Salvation and World Religions: Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism

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Abstract

Every religion has its own distinct doctrines which their ardent believers follow. For Christians, one is continuously trying to build a relationship with God for “whosoever believes in Jesus Christ shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Similarly, Christians deeply think about the soul or the spirit after death. Each believer hopes to have a better condition after life. This belief, though very typical of Christianity, finds similarity in other faiths as each one emphasizes the “salvation of souls” or a similar concept of after-life. In this manner, religious leaders devote their time preaching and teaching their own distinct belief of “salvation.” Now that many other religions have continued to emerge, so do different ways of looking into religion, different practices, and different means of salvation. To an extent, questions even arise as to the authenticity of each religion. Some insist on their own truths and beliefs, while several other faiths are more welcoming of other religions. This paper, hence, will explore the concepts of inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism and relate them to the idea of world religions. Moreover, the paper will also present suggestions and a more personal perspective in looking at these topics.

Keywords: relationship with God; salvation; inclusivism; exclusivism; pluralism

1. Introduction

Christianity is a world religion and it is based on the teachings and miracles of Jesus Christ. Christianity is more about a relationship than religious norms and religious standards. Rather than focusing on the observance of religious practices, the essence of being a Christian is building and nurturing his relationship with God. In doing so, one is assured of salvation as promised by God, Our Father.

Christianity is one world religion among a host of many which emerged from Judaism in AD 30-60. As it expanded, it encountered other religious beliefs and practices. Moreover, it has unavoidably witnessed the meeting of the major world
religions in the twentieth century. As a result, religious pluralism caused practical issues personally, socially, and politically. McGrath (2007), for instance, comments that the relationship of Christianity with other religious traditions has greatly impacted the society. It even raised profound theological questions for Christians (Walker, 1988). To address these crucial issues, three main approaches have become overwhelmingly popular recently with a fourth now being given a serious consideration. These approaches include: (1) inclusivism, (2) exclusivism, and (3) pluralism (4) parallelism (McGrath, 2007; Marbaniang, 2017). Understanding the interplays that exist among these concepts is vital to understanding the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions. The crucial question, therefore, is to ask in what way or ways can such traditions be understood within the context of the Christian belief and the universal saving will of God which was made known through Jesus Christ. If Christians are to evaluate the current position by which Christianity finds itself in the pluralistic modern society, then, it must be evaluated from the perspective of Christianity (McGrath, 2007).

2. Inclusivism

Inclusivism acknowledges that although Christianity represents the normative revelation of God, salvation remains accessible to those who belong to other religious traditions as well. God wants every single human being to be saved even though the only way to God is through Christ, and the only basis for forgiveness and acceptance is atonement at the cross (Evans, 1987). This basic Christian principle binds every Christian to Jesus Christ with genuine openness to the truth and goodness found in other religions. That God is revealed definitively in Jesus Christ, however, does not imply that he is not working in the wider world (Pinnock, 1992) and in other religions for Christian inclusivism seeks to make sense of two vital features of the Christian faith (Hedges & Race, 2008; Ensminger, 2014; Lawrence, 2014). ): (1) the commitment to Christ as the unique and normative revelation of God, and (2) God's universal salvation. These two aspects are crucial and are important features of Christian inclusivism. It is probable that such a view of inclusivism represents the mainstream opinions of the majority of Christians today.

In the Evangelical church, inclusivism has likewise established a powerful presence (Miles, 2010). The inclusivism perspective is manifested as the view is intentionally turning to the work of the Holy Spirit as the means by which the salvific work of Christ is appropriated to those who have never heard or believed the Gospel.
It is said that when the person and the work of the Holy Spirit are rightly understood on biblical-theological grounds, the conscious faith in Christ for Salvation is strengthened. In fact, the early Church taught that Jesus Christ is the only Savior. According to Acts 4:12 from the Holy Bible “Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” This means that non-Christian believers will not gain redemption as those who accept the teachings of Christianity. Some have clarified this interpretation of the scripture as condemning to punishment all those who are not visible members of the Church. Evans (1987), however, opposes the idea and concludes that the teaching authority of the Church has never reached that far.

Nowadays, there is a tendency to emphasize that God’s desire is for the salvation of all. The discovery of new lands in the late fifteenth century onwards raised deep reflection on the whole question of unbelievers especially since moral goodness was encountered among the pagans and has challenged Christianity to think more carefully about the possibility of the saving grace of God through non-Christian religious traditions. Among the seemingly millions of people in Asia today, only between one and two percent are Christians (Evans, 1987). There are huge numbers of people who have no belief in Jesus Christ, yet they are clearly seekers after the good and the truth.

In the New Testament, it is clearly mentioned that there is no such thing as an isolated, purely private faith in Jesus Christ and there is no Church-less Christianity. To be a Christian is to be a member of Christ’s Body, the visible Church. When literally interpreted, it can mean that ‘outside the Church, there is no salvation’. Anyone who is not an obvious member of the Church would be certain of damnation. This formula has long been explicitly rejected several times in the last hundred years. The Church stands on the belief that all salvation comes in some ways through the Church to those outside its visible limits, even if they have not heard the Gospel and do not believe in Christ (Evans, 1987).

Rahner’s (1966) perspectives may very well elucidate these ideas as he explicitly explained key perspectives by which to view religious pluralism. He emphasized that those who have lived before Christ cannot be judged accordingly for they have not the knowledge of Christ’s saving grace. The same maybe said of non-Christians who are yet to be informed of the meaning and idea of Christ as savior. Christians, therefore, should treat the latter as “anonymous Christians” though
believing and practicing a non-Christian faith. It is not, therefore, for Christianity to supersede other religions as diversity will continue to be a unique attribute of human existence.

In the sixth volume of *Theological Investigation* of the Jesuit writer Karl Rahner (1969), he argues that the saving grace must be available outside the bounds of the church. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) followed Rahner in affirming that rays of divine truth were indeed to be found in other religions. Furthermore, Vatican II demanded that we look more positively at the great world faiths that include other religions aside from Christianity (Evans, 1987). The doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection remind us that no human being is totally cut from Christ for there is a sense in which every person can be a sacrament of Christ and his salvation for his neighbor for the mission of the Church is directed to all peoples until the end of history. For uniting the world to God in Christ, the Church is the effective sign and instrument. When construed in this manner, many non-believers will be on their way to salvation in Christ for they are seeking goodness and truth either as individuals or as members of certain religious traditions. Even if Christ was not recognized in their journey, the Church will always hope that they may come to an explicit recognition of Him in the Christian community. In the end, they will recognize Him at the heavenly banquet (Evans, 1987).

3. Exclusivism

Copan and Meister (2008) stated that exclusivism is basically a rejection of non-Christian believers with respect to the idea of salvation. For this reason, exclusivism is mostly depicted in the literature in an unflattering term as embracing highly negative views of religious others (McDermott & Netland, 2014). For instance, Race (1993) commented that the predominant attitude of the church through Christian history has been a regard by outsiders as errors or darkness.

Also, exclusivism is the view that there is only one way to God and salvation and only those who hear and respond to the Christian gospel may be saved. Thus, one religion is uniquely and supremely true and all other religions are false (Brill, 2010). This kind of approach has a strong emotional appeal for many evangelical Christians (Nash, 1994). In recent years, some theologians have objected to the term *exclusivism* because of its negative connotation (Robinson, 2014). They
prefer the term *particularism* within Christianity on account of its affirmation of the particular and distinctive features of the Christian faith (McGrath, 2016).

Christianity is often viewed as an exclusive religion because of Jesus’ statement in John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me. (NIV)” Renowned proponent of this frame of reference may be traced back to the works of Kraemer (1938) who noted that “God has revealed the Way and the Truth and the Life in Jesus Christ and wills this to be known throughout the world.” Also, he insisted that God’s revelation is possible in various places and through different contexts. This revelation should be properly identified in view of God’s definitive revelation.

In Acts 2:38, Peter said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins (NIV).” According to this passage, Peter is clearly anti-inclusivism for strongly implying that if his hearers did not get their relationship with Jesus Christ right, their sins would not be forgiven (Nash, 1994). There are some critics for those who have not heard the gospel of Christ including the exclusivists who refuse salvation to those who have not heard of Christ. Conservative ones even strongly quote well-known verses like John 14:6 or Acts 4:12 which states that “No one can come to the Father except through Jesus and it is only through Him that people can be saved.” Here, exclusivists affirm that Jesus Christ is the unique and distinctive ground and center of a unique and distinctive faith (Goldsmith, 2012).

According to Hindson and Caner (2008), Jones (2008), exclusivism views only one religion as soteriological efficacious and the adherents of all other religious are lost. Jones (2008) stated that Christians who are exclusivists considers Christianity as the only religion that is true, and although there may be some truths in other religions, these truths are not adequate to bring about salvation. Therefore, the problem for exclusivism is that, to many people, it seems unmerciful, un-passionate, and unjust of God to condemn millions to eternal punishment that they have not chosen or on the basis of mere intellectual error.

4. Pluralism

To this date, several controversial issues have emerged as regards the diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Since 1980s there has been enormous
increase both in volume and in sophistication of discussion in the theological literature on religious pluralism (Netland, 2001). This approach holds that all the religious traditions of humanity are equally valid paths to the same core of religious reality. In addition, God’s grace is at work with undiscriminating generosity among all peoples and in all the great religious traditions. The basic feature of the pluralist approach is that all religions are from the same original source, and all must be possessing a distinctive, yet equally valid, grasp of some ultimate spiritual reality which some religions term ‘God’ and other define in a rather more nontheistic or atheistic terms (Mc Grath, 2007). Furthermore, religious pluralism cannot replace religious tolerance, nor is religious pluralism a requirement of tolerance. Religions are not only capable of tolerating each other but they can also develop genuine forms of reciprocal appreciation (Schmidt-Leukel, 2017).

In this concept, the other faiths show just as much spiritual vitality as Christianity. The most obvious manifestation is apparent where believers recognize saints of the different traditions and the different patterns of sainthood. Some are even pursuing the inner paths of prayer, contemplation, meditation, and others as the outer paths of social service and political action (Hick & Knitter, 1987).

The biblical teaching is that “God as creator.” By this statement, God is the creator of all people whether Christian, Hindu, Jew, or Muslim. God as creator provides for all living beings. There is no Christian God, Hindu God or Muslim God (Ariarajah, 1985). Hence, Christian theology should agree to permit God to be God; it should not own God as we own a private property. Instead, each has to learn from each other in ‘dialogue’ and encourage Christians to be better individuals. Similarly, Christians should encourage the Hindu to be a more devoted Hindu and so on and so forth (Goldsmith, 2012).

In the New Testament, Paul is in constant dialogue with his own Jewish tradition and he does not deny the reality of the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but link it to Christ and what Christ means. The Book of Jonah also portrays God as God of mercy and love who would rather forgive than destroy. Therefore, this love and mercy of God are not confined to any one nation or person. God accepted their prayers and repentance and God dealt with the people of Nineveh with profound compassion (Ariarajah, 1985). God had heard his prayer and was pleased with his works of charity. Later, he became a disciple of Jesus Christ. Yet, he heard the message long ago and he had stood in a special relationship with God. ‘It was Peter
who had to learn that truth. It had never occurred to Peter that God would communicate so directly with someone who was outside the Jewish religion and was ritually unacceptable to his religious tradition.’ Therefore, Peter said, “I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis (ESV).” Hick and Knitter (1987) fortify the Ultimate Idea where world religions, despite their varied practices and divergent beliefs will all come together as one towards the Absolute Truth. The journey will be an upward search for the great idea whether it be Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus. No one particular religion in this matter will claim possessor of the “truth,” nor will any religion claim as the sovereign religious faith.

5. Personal Reflection

Christianity is basically a historical religion. In addition, there is only one God who made the earth and all people. He is God of all the earth. Christians believe that God is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient who revealed in Jesus Christ. Moreover, the Bible is unique and universal. God is light and He hates sin and commands men not to sin, but sin they will. So God sent His only begotten Son to this world to save us and for those who believe in Jesus Christ, his death, and resurrection, God grants eternal life.

Reflecting on this basic truth, the researcher advocates a closed inclusivism approach to world religions. This approach, though highlights salvation through Jesus Christ, also looks into the ways of non-Christian believers. Salvation in Christian faith is based on relationship with God through Jesus. It is evidenced by God’s gracious work of liberating his people and salvation from sin. Jesus’ ministry of salvation comes from God by the Spirit and is the climactic fulfillment of all prophecy concerning the promise of the Messiah. Salvation, therefore, cannot be separated from a God-centered spiritual approach. No one can match the absolute sinless purity and holiness of Jesus Christ. He is both fully divine and fully man in every part.

In Bible, Acts 4:12 mentions that “Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Therefore, no other religious teacher could die for our sins; no other religious teacher can come to the earth as God’s only Son; and no other religious teacher rose from the death. Thus, our focus should be on Jesus whom God offered as the way to have an eternal relationship with himself (Webber, 2017).
On the other hand, churches may think and talk of the destiny of unbelievers—those who do not hear the good news of Jesus Christ, or those outside of the Christian faith. The Church has been teaching and preaching about the gospel for almost 2000 years. So how will this idea apply to those who came before Christ? The Israelite people came to know that they were sinners and when they made mistakes, they brought offering for repentance with both heart and conscience. Though human sin cannot be taken away by animal sacrifices, yet on the basis of what that sacrifice indicated, it can be a way by which they may be forgiven. Therefore, believers under the Old Testament were saved by grace through faith. Under the covenant of Sinai, the acknowledgement of God and the experience of His grace were never limited to the Israelites (Anderson, 1984). Another important issue to address is what happens to those who have never heard the gospel and those who have already lived and died just like in Myanmar and other Asian countries. Accordingly, “The Israelites will be judged on the basis of the Law revealed on Mount Sinai.” Romans 2:14 mentions non-Jews will be judged according to the criteria of the requirements of the law written in their hearts. Those who know God’s written Word and his law will be judged by them. However, believers who have no knowledge and understanding of Christ as savior will not be judged with the same standard. So, for those who have not heard the good news, they will have their own salvation if they follow their religious norms and standards.

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded from the above discussion that other religions have a positive saving potential similar to Judaism in the Old Testament. They, too, were given the grace of God and they too are entitled to have salvation. This can serve as a preparation in bringing people to Christ. This can be the means by which God’s salvation reaches those who have not yet heard the gospel. Alternative religious traditions may even mediate divine grace found in the particular Christian tradition to the hearts of non-Christian believers. The 21st century where diverse religious beliefs are mushrooming in every country in every part of the world, a simplistic means of addressing a rather complex issue is not quite easy. Jesus is still normative, unique, authoritative and definitive. Hence, a position of closed inclusivism is critical to living in harmony and peace in the modern pluralistic society. In this position, Christ saves many outside the church without depending on other faiths as means of salvation; not through their religion but in spite of it.
References


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