

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Communicating the Gospel
in a Pluralistic World



SESSION 4

Responses to Religious Pluralism among Christians

CLT Bible Study

Responses to Religious Pluralism among Christians

Certificate of Lay Ministry
Communicating the Gospel in a Pluralistic World
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First printing 2025

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Responses to Religious Pluralism among Christians

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Truesdale writes about what he and Dr. Ron Benefiel did when they taught the Nazarene Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry Seminar: “The Theological Development of the Minister.” Dr. Benefiel and he take the students to a Sabbath (Shabbat) service at Beth Shalom Congregation, a conservative Jewish synagogue in Kansas City. Dr. Truesdale reports, “Alan Cohen is the senior Rabbi.

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 about what he and Dr. Ron Benefiel did when they taught the Nazarene Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry Seminar: “The Theological Development of the Minister.” Dr. Benefiel and he take the students to a Sabbath (Shabbat) service at Beth Shalom Congregation, a conservative Jewish synagogue in Kansas City. Dr. Truesdale reports, “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.”

What does this situation have to do with salvation? Nothing? Something? If it does have to do with salvation, in what way? This session will explore different responses from other religions. How should Christians respond to these other religions? How can we evaluate these religions with respect? In this session, we will examine three major topics: pluralism, inclusivism, and particularism. We will not evaluate the theology of the different responses but seek to understand their basic approaches to religious pluralism.

Christians can respond to religious pluralism in many different ways. Different Christian thinkers and parts of the Church have different ideas about three things:

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

Each thinker and part of the Church have their own answers to these questions, making for various responses and perspectives. People sincerely try to figure out how the Christian faith should look at religions that are not Christian. Let us look now at the three major responses to this challenging topic.

PLURALISM



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The pluralist response to religious pluralism says that every religion has its own true way of looking at the world. Every religion is valid on its own and does not need approval from any other religion. How that religion interprets truth is acceptable for all those who believe it. Truth does not depend on other religions. Only those who follow a religion can truly understand it. Everyone else is just a visitor or observer. So one religion should not try to judge the beliefs and values of another based on its own beliefs and values. No religion should judge another religion. No religion should think it is better than another and try to replace it. To do this would be ignorant, arrogant, and unfair. All religions should see each other as different but valuable ways to understand the world. They are all legitimate interpretations of the world from their own perspectives.

According to this position, religions should respond to other religions with respect. They should tolerate and protect each other. They can learn from each other through dialogue, but they should not use dialogue as a way to convert others. Some scholars who support this view are D. Z. Philips, John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Paul Knitter, and Stanley Samartha.

There are two ways to look at religious pluralism from a pluralist perspective.

The first way of looking at religious pluralism is that even though there is only one ultimate truth, God, God can show up in many different ways. To Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and other religions, God has many ways to show himself. God appears differently in each of these religions. Each religion has a different path to God. Each religion has its own legitimate interpretation of who God is.

Those who carefully study religion should recognize this and celebrate the many ways God can appear. Swami Vivekenanda, who spoke at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and Mahatma Gandhi both believed in this view. Among Christians, John Hick, an influential philosopher of religion, is the main person who believes this.

Many people who are Christian agree with this first view. For example, in the winter of 2002, some people from Charleston, South Carolina, who were part of the Episcopal Church, were shocked to find a Shinto altar in the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. When they complained to the bishop of New York, he said they were narrow-minded and did not appreciate the many ways to reach God.

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The second way of looking at religious pluralism argues that we should forget the idea of having only one God. There are big differences between religions, and we should not ignore them. These differences are so basic and significant that they might stop us from finding a single definition of religion. Some religions are more alike than others. However, there is no one thing that all religions have in common. There is nothing that can unite all religions. For example, in Theravada Buddhism, there is no God. That is one of the first things people following this way must understand. They also must understand that there is no real self (the doctrine of anatta), which is different from what Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe.

According to this second view, true pluralism means accepting religious diversity without trying to change it. It means that there is no one God with many faces. There is no way to bring all religions together. Each religion should be recognized for what it is. If we try to find a unifying God behind all religions, we might miss what makes each religion unique. We might also overlook the real meaning of religious pluralism. Religions are specific to their context. Except for families of related religions like the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) or the Asian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), we should focus more on differences than similarities. More Christians like the first view of pluralism than the second one. But the second view might fit better with the idea of religious pluralism.

INCLUSIVISM



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Inclusivism is the idea that there is one true religion, but there may be some truth in other religions. Inclusivists, who are Christians, believe there is only one God. This God is revealed in the Old and New Testaments as Father, Son, and Spirit. God is the Creator and the one who saves us. There is no other God besides him. God became human in Jesus Christ and brought salvation to the world through him. Any other claims about deity are false. In the presence of Jesus Christ, every knee will one day bow. Every tongue will 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 (Hebrews 2:17).

Inclusivists reject the idea that all religions should be independent. They believe Christians who accept the first view above are not faithful to the New Testament and orthodox Christian faith. Inclusivists want to answer the question, “How does Christ relate to people in other world religions and to the religions themselves?” There are two ways inclusivists answer this question.

CAUTIOUS INCLUSIVISM

Clark H. Pinnock, a systematic theologian at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, and John Sanders represent the first view above. They believe in an orthodox and traditional view of Christ. They also believe the prevenient grace of God is at work in all persons. They think that God’s Spirit is working to save everyone and uses many ways to do this.

One of the ways the Spirit may work is through a person’s participation in a non-Christian religion. This means God’s Spirit could be active in religions other than Christianity. But this is just a possibility. If people respond positively to God’s prevenient grace through their religion, they could be saved even if they have never heard the gospel or openly confessed their faith in Christ.

Pinnock and Sanders do not agree that all non-Christian religions are a way God uses to bring people to salvation. Even if a person is saved while following a non-Christian religion, the ultimate goal is to lead them to fully know Jesus Christ. Any role the religion might play is temporary. It points the way but is not the way. This view emphasizes that while the Holy Spirit might use another religion, non-Christian religions are not paths to God on their own.

NOTES**A LESS CAUTIOUS INCLUSIVISM**

The second form of inclusivism is represented in the work of Karl Rahner (1904-1984). Rahner was a German Jesuit and one of the most important Catholic theologians of the 20th century. He believed the grace of God is most significantly seen through Jesus Christ. Pinnock called Rahner the most famous inclusivist. Similar ideas to Rahner's can be found in Paul Tillich's book, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (1963).

Rahner thought that non-Christian religions were more important than Pinnock and Sanders did. In his book *Theological Investigations* (1961), Rahner wrote about the relationship between the Christian faith and non-Christian religions. First, he believed that Jesus Christ is the one through whom God created and saved the world. When Jesus came to earth, God became human. The salvation that Jesus won through his life, death, and resurrection is for everyone and affects everyone.

Second, Rahner believed Christianity is the best religion. No other religion is equal. True religion is about what God does for people and is God's initiative to create relationship. It is not what people think about themselves or what other religions tell them.

Third, on the one hand, it is true that only through Jesus Christ can anyone be saved. But on the other hand, God can reach people in different ways and at different times. Until people hear the gospel at some point in time, a non-Christian religion can help prepare them for it. But once they hear about the gospel of Jesus Christ, their old religion is not valid anymore. They have to choose whether or not they believe in God's truth.

What about those faithful to their own religion before they hear the gospel? Rahner answers that they are anonymous Christians, not non-Christians. The salvation they have received is in hope of Christ's salvation.

Rahner knew that non-Christian religions are influenced by original sin and the wrong understanding of God. But they also have "supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to persons as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ." God's grace is at work in these religions, and this grace comes because of Christ. So, to different degrees, they can be seen as lawful religions.

The view of Pinnock and Sanders is different from Rahner's. Rahner believes more strongly that non-Christian religions are tools God uses to prepare for and show his grace. He also more easily sees people who are waiting for the gospel as Christians without knowing it. The Second Vatican Council's statement "Declaration on the

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Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (Nostra Aetate) sounds a lot like what Rahner thinks. The statement is summarized in the following paragraph:

The Catholic Church does not reject anything true and holy in other religions. She respects the ways of life and teachings that are different from hers but still show some of the Truth that enlightens everyone. She says, and always will say, that Christ is ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6). In Christ, people can find the most complete religious life, and God has made peace with everything through him.

PARTICULARISM-EXCLUSIVISM



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The third way people respond to different religions is completely different from pluralism. This is called particularism or exclusivism. Some well-known people who believe this are Karl Barth, Hendrik Kraemer, John Piper, Ronald Nash, R. C. Sproul, and Carl F. H. Henry. Like inclusivists, particularists believe that people can only be saved and truly know God through Jesus Christ. The incarnate revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is the Triune God's ultimate way he has shown himself. There is nothing higher or more important.

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 fought against the powers that made creation slaves, won our salvation, and set the captives free.

In a final and universal way, God has provided redemption "by the blood of the eternal covenant" (Hebrews 13:20-21). All other ways people say lead to God are false. Hendrik Kraemer, a Dutch theologian, said that the way to judge religious truth in the Bible and Christianity is "the Person of Jesus Christ who is the Truth."

After this point, the views of inclusivists and particularists are very different. Particularists do not agree with inclusivists who say that Jesus Christ is the only savior, but other religions can still have a good role, even if it is small. Particularists think that inclusivists who say this do not fully recognize how unique and final Jesus Christ is and how important it is to preach and accept the gospel. Particularists believe that the New Testament is very clear: the only way to be saved is by knowing and believing in Jesus Christ.

Particularists ask how anything could be more clear or final than what the New Testament says:

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? (Romans 10:9-15).

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To believe, one must first hear. There are other passages in the Bible that particularists-exclusivists can use to show that there is no salvation outside of God's plan, including the following:

- Exodus 20:3-6
- 2 Chronicles 13:9
- Isaiah 37:18-19; 40
- Jeremiah 2:11; 5:7; 16:20
- Acts 26:17-18
- Colossians 1:13.

A MODERATING RESPONSE

The apostle Paul wrote that people who do not believe in Jesus will experience God's wrath (1 Thessalonians 2:16). Based on verses like this, particularists do not accept the idea that prevenient grace in other religions is enough to be saved. Not even in a preliminary way can people experience God's saving grace in these religions. They believe that only those who hear about Jesus and clearly decide to follow him can be saved. Everyone else is lost. There is no hope for those who die without having heard and believed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These particularists also ask, "Isn't this why Christians share their faith and are involved in missions?" If either inclusivism or pluralism is correct, why should Christians obey the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20)? Why should we go into the world if people can be saved through their religions without hearing the gospel? Why should missionaries and evangelists go through suffering and persecution to bring the gospel to the world? Particularists are worried that inclusivists are ignoring the importance of sharing their faith and the sacrifice of Jesus. They ignore the gospel mandate and betray the scandal of the cross.

On the one hand, those who believe in particularism must be ready to accept that most people will never hear the gospel and, therefore, will be lost forever. There is a more moderate way to approach this problem posed by exclusivism-particularism. Harold Netland represents this moderate position. Netland argues that both inclusivists and exclusivists go beyond what the New Testament says. He advises we should "adopt a modest agnosticism [lack of certainty] regarding the unevangelized." We should not guess how God will deal with those who have not heard about Jesus. God is the judge. Let God, in His wisdom, decide what will happen. Other evangelicals who agree with Netland are J.I. Packer, John Stott, Chris Wright, and Millard Erickson.

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As we can see, Christians respond in many different ways to religious pluralism. It should not surprise us when people ask how Christianity can allow so many views, and sometimes those views contradict one another!

You might be wondering how the idea of postmodernity fits into our discussion. Postmodernity's view that there are many religious stories, and each is valid for a group of people, goes against the options above. Postmodernity would have a difficult time accepting any form of exclusivism.

The only Christian response that fits with postmodernity might be the second form of pluralism. But even the first form of pluralism, which says that God appears in many different ways, sounds too much like a story made up by Western cultures. Postmodernity may accept the idea that religion is evolving, but it would probably see this idea as a theory and not something practical.

We could just ignore postmodernity's problems with inclusivism, particularism, and the moderating response. After all, the message of God does not have to fit with modern or postmodern ideas or any other ideas from different times in history. Maybe there is another option. Is it possible to stay true to the Christian faith and the Great Commission without forcing it on people who follow other religions? Is there a way to respect these religions and the consciences of the people who are part of them? The Wesleyan-holiness tradition offers an answer to this challenging question.

THE GRACE OF GOD

The following story shows how the prevenient grace of God works in people's lives, drawing them to salvation even though they do not know 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.

Taken from an article dated 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 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


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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."

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He just 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 on the theme of “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



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- _____ view rejects any positive role for non-Christian religions.
 - Pluralism
 - Inclusivism
 - Particularism/exclusivism
- _____ view holds that each religion has its own truth.
 - Pluralism
 - Inclusivism
 - Particularism/exclusivism
- _____ view affirms the unique, ultimate truth of Christianity while also allowing some positive role for non-Christian religions.
 - Pluralism
 - Inclusivism
 - Particularism/exclusivism
- The pluralist response to religious pluralism holds there are as many authentic expressions of religion as there are religions..
 - True
 - False
- Exclusivism holds that only people who hear the gospel and explicitly place their trust in Christ will be redeemed.
 - True
 - False
- A moderate strand of exclusivism/particularism affirms the centrality of Christ and Christian faith but rejects speculating about the destiny of those who have not heard the gospel.
 - True
 - False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



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Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

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