

# **WHAT IS EVANGELICAL EXCLUSIVISM? IS IT TENABLE IN A WORLD OF RELIGIOUS PLURALITY?**

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## 1 Introduction

The concept of salvation is central to the Christian faith. It is maintained that humankind are separated from God, and subject to his wrath due to sin. Then, it is only Jesus' sacrifice on the cross that permits us to be reconciled to God and not pass eternity in separation from him. This is in turn a major spur to missionary effort. Some would argue that this traditional view is put into question by the existence of diverse religions in the world today. We shall distinguish three points of view touching on religious plurality and its link to salvation; exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. We shall seek to assess whether exclusivism is defensible on both biblical and non-biblical grounds.

## 2 Evangelical exclusivism

Following Netland, exclusivism is based on the three following propositions: First, the Bible is God's distinctive written revelation, which is true and fully authoritative, and can be used to adjudicate between Christianity and other faiths. Second, Jesus is God incarnate, who is fully God and fully man, and salvation is possible through his unique sacrifice alone. Third, salvation is not possible through the practices of other religions, and they provide a false and inaccurate picture of reality.<sup>1</sup> Exclusivists argue that it is by explicit response of faith in Jesus – i.e. by adhering consciously to Christianity and developing a relationship with God - that salvation is possible. Thus, witness is mandatory, in order to save the lost from an unfulfilled life and eternal separation from God after death.

One can distinguish two exclusivist points of view. First, there are those who hold that only those who hear the Gospel and explicitly respond with faith in Jesus in this life are saved. Others, while remaining exclusivist, are agnostic about how God deals with the unevangelised. God might save some of those from other traditions who had no chance to reject Christ, but solely from his grace rather than granting any special status to their religion.

Two alternatives to exclusivism form the basis of many of the critiques discussed in Sections 3 and 4. Inclusivism maintains that Christianity is an absolute religion, and the only way to salvation, but balances this with belief in God's universal saving will, meaning implicit as

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<sup>1</sup> Netland, *Encountering*, 48

well as explicit faith can save. Hence writers such as Rahner allow there to be saving grace and truth in other religions, at least until the Gospel is preached.<sup>2</sup> Adherents are considered to respond positively to the truth they have e.g. in respect of experience of God's creation, which saves them. They are sometimes called "anonymous Christians".

Pluralists suggest that all religions offer a way to God. For example, Hick argues that all religions are aiming for the same objective, which he calls "the unknowable Ultimate Reality (the Real)". However, religions differ for cultural and historical reasons. A common goal of salvation is based on desire to transcend self and encounter a "new (unexplainable) experience with the Real".<sup>3</sup> Hick claims that the ineffability of religious experience means no religion can claim superiority.

At the least, this requires an abandonment of the centrality of Christ as "opposed to" God in the Christian faith. McGrath suggests that he becomes just a great moral teacher, reviving the Ebionite heresy.<sup>4</sup> Pluralism also confronts the difficulty that all religions do not worship the same God, and some such as Buddhism exclude a role for a saving God entirely.

### **3 Arguments for tenability – Biblical**

Quite apart from the Christian belief that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, the Bible is legitimately used to address the issue of tenability of exclusivism for three other reasons. First, we would contend the Bible is true from a historical point of view, and that the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels are much better attested to than other historical figures who no-one questions, such as Julius Caesar.<sup>5</sup> Second, we would maintain that the evidence for the resurrection of Christ is exceptionally strong.<sup>6</sup> Third, the early church developed in a period of plurality and syncretism akin to the situation today, so its experience is directly applicable.

Numerous Bible passages support an exclusivist point of view. First, there are passages which assert that belief in Jesus is the only way to salvation. These include words of Jesus himself in John 14:16, Peter's assertion at his trial in Acts 4:12, and Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians

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<sup>2</sup> Rahner, 'Christianity', 76

<sup>3</sup> Okholm and Phillips, 'Introduction', 17

<sup>4</sup> McGrath, 'Post-Enlightenment', 167

<sup>5</sup> Bruce, *Documents*, 16

<sup>6</sup> Gumbel, *Alpha*, 33-37

3:11 and 1 Timothy 2:5. The requirement to witness in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 is consistent with these. Meanwhile, Paul asserts that those who do not believe are “by nature objects of wrath”, (Ephesians 2:3), while Jesus in John 3:18 grounds condemnation in unbelief in his own name. The actions of unbelievers are all sinful, as stated in Romans 14:23. We contend that the natural reading of all these passages is to require explicit faith.

Romans 10:10-14 requires someone to preach to an individual before they can call on the name of the Lord and be saved. This strongly tells against inclusivism - one cannot be a Christian without knowing it. Carson notes that in principle this passage need not imply the opposite “if you do not confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord... it does not necessarily follow that you are not saved”. “If A then B” need not imply “if not A then not B”.<sup>7</sup> But as argued by Johnson “there is a vital classical exception to the rule; if all the members of class A are identical to the members of class B, and the conditional "if A, then B" is true, so is "If not A, then not B."<sup>8</sup> The weight of the biblical data, in accordance with sound logical reasoning, hence supports an *explicit* faith response to Christ, as per exclusivism.

As against this, certain Bible passages are used to suggest that God’s will is for all people are saved, which could support inclusivism or even pluralism. These include in particular 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9. But the Timothy passage is followed by the statement there is one God and one mediator, Jesus, while the Peter passage talks of scoffers following their evil desires (who seek to lead Christians astray). Furthermore, from a Calvinist point of view these verses may speak of God’s revealed will (what we should do) and not his hidden will (his eternal plans for what will happen). God invites us all to repent but does not reveal who will actually be saved.<sup>9</sup> Or alternatively, from an Arminian point of view God wills to preserve man’s free will more than he wills to save everyone, so again not everyone is saved.<sup>10</sup> All are invited to the feast of Matthew 22:1-12 but not all may come – otherwise God would be imposing salvation on individuals and humanity is forbidden to say no to God.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Carson, *Gagging*, 312

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, ‘Defense’ (web-page)

<sup>9</sup> Grudem, *Systematic*, 683

<sup>10</sup> Pinnock, *Grace*, 13, cited in Grudem, *Systematic*, 683

<sup>11</sup> McGrath, ‘Post-Enlightenment’, 177. Alternatively, the texts may relate to social groups rather than individuals and assert that God wants to save people from all parts of society, including the rich.

Further inclusivist arguments are based on the “*logos* principle”.<sup>12</sup> John 1:9, it is asserted implies that since the “word” gives light to every man, man can be saved by the universal *logos* apart from knowledge of Jesus, the incarnate *logos*. But a more natural reading is that “light” in the verse refers to the divine invasion of the incarnation that forces distinctions and separates the human race.

A number of biblical arguments against exclusivism rest on Romans 1:20, which stresses that God’s power and nature is apparent to man from creation. This “general revelation” is seen as a basis from which individuals may respond to God for salvation without hearing the Gospel, notably via other religions, or, as Cottrell suggests, by abandoning human religious efforts and flying to God’s mercy and grace.<sup>13</sup> However, this seems to disregard Romans 1:21 which suggests that this does not happen, as fallen man’s “thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened”. As noted by Grudem, without the Bible it is not possible to reconcile God’s holiness and justice with his love and willingness to forgive sins, as shown by Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection.<sup>14</sup> This is also indicated by the fact that no other religion has addressed this issue.

Then there is the argument that those under the Old Covenant could not have known the name of Jesus and yet it is commonly believed that they are saved. But the writer of Hebrews (11.13) shows that they were saved by faith in Jesus via God’s promise of a redeemer. Old Testament people are not on a par with those only receiving general revelation.

The Bible consistently points to the inadequacy of other religions, underpinning exclusivism. The idea that Jesus brought light to the world in John 8:12 suggests other faiths are inadequate. Romans 1:23-24 talks of the folly of worshipping impotent images and the adverse effects on behaviour. Paul notes that God has been patient with idolaters in the past before the coming of Jesus in Acts 17:29, but now this would change. The role of demons in the empty religion of the Gentiles is stressed in 1 Corinthians 10:20. A corollary is that other religions are devised by Satan to deceive mankind and turn man away from worship of the

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<sup>12</sup> Geivett and Philipps, ‘Evidential’, 241

<sup>13</sup> Cottrell, *Mission*, 77

<sup>14</sup> Grudem, *Systematic*, 123

true God. This is made explicit in Colossians 1:13 which talks of rescue from the dominion of darkness.<sup>15</sup>

A common argument against exclusivism is that it is unjust for God to condemn those who have not heard the Gospel. However, human notions of justice often imported into such discussions<sup>16</sup> are tainted with sin and partial, and hence the issue is best addressed on biblical grounds. The concept of middle knowledge suggests that the gospel will come to all those whom God knows would be prepared, like Cornelius in Acts 10, to receive it.<sup>17</sup> Hence God is just. Furthermore, it is shown in 2 Peter 2:4 that God did not spare angels when they sinned, although they were moral beings as humans are, and one can agree that this was just and fair. In contrast, God's decision to save some humans if not all is a demonstration of mercy and grace since we merit judgement due to our rebellion (Romans 3:23).

Pluralists often view exclusivism as intolerant. But it is clear from the New Testament that Christian faith can only lead to salvation if it is freely chosen rather than forced on an individual. This is the essence of Revelation 3:20 used evangelistically. Christ waits to be invited into the believer's heart and does not force his way in. The corollary is that other faiths must be tolerated, while the believer should seek with the power of the Holy Spirit to persuade others of Christ's salvation – living out the second commandment to “love your neighbour as yourself”(Luke 10:27).

As regards pluralist approaches to biblical exclusivism, their critique is often based on the idea that Jesus did not claim to be God; the relevant Bible passages were an invention of the early church as views of Christology evolved, as suggested by Hick, and are mythical.<sup>18</sup> Or alternatively the exclusivity claims are a form of love language as Knitter suggests.<sup>19</sup> In fact, there is much evidence that Jesus saw himself as God, notably use of “Son of Man” and its links to judgement of the world<sup>20</sup>, and that the New Testament account of Jesus' words is

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<sup>15</sup> There are also numerous Old Testament references against pagan religions, which we omit for reasons of space.

<sup>16</sup> For example Cottrell, *Mission*, 83

<sup>17</sup> Geivett and Philipps, 'Evidential', 270

<sup>18</sup> Netland, *Voices*, 246

<sup>19</sup> Netland, *Voices*, 252

<sup>20</sup> Geivett and Phillipps, 'Evidential', 268

historically valid.<sup>21</sup> However, the pluralist rejection of conventional views of the Bible suggests a need for looking also at aspects from outside the Bible.

#### **4 Arguments for tenability – non Biblical**

An argument can be made for exclusivism simply from the point of view of risk. If exclusivism is true, then neglect of missionary activity consigns individuals to hell. On the other hand, adopting a tolerant exclusivist position if inclusivism or pluralism are true merely entails there being more “explicit” Christians at the Day of Judgement.<sup>22</sup> The danger is surely very one-sided and justifies even the sceptic adopting an exclusivist position. This may be used to overrule arguments for example, that the relegation of matters of religion to the private realm in the modern world means choice in religion is only a question of preference and no longer of truth. While openness and tolerance remain desirable, the Christian is still obliged to tell others the Gospel.

There is the argument that no religion saves people as it is purely a product of man’s fallen search for God. Indeed, mere observance of dogma may actually be a revolt against God, as suggested by Barth. He saw it as a form of self reliance that is man made, shaping God to man’s agenda. The “religious” in this sense are actually godless. Only “revelation”, which is from God, is actually inspired and stands opposite to religion in this sense.<sup>23</sup> Such a point of view rules out salvation from Christianity as a “religion” as well as other faiths; However, Christianity benefits from grace and truth because God’s light shines on it. Such an approach supports a humble exclusivism, that acknowledges that Christianity is as corrupt as other faiths except for grace, but emphasises the need for mission to confront the world with the one true faith.

Netland spells out a number of further non-biblical arguments from the point of view of modern thinking that are thought tell against exclusivism.<sup>24</sup> A possible summary of these from Hick is that claims entailing uniqueness of Christianity are not compatible with the "new global consciousness of our time"<sup>25</sup>, a phrase we argue is an intrusion of modern prejudices in

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<sup>21</sup> See for example Bruce, *Documents*, 29-61

<sup>22</sup> See also Geivett and Phillips, ‘Evidential’, 244-5

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics*, 303

<sup>24</sup> Netland, *Voices*, 27-33

<sup>25</sup> Hick, *Metaphor*, 7

what God can do. All these arguments are subject to the difficulty that man's understanding is fallen, and hence should not be regarded as overruling the Biblical basis of exclusivism. We are warned of such "intellectual fashions" in passages such as Jude 18-19.

The growing belief in relativism is often seen as implying that truth is no longer absolute. Rigour in pursuit of truth is seen as arrogant, especially if it involves contradicting others, and tolerance is seen as the overarching virtue. But relativism may also be seen as a psychological response to the rapid change in the modern world and not a sound basis for decisions regarding faith with, as noted, eternal consequences. Furthermore, with the possible exception of Hinduism, all major religions are exclusivist, not just Christianity – and so is pluralism in its own way. Indeed, pluralism can be accused of relativising all other religions' truth claims (suggesting they are mythical), while illegitimately claiming absolute truth for its own truth claim that all others are relative. Hence as suggested by D'Costa<sup>26</sup>, pluralism is itself a form of exclusivism that itself is intolerant of other forms of religion<sup>27</sup>, and subject to the charge of arrogance it levels at exclusivism.

There is the assertion that increased exposure to other religions thanks to immigration and global travel makes it hard to assert that other religions are debased, as individuals meet moral adherents of other faiths. Against this it can be argued that an exclusivist position does not rule out some good elements in other faiths since humans are made in God's image – for example some forms of Hinduism have notions of grace - it merely denies that they can lead to salvation. McGrath<sup>28</sup> notes that dialogue between faiths can be helpful to encourage respect and mutual understanding, as well as ensuring self-examination of presuppositions, but need not require agreement or mean "we are all saying the same".

Scepticism in philosophy associated with Kant, Hume and Wittgenstein asserts that any claim to religious truth is problematic, and notably any claim that God (if he exists) has shown himself in a single religious tradition. Again, these are fallen and subject to the problem of risk set out above. This scepticism is heightened by Higher Biblical Criticism that seeks to cast doubt on the New Testament record of Jesus sayings, which we have argued is superseded by modern Biblical studies.

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<sup>26</sup> D'Costa, 'Impossibility', 229

<sup>27</sup> Netland, *Encountering*, 214-218, shows that this is also the case for religious leaders from Hindu or Buddhist traditions that suggest all paths lead to God while maintaining that their own is superior.

<sup>28</sup> McGrath, 'Post-Enlightenment', 158

A pragmatic view of religion urges that it should be judged on what it does, for example providing solace in a period of crisis. Given that people and cultures differ, it is logical on this basis that a variety of religious approaches would be valid. This denies altogether the transcendent nature of all religions, seeing them as a fruit of human activity (cultural constructs) and hence unacceptably eliminates the notion of revelation a priori.

From a point of view of consequences, it is often seen as arrogant and offensive for one faith to claim universal truth, as it leads to bad relations between races and traditions. To defend Christianity can be seen as belittling other religions, which is not acceptable in a multicultural society. Hick<sup>29</sup> accuses exclusivism of adverse historical effects, such as validating anti-Semitism, colonial exploitation, and the subordination of women. However, Stetson<sup>30</sup> suggests that there is no necessary connection between, on the one hand, believing Christianity true and other religions untrue and, on the other, mistreating and disrespecting non-Christians. Church history is filled with accounts of brutality and negativity; however, it can be argued that the fact that exclusivism is tied to these episodes may be less a matter of theological implication than it is a socio-historical phenomenon. Indeed Netland<sup>31</sup> suggests that evangelical exclusivism is defined in terms of theological and not social and cultural exclusivity and is hence consistent with tolerance.

## 5 Conclusion

We have suggested that exclusivism is strongly defensible both on biblical and non biblical grounds. The alternatives, besides being unfounded, risk weakening missionary effect and risking separation from God for many individuals that might otherwise have found salvation. Hence they are to be rejected. Christians must maintain the distinctiveness of their faith while tolerating others and witnessing vigorously. As argued by McGrath<sup>32</sup> it is “in a free market of ideas, the attractiveness and relevance of the Christian understanding of salvation” will be what attracts others to embrace Christianity. It is our task to ensure that understanding is made known to all humankind.

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<sup>29</sup> Hick, *Disputed*, viii

<sup>30</sup> Stetson, *Pluralism*, 118

<sup>31</sup> Netland, *Encountering*, 48

<sup>32</sup> McGrath, ‘Post-Enlightenment’, 176

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