

This research paper, titled “The Battle for Exclusivism” was written to fulfill an assignment in Dr. Rick Power’s Religions of the World class. In this paper, I outlined the three viewpoints on religious diversity, and defended my position on the Exclusivist view.

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The Battle for Exclusivism

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## The Battle for Exclusivism

In today's world, people everywhere are being bombarded with information. Students especially are taking in new facts and ideas at an almost overwhelming pace, and using it to form the lens through which they see the world. The college years are a crucial time in the development of a person's worldview; they are removed from their parents, old friends and influences, and find themselves forced to make decisions for themselves. One of the decisions they will have to make involves their religious life. Will they continue practicing the faith of their parents? Will they make it their own? Will they move on to an alternate belief system? One general decision they will have to face is whether they believe there is many ways to salvation, one single path, or somewhere in between. These views, respectively, are Pluralism, Exclusivism, and Inclusivism. I believe that in order to truly defend a particular view, we need to be familiar with all views available. In this paper I will outline each of these views, and explain why Exclusivism, though increasingly unpopular among college students, is truly the most reasonable choice.

John Hick, the most well-known advocate of religious pluralism in the West describes pluralism in this way: "There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation...taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions."<sup>1</sup> In other words, he believes it doesn't matter if a person is a Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or believer in any other faith—all people can achieve what they are looking for, the ultimate goal, in their own personal way. Pluralists believe that God, Muhammad, Brahman, and all of the other supreme deities of other religions are not unknown to each other, but instead are each other. The "Eternal One", as Hick calls this all-encompassing deity, cannot be fully known,

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<sup>1</sup> John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), 34.

but each religious tradition is able to grasp at it in equally effective yet unique ways. This interaction can be very personal, as in Christianity or Judaism, or very detached as in the Yogic traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Pluralism encourages people to “see one another as friends rather than enemies or rivals” and encourages them to interact with one another, learning alternate ways of contact with the “Eternal One” in order to enrich themselves and gain a greater understanding of the “Ultimate Reality”.<sup>2</sup>

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University stresses that Pluralism is not simply diversity, but the “energetic engagement with diversity”.<sup>3</sup> It is not enough for them to accept other religions; Pluralists should seek to know about them—and even experience them for themselves—in order to come to a full understanding of others. Pluralism doesn’t require a person to reject his or her own faith commitments, but encourages them to bring their beliefs to the table in order to participate in conversation with other faith traditions, for the enrichment of all involved.

Hick illustrates the similarities in worship and prayer styles between different faiths in his book *God Has Many Names*. He includes portions of prayers and hymns from Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu worship, comparing them to each other and citing their convergence on key topics. He believes that their basic perceptions of God—that he is the ultimate creator, timeless, loving, and abounding in grace—are similar enough to conclude that they are, in fact, worshipping the same god. He goes on to say that there are, overall, three explanations of deity. First that there are many gods, all which lead to truth. Second that there is one god and all other traditions are lacking truth. Third and most feasibly, he says, is the belief that “there is but one God, who is

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<sup>2</sup> John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 59.

<sup>3</sup> Diana L. Eck, "The Pluralism Project at Harvard University," *What Is Pluralism?*, section goes here, accessed March 14, 2013, [http://pluralism.org/pages/pluralism/what\\_is\\_pluralism](http://pluralism.org/pages/pluralism/what_is_pluralism).

maker and lord of all; that in his infinite fullness and richness of being he exceeds all our human attempts to grasp him in thought; and that the devout in the various great world religions are in fact worshipping that one God, but through different, overlapping concepts or mental icons of him”.<sup>4</sup>

This last quote from Hick provides an excellent segue into another increasingly popular view of religious diversity—Inclusivism. Inclusivism is one of the most confusing views of religious diversity, bordering on Pluralism in some aspects and Exclusivism in others. Ken Keathley, Professor of Theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary defines inclusivism as the belief that “even though the work of Christ is the only means of salvation, it does not follow that explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary in order for one to be saved”.<sup>5</sup> (Keathley 102). This is not to say that there are many paths to heaven—simply that the one and only God, through His grace, has opened the door of heaven to people of other belief systems as well. Karl Rahner, a Catholic theologian, popularized this view in the mid to late 1900s. Rahner also developed the concept of the “anonymous Christian”, a person who, though not knowing or believing in Christ, is saved. He says that someone who accepts Christ as Lord is saved explicitly, but a person can also be saved implicitly by accepting God through his or her life choices. Another theologian, John Sanders, puts it this way, “...they [inclusivists] hold that the work of Jesus is ontologically necessary for salvation (no one would be saved without it) but not epistemologically necessary (one need not be aware of the work in order to benefit from it). Or in other words, people can receive the gift of salvation without knowing the giver or the precise nature of the gift”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *God Has Many Names*, 66-67.

<sup>5</sup> Ken Keathley, "None Dare Call It Treason," *Journal For Baptist Theology* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 102, accessed March 13, 2013, <http://baptistcenter.com/Journal>.

<sup>6</sup> John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 215.

Though they may not have used the word “Inclusivist” to describe themselves, we can tell from the writings of some of the most well-loved Christian leaders that they believed this way. John Wesley, C.S. Lewis, and Billy Graham are just some of these familiar names. Wesley confirms this in his sermon “On Living Without God”<sup>7</sup>, Lewis in *Mere Christianity*,<sup>8</sup> and Billy Graham in an interview with Robert Schuller on the topic of world religions<sup>9</sup>. Many people, along with these men, feel the inclusivist view tugging at their heartstrings. They feel that it’s terrible—and unfair—to think that God, in all of his justice and grace, would condemn people to burn in Hell simply because they never had the opportunity to hear the good news of Christ. This viewpoint settles many Christian’s worries.

Having laid the foundation to understand these other viewpoints, it’s time to delve into Exclusivism. It is the belief that there is but one way to salvation, and Christians know that to be through trusting in and having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is not surprising that this is the oldest of these three views, given that it is explicitly described in the New Testament. Jesus clearly states in John 14:6, “I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In contrast with pluralism and even inclusivism, exclusivism does not require one to dig through books by religious philosophers to find its doctrine. It is not something dreamed up to make humanity feel better about their current situation. Exclusivism comes straight from God’s word. In studying it, we need no other sources. We need not cite theologians “new ideas”, for theologians with this viewpoint take all of their points straight from

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<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 125, "On Living Without God," section 15, in *The Sermons of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, accessed April 14, 2013, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/125/>

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fount, 1997), 178.

<sup>9</sup> “Robert Schuller And Billy Graham Speaking Wide Acceptance.” YouTube video, 1:02. Posted by "SacisutaDasa," Sept. 23, 2007. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNCnxA91fHE&feature=player\\_embedded#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNCnxA91fHE&feature=player_embedded#!).

the Bible. In order to explain and defend the concept of Exclusivism within a finite space, we must assume that the reader is previously convinced that the Bible is the true, inerrant word of God, and believes that it is the standard of truth. To explain the engaging concept of how we know this must be beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of this section is to provide evidence straight from the Bible to combat specific elements of Pluralism and Inclusivism, and to support Exclusivism as the only true way to salvation.

Pluralism, as we have previously discussed, teaches that all the “gods” of different religions are, in fact, the same over-arching deity. If this were the case, why would God have given the Israelites the first of the Ten Commandments, saying “You shall have no other gods before me”? In Exodus 20:5 God states that he is a jealous God. Why would he be jealous of people worshiping other gods if they were one in the same? Again, the gods worshiped by the different religions of the world are all drastically different. The Islamic tradition believes in one supreme god just like we do in Christianity, but this god, Allah is wrathful, impersonal, not part of the trinity, and encourages carnal pleasure. The Qur’an even states that Allah is the author of all evil, “Verily, the hypocrites seek to deceive Allah, but it is He Who deceives them”.<sup>10</sup> This is most certainly not the God of the Bible. With so many contradictions between the major attributes of this supposed “Eternal One”, how could we say that it is the same god?

The Inclusivists maintain that the God of Christianity can be found through multiple paths. This, however, goes squarely in the face of John 14:6 in which Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” There is no “but” in this verse. There is no fine print notating an alternate process in special situations. Jesus is the only way.

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<sup>10</sup> "The Noble Qur'an," The Noble Qur'an, S. 4:142 Hilali-Khan, accessed March 13, 2013, <http://quran.com/>.

Believers in inclusivism tend to quote Bible verses such as 1 John 2:2 that states “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world”. They use this as support to say that the entire world is saved through Christ, not just those who believe in Jesus. However, that’s not what this verse says. He has forgiven everyone of their sins, but that does not mean that everyone automatically received salvation by his death and resurrection. Christ gift of salvation has been made available to all, but is only effective when a person accepts Jesus as Savior.

But what about the people who have never heard the Gospel? This is where many Christians—even exclusivists—get caught. Does God really leave them to endure the terror of Hell simply because they never got the chance to hear about Him? This is where inclusivism seems to show a bright side. Inclusivist C.S. Lewis demonstrates a possible solution in the last book of his children’s book series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He alludes to the fact that even though a person was devoted to another god through another religion, God would accept their service to the false god as service to him. Knowing that “God is a jealous God”, how can we possibly believe that He would tolerate such a thing? Also, this belief speaks of being saved through “good works”, which is shot down by Ephesians 2:8-9, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”.

Now take, for instance, a person living in the innermost regions of Africa who has never heard the Gospel. Inclusivists believe that these people can, by natural revelation, deduce that there is a God who created the universe. Though they could, most likely, understand that much, how could they get a full interpretation of God’s plan for them by their own reason? The Bible says in Romans 1:20 that by seeing creation we will be without excuse that there is a God, but



simply believing that there is a God will not save you. You need to know more about this God—you need to *know* this God.

Along this same line, natural theology teaches that a person doesn't need the scriptures to get to heaven, but are able to use their own reason to get to God, and are equipped with an innate sense of how to please God. The major problem with this idea is the fact that we cannot, as completely depraved human beings, even begin to be able to get our minds on the right track to God without His word. To find our way to God on our own assumes that there is goodness inside everyone of us, which we know is untrue based on Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things<sup>[1]</sup> and beyond cure." Even Adam and Eve who were, for a short time, without sin, still needed God to tell them what to do. They could not figure it out on their own.

As a final capstone to this argument, if it were possible to find salvation through other gods, or to find the true God through ways other than the Bible, why do we send missionaries to evangelize the world? Theologian John MacArthur makes a profound statement in his book, *Hard to Believe*. He says, "This redefines the whole concept of missions. Instead of going into a tribe and saying that those people are lost, doomed, and in darkness, you should say you're standing on holy ground, because God has been there in the form of their paganism".<sup>11</sup> This certainly cannot be the case!

Overall, I believe that inclusivists have the wrong mindset. The overarching question is this; not how God can be heartless enough to condemn someone to Hell, but how he is gracious enough to stoop down to redeem any undeserving people at all. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14 "...wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." The way to truth is

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<sup>11</sup> John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe: The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 191.

narrow. The way to truth is clear. How can it be explained better than the words of Acts 4:12; “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved”.

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