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PLACE

Communicating the Gospel in a  
Pluralistic World



**SESSION 4**

Responses to Religious Pluralism  
Among Christians

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# Responses to Religious Pluralism Among Christians

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**Pluralism**

**Inclusivism**

**Particularism-Exclusivism**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand and be able to discuss the four major responses to religious pluralism among Christians

# Responses to Religious Pluralism Among Christians

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. Truesdale writes, “Each time Dr. Ron Benefiel and I conduct the Nazarene Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry Seminar, ‘The Theological Development of the Minister,’ the seminar members, Dr. Benefiel, and I attend Sabbath (Shabbat) service at Beth Shalom Congregation, a conservative Jewish synagogue in Kansas City. Alan Cohen is the senior Rabbi. The ‘contemporary’ service begins with joyous singing, accompanied by guitars, tambourines, a violin, and drums. Talented musicians lead the music. As the service proceeds, the liturgy—heavy with Torah readings—repeatedly refers to the holiness of God and to God’s command that His people live righteously before Him. Repeatedly one hears reference in the liturgy to the love and grace of God. As the Torah scroll is taken throughout the congregation, the congregants move to the aisles so they can touch the Torah either with their prayer shawls or their scriptures.”

Soteriologically (theology dealing with salvation), what is going on there? Nothing? Something? If so, on what basis? The responses to religious pluralism to be examined in this session represent sincere efforts to determine how the Christian faith should evaluate and relate to non-Christian religions. We will not try to provide a theological evaluation of each response. We will examine: pluralism, inclusivism, and particularism.

Christians can respond to religious pluralism in a number of different ways. Diverse responses have been stated and embraced by various Christian thinkers and parts of the Church. All the various responses achieve their forms based on how they answer three questions:

1. Who is Christ?
2. In what way is He active in the world beyond the Church?
3. What is the soteriological (theology dealing with salvation), status of non-Christian religions?

Watch for the ways the various responses answer these questions. The responses are sincere attempts to determine how the Christian faith should evaluate non-Christian religions.

## PLURALISM



### NOTES

The pluralist response to religious pluralism holds there are as many authentic expressions of religion as there are religions. Each religion has its own independent legitimacy. Its truth depends upon no other religion or religious vision for authentication. The only persons who can truly access, and hence profoundly encounter, a particular religion are those who participate in it, those who live in its wholeness, meaning, and power. All other persons are observers or visitors at best, and should not pretend to know the religion's significance and appeal. Nor should one religion propose to evaluate another on the basis of its own religious vision and values.

No religion can rightly sit in judgment upon another. People who believe their religion to be superior, and that it should replace the religions others embrace, thereby reveal their ignorance, arrogance, and oppressiveness. The religions should recognize in each other rich ways for redemptively encountering ultimate reality as known in each religious community.

According to this position, the appropriate relationship between the various religions is one of respect, tolerance, and mutual protection. In dialogue, the various religions can learn important lessons from each other, but dialogue should never be a cloak for proselytism. Scholars who embrace the pluralist response to religious pluralism include D. Z. Phillips, John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Paul Knitter, and Stanley Samartha.

*The pluralist assessment of religious pluralism takes two forms.*

According to the first form, while there is only one absolute reality, God, God has many faces. To Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and other religions, God manifests himself in different ways. He has many rich *personae* through which to reveal himself. The various religions are so many different paths to, and accounts of, God. Wise observers of religion should not only recognize this, but also celebrate the many faces of God. Swami Vivekenanda spoke for this position at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Mahatma Gandhi also embraced this form of pluralism. The chief representative among Christians is John Hick, a major philosopher of religion.

Many persons who identify with Christianity embrace this first option. For example, in the winter of 2002 some Episcopalians from Charleston, South Carolina, were shocked to find a Shinto altar in the Episcopal Cathedral of St.

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John the Divine in New York City. When they voiced their objections to the bishop of New York, he dismissed them as narrow-minded people who could not appreciate the many paths to God.

A true pluralism, the second form insists, must abandon any prior concept of a single God. The wide differences among the religions are definitive and they should not be glossed over. The real and essential differences are so fundamental they may just keep us from arriving at a single definition of religion. Some religions are more similar than others, but there is no single commonality that applies to and unites all religions. For example, in Theravada Buddhism there is no God. That is one of the first concepts a person who follows this way must understand. He or she must also understand there is no real self (the doctrine of *anatta*) as Jews, Christians, and Muslims maintain.

According to the second form of the pluralist response, a true pluralism gives up on the idea of a God with many faces, and just accepts religious diversity without trying to fix it. Each religion should just be recognized for what it is. Otherwise, in our efforts to seek a unifying God behind the religions, the real character of a religion will be missed, and the real meaning of religious pluralism will be overlooked. Religions are context-specific. Except where there are families of religions such as the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, or the Asian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, talk about similarities should take a backseat to an emphasis upon distinctions. The first form of the pluralist response is attractive to more Christians than is the second one. I think the second form of pluralism is probably more conformable to the ideology of religious pluralism than is the first.

## INCLUSIVISM



### NOTES

The inclusivist's response to religious pluralism among Christians affirms there is only one God. He is the Triune God to whom the Old and New Testaments bear witness. God is the Creator and the Redeemer, and beside Him, there is no other God. He became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth and acted definitively in Him to redeem the world. All other claims to deity are false. In the presence of Jesus Christ, every knee shall one day bow and every tongue shall confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Jesus Christ is the Mediator between God and humankind. He alone provides the way of salvation (Heb. 2:17).

Inclusivists reject the notion that the autonomy of all religions should be recognized. They believe Christians who adopt the first position are unfaithful to the New Testament and to orthodox Christian faith. The question inclusivists seek to answer is, "How does Christ relate to persons in other world religions, and to the religions themselves?" In the answer to this question, inclusivism takes on two forms.

### CAUTIOUS INCLUSIVISM

Clark H. Pinnock, systematic theologian at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, and John Sanders represent the first form. While affirming an orthodox Christology, they believe the prevenient grace of God is at work in all persons. They hold that the Spirit of God works to bring everyone to salvation, and He uses many vehicles to achieve this.

It is possible one of the tools the Spirit may use is the non-Christian religion in which a person participates. So the Spirit of God may be active in non-Christian religions. The emphasis is placed upon the word may. If through another religion a person responds positively to prevenient grace, he or she may be saved without ever hearing the gospel, and without ever explicitly confessing faith in Christ.

Pinnock and Sanders do not uniformly affirm that non-Christian religions are preliminary means through which God works to bring persons to salvation. Even if while participating in a non-Christian religion a person responds to prevenient grace and is saved, the goal is still to lead the person to a full knowledge of Jesus Christ. Whatever role it might play, the religion is preliminary and passing. This form of inclusivism stresses that while the Holy Spirit may use another religion, non-Christian religions are not by themselves independent pathways to God.


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### A LESS CAUTIOUS INCLUSIVISM

The second form of inclusivism is represented in the work of Karl Rahner (1904-1984), a German Jesuit and one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 20th century. A grand presentation of the grace of God made possible through Jesus Christ marks Rahner's theology. Pinnock referred to Rahner as the most famous inclusivist. One can find Rahner's position similarly stated by Paul Tillich in *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (1963).

Rahner assigned an importance to non-Christian religions not characteristic of Pinnock and Sanders. In *Theological Investigations* (1961), Rahner discussed the relationship between the Christian faith and the non-Christian religions. First, he believed Jesus Christ to be the one in whom the Father has acted to create and redeem the world. In Jesus, God became incarnate. The salvation He won through His life, death, and resurrection places a universal claim upon all persons.

Second, Rahner believed Christianity to be the absolute religion. No other religion is its equal. Valid religion is limited to God's initiative and action in relationship to humankind, not to what people think about themselves or to what other religions tells them.

Third, while it is true that only through Jesus Christ is salvation made possible and offered to all, God reaches persons under diverse circumstances and at different times. Until the gospel explicitly enters a person's historical situation, a non-Christian religion can serve as a valid means to prepare for the coming of the gospel. After the gospel of Jesus Christ explicitly encounters a person of another religion, his or her old religion ceases to be valid. He or she must decide for or against God's truth.

What of the soteriological status of one who is faithful to his or her historic religious vision prior to hearing the gospel? Rahner answers that such a one is an anonymous Christian, not a non-Christian. The salvation that has reached the person is, by anticipation, Christ's salvation. Rahner recognized that non-Christian religions show the marks of original sin and bear the weight of error regarding God. They also contain "supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to persons as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ." For this reason, in varying degrees, they can be recognized as lawful religions.

We can see the that essential difference between Pinnock and Sanders on the one hand, and Rahner on the other, is that Rahner more actively affirms the role of the non-Christian religions as anticipatory instruments of God's grace, and much more readily identifies those who await the coming of the gospel as



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anonymous Christians. The Second Vatican Council, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate), sounds much like Rahner's position:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.

## PARTICULARISM-EXCLUSIVISM



### NOTES

The third response to religious pluralism is at polar opposites from pluralism. Either the term particularism or exclusivism applies. Some of the best known particularists are Karl Barth, Hendrik Kraemer, John Piper, Ronald Nash, R. C. Sproul, and Carl F. H. Henry. As do inclusivists, particularists maintain that only through Jesus Christ can persons come to salvation and know God truly. The incarnate revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is the Triune God's definitive self-disclosure.

Through His Son, and by the Holy Spirit, the Father fulfills the promises made during the time of the old covenant. Only in Christ has God engaged the powers that enslaved God's creation, won our salvation, and set the captives free. Definitively and universally, the Father has provided redemption "by the blood of the eternal covenant" (Heb. 13:20-21). All other so-called paths to God are false. The biblical and Christian criterion of religious truth, said Dutch theologian Hendrik Kraemer, "is the Person of Jesus Christ who is the Truth."

After this, the inclusivist and the particularist positions differ greatly. Particularists reject the inclusivist position that we can affirm Jesus Christ to be the only redeemer, and still affirm a positive role, even if limited, for non-Christian religions. Inclusivists who do this, particularists say, compromise the radical singularity and finality of Jesus Christ, and the preaching and reception of the gospel. Particularists believe the New Testament to be absolutely clear: the only way to salvation is through an explicit knowledge of, and expression of faith in, Jesus Christ.

Particularists ask how anything could be clearer or more final than the New Testament:

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved . . . 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in the one whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? (Rom. 10:9-15).


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To believe, one must first hear. Additional texts to which particularists-exclusivists can appeal as showing that the Bible makes no space for salvation outside of the way God ordains are:

- Exod. 20:3-6
- 2 Chron. 13:9
- Isa. 37:18-19; 40
- Jer. 2:11; 5:7; 16:20
- Acts 26:17-18
- Col. 1:13.

The apostle Paul tells us the wrath of God abides on those who remain apart from Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 2:16). Based on texts such as these, particularists reject the idea that through prevenient grace as assisted by a non-Christian religion, persons can, even preliminarily, experience God's saving grace. While there may be very rare exceptional instances in which God reveals himself in a saving way, only persons who in this life hear the gospel and explicitly place their trust in Christ will be redeemed. All others are lost. There is no hope for those who pass from this life without having heard and responded to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"Is not this Christian truth a part of what drives Christian missions," particularists may ask? If either inclusivism or pluralism is correct, why should Christians obey the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20)? If many of those who have not heard the gospel will be saved without hearing it, why should missionaries and evangelists suffer persecution to spread the gospel? Particularists fear inclusivists have subverted the missionary mandate and have betrayed the scandal of the Cross.

On the other hand, if one embraces this form of particularism, he or she must be prepared to recognize the majority of men and women in the world will not hear the gospel, and they will therefore be lost forever. There is a moderating strand of exclusivism-particularism—that differs a bit from what we have described so far. Harold Netland speaks for this moderation. He says both inclusivists and exclusivists go beyond what the New Testament states. He advises that we should "adopt a modest agnosticism [lack of certainty] regarding the unevangelized." We ought not to speculate regarding how God will choose to deal with those who have not heard the gospel. Leave that to God's wisdom. Other evangelicals who agree with Netland are J.I. Packer, John Stott, Chris Wright, and Millard Erickson.


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### A MODERATING RESPONSE

As we can see, the range of responses to religious pluralism among Christians is wide indeed. We should not be surprised if persons ask, “How could Christianity entertain such diverse—in some instances contradictory—views?”

Discussion of the responses has probably raised the question: How does the discussion of postmodernity relate to the responses discussed in this session? Our discussion of the importance of postmodernity attaches to many religious narratives, and its rejection of any single, overarching religious narrative all people ought to embrace, seems to rule out most of the options presented above.

Strictly speaking, probably the only response that would closely conform to postmodern standards would be the second form of pluralism. Even the first form of pluralism—God has many faces—sounds too much like a Western-engineered metanarrative. Postmodernity may at least tolerate the evolutionary estimate of religion. But its thesis would probably be seen as speculative, not practical.

We could choose the option of just dismissing any postmodern dissatisfaction with inclusivism, particularism, and the moderating response. After all, the gospel of God does not have to bow before or conform to modernity, postmodernity, or any other historical era. May there not be another option? May it not be possible to remain true to apostolic faith and the Great Commission, even while rejecting so much as a scent of infringement upon the integrity and consciences of adherents of other religions? I believe the Wesleyan tradition provides this.

### THE GRACE OF GOD

The following story shows how the prevenient grace of God works in a person’s life, drawing him or her to salvation even when a stranger to the Christian faith. The Dick Staub Interview: Mary Poplin Calls Claremont Her “Calcutta.” After seeking God through telepathic spoon bending exercises, this professor found God, and with the help of Mother Teresa, her calling.

-Posted 12-10-2003 *Christianity Today*, Week of December 8.

Mary Poplin is a professor of education and dean of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. After attending a Methodist church as a child, Poplin began searching other spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, even telepathic attempts to bend spoons. She began teaching at Claremont, where a Christian friend encouraged her spiritual


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journey. Eventually in 1993, she became a Christian. Poplin then sought to integrate her faith with her teaching and academic career following a trip to work with Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity in 1996. She is now working on a book to tell her story.

Q. You were raised in a Christian home and experimented with Zen. You were into anything except what was familiar. What was it about Christianity that was a nonstarter for you?

A. I was working in the area of liberation, education of the poor, education of people of color, and so I just accepted what I'd been told—that Christianity was terrible for women. It never occurred to me to look around the world and see where women were the freest and note that those were countries dominated by Christianity. But I didn't think that way.

Q. What moved you toward a different and more compelling view of Christianity?

A. One of the main reasons was a graduate student who I knew. He lived his life differently. First, he prayed for me for eight years. And he would say irritating things like, "If you ever want to do anything with your spiritual life, I'd like to help you." That was irritating because I thought I was doing plenty with my spiritual life. You know, I was bending spoons. And the other, more distressing thing is, he would ask me questions like, "Do you believe in evil?" And I would realize that I couldn't answer the question consistently.

He worked at our university as a professor for a year on a sabbatical. When he left, I had a dream. I still felt empty and confused. In the dream, I was in a long line of people suspended in the air. The line seemed eternal on both ends. Jesus was standing greeting us in line. When I looked at Jesus, I knew immediately what I was seeing. I couldn't even look at him, but for a second. I fell down to his feet and started weeping, and the only way I can describe the feeling I had in the dream is that I could sense every cell in my body, and I felt total shame in every cell. Then Jesus grabbed my shoulders and I felt total peace, like I had never felt in my life. I woke up and I was crying.

So I go to the phone and I call this gentleman. He had never told me he was a Christian. But I called him and said, "I think I need to talk to you about my spiritual life." And he said, "Let's meet for dinner." At dinner, he said to me, "Why do you think you have to do something with your spiritual life now?" And out of my mouth came something I'd never thought about. I said to him, "I have some black thing in my chest. And I don't know what it is." He just

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nodded, and I told him the dream. I said, “What do I do?” And he said, “Do you have a Bible?” He made sure I had one before we split up that night. He said to me, “You could read five Psalms a day and one book of Proverbs.” And I thought, well okay, I’m going to do it. I mean, I’m really going to do it this time. And then he said, since Jesus was the one in your dream, you might even read the New Testament. And that’s how casual he was about that. I began to read them, and we began to meet in a town between our cities about once a week. That was November to January.

In January, my mother wanted to go to North Carolina to where she had grown up. We went to this little Methodist church, not because she was religious; she just wanted to see her friends. When we got there, I was really moved to just go up to the altar and give my life to the Lord. It wasn’t even an altar call. It was a communion call. The guy said, you don’t have to be a member of any church to take communion. You just have to believe that Jesus Christ lived, that he died for your sins, and you have to want Him in your life. And when he said that, I was so powerfully moved that I actually thought, even if a tornado rips through this building, I’m going to get that communion.

I took the communion, and I didn’t even listen to the guy. I knelt down and I said, “Please come and get me. Please come and get me. Please come and get me.” And when I took the communion and I said that, I felt free. I felt like tons of things had been lifted off of me. And I began to have an insatiable desire to read the Bible. Romans 1 says God is obvious to everyone and people’s minds who deny him become darkened. And though they think themselves wise they’re actually foolish. That was me. But the Scriptures began to heal my mind so I could actually think again.

## APPLICATION

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1. Spend some time exploring various internet sites for “religious pluralism”.
2. Write a reflection paper based on the following questions. Be prepared to share that paper with your mentor.
  - How would you critique or respond to the following Christian responses to religious pluralism: pluralist, inclusivism, and particularism-exclusivism?
  - Which view most closely reflects your own personal view? Why?

## EXAM



### NOTES

1. \_\_\_\_\_ view rejects any positive role for non-Christian religions.
  - A. Pluralism
  - B. Inclusivism
  - C. Particularism/exclusivism
  
2. \_\_\_\_\_ view holds that each religion has its own truth.
  - A. Pluralism
  - B. Inclusivism
  - C. Particularism/exclusivism
  
3. \_\_\_\_\_ view affirms the unique, ultimate truth of Christianity while allowing some positive role for non-Christian religions.
  - A. Pluralism
  - B. Inclusivism
  - C. Particularism/exclusivism
  
4. The pluralist response to religious pluralism holds there are as many authentic expressions of religion as there are religions.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
5. Exclusivism holds that only persons who hear the gospel and explicitly place their trust in Christ will be redeemed.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
6. A moderate strand of exclusivism/particularism affirms the centrality of Christ and Christian faith but rejects speculation on the status of those who have not heard the gospel.
  - A. True
  - B. False



## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Review the exam questions and answers. Discuss any issues or questions they raise for you.
2. How would you critique or respond to the different responses to the following Christian responses to religious pluralism: pluralist, inclusivism, and particularism-exclusivism?
3. Which view most closely reflects your own personal view? Why?