

Christianity and Religious Pluralism - Are There Multiple Ways to Heaven?

Rick Wade

Rick Wade takes a hard look at the inconsistencies of religious pluralism. He concludes that if Christ is a way to heaven there cannot be other ways to heaven. Whether Christianity is true or not, pluralism does not make rational sense as it considers all religious traditions to be essentially the same.

Aren't All Religions Basically the Same?

In a humorous short article in which he highlighted some of the silly beliefs people hold today, Steve Turner wrote, "We believe that all religions are basically the same, at least the one we read was. They all believe in love and goodness. They only differ on matters of creation sin heaven hell God and salvation." [\[1\]](#)

It is the common belief today that all religions are basically the same. They may *look* different—they may differ with respect to holy books or forms of worship or specific ideas about God—but at the root they're pretty much the same. That idea has become so deeply rooted that it is considered common knowledge. To express doubt about it draws an incredulous stare. Obviously, anyone who thinks one religion is the true one is close-minded and benighted! More than that, the person is clearly a bigot who probably even hates people of other religions (or people with no religion at all). Now, this way of thinking is very seldom formed by serious consideration of the issues, I believe (although there are knowledgeable scholars who hold to it), but that doesn't matter. It is part of our cultural currency and is held with the same conviction as the belief that planets in the solar system revolve around the Sun and not Earth.

On the surface at least, it's clear enough that the various religions of the world are different. Theists believe in one personal God; Hindus believe in many gods; atheists deny any God exists. Just on that issue alone, the differences are obvious. Add to that the many beliefs about the dilemma of the human race and how it is to be solved. Why don't people understand the significance of these differences? On the scholarly level, the fundamental objection is this. It is believed that, if there is a God, he (or she or it) is too different from us for us to know him (or her or it). Because of our limitations, he couldn't possibly reveal himself to us. Religious writings, then, are merely human attempts at explaining religious experience without actually being objectively true.

Philosopher John Hick wrote that this is really a problem of language. Statements about God don't have the same truth value as ones about, say, the weather, because "there is no . . . agreement about how to determine the truth value of statements about God." [\[2\]](#) We use religious language because it is meaningful to us, but there is really no way to confirm the truth of such talk. Because we can't really know what the truth is about God, we do our best to guess at it. For this reason, we are not to suggest that our beliefs are true and others false.

On the more popular level, the loss of confidence in being able to know religious and moral truths which comes from academia and filters through the media, is teamed up with an inclusivist attitude that doesn't want anyone left out—that is, if there are any truths to be known.

I want to take a look at the issue of religious pluralism, the belief that there are many valid ways to God. We'll start with some definitions and a reminder of what historical Christianity teaches about God and us and how we can be reconciled to Him.

Starting Points

There are three basic positions on the question of the relation of Christianity to other religions. The historic view is called *exclusivism*. That word can be a real turn-off to people because we live in an inclusivistic era. What it means in this context is that the claim of Christianity that Jesus is the only way means that all other ways to God are excluded. If Jesus is the only way to the one true God, then no other claims can be true.

Another view on the matter is *inclusivism*. This is the belief that, while salvation is made possible only by the cross of Christ, it can be obtained without hearing the gospel. Even people who are externally part of other religions traditions can be saved. This is a temptation for Christians who are convinced that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but don't like the idea that there are people who haven't heard the gospel who thus cannot be saved.

By religious *pluralism*, we mean the belief that all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) are valid as ways to relate to God. There is nothing unique about Christ; He was one of many influential religious teachers and leaders. This is the position I'll be considering in this article.

Before looking at pluralism, it would be good to review the historic Christian understanding of salvation to bring the contrast into bold relief.

One God

The Bible is clear that there is one God. Through Isaiah the prophet God said, "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God" (Is. 45:5a; see also 43:10; 44:6).

Beyond this, it's important to note that, philosophically speaking, it is impossible that there could be two (or more) "Gods" like the God of the Bible. Scripture is clear that God is everywhere present at once, so there can't be a truly competing

presence (Ps. 139:7-12). God is capable of doing whatever He wills. There can be no ultimate interference by another deity. “The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths,” says the Psalmist (135:6). Or more succinctly, “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (Ps. 115:3; see also Dan. 4:35). How could there be two Gods like this? They would have to be absolutely identical, since neither one could be interfered with. And if so, they would be the same God!

One Savior

The Bible is also clear that there is only one Savior. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (Jn. 14:6). To the rulers and elders and scribes in Jerusalem, Peter declared, “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Theological necessity

In addition, it was theologically necessary for salvation to come through Christ alone. In Hebrews chapter 9 we read that the death of the sacrifice was necessary. According to Hebrews chapter 7, the Savior had to be divine (see also 2 Cor. 5:21). And Hebrews 2:17 says the Savior had to be human. Jesus is the only one who fulfills those requirements.

One more consideration

To this we can add the fact that the apostles never even hinted that people could be saved any other way than through Christ. It is this belief that has fueled evangelistic endeavors all over the world.

Religious Pluralism Can't Accomplish Its Goal

Even on the surface of it, the notion of religious pluralism is contradictory. If we

can't know that particular religions are true, how can we know that *any* are valid ways to God? The pluralist has to know that we can't know (which is an interesting idea in itself!), while also having confidence that somehow we'll be able to reach our goal through our particular beliefs and practices.

But that brings serious questions to the surface. Do all religions even *have* the same goal? That's an important issue. In fact, it's the first of three problems with religious pluralism I'd like to consider.

Can religious pluralism accomplish its goal? What do I mean by that? Two ideas are at work here. First, it is believed that we can't really know what is true about God; our religions are only approximations of truth. Second, if that is so, aren't we being high-handed if we tell a people that their religion isn't true? How can any religion claim to have *the* truth? To be intellectually honest, we need to consider all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) as equally valid. There is a personal element here, too. The pluralist wants to take the *people* of all religions seriously. Telling anyone his or her religion is false doesn't seem to signal that kind of respect. So the goal of which I speak is taking people seriously with respect to their religious beliefs.

I can explain this best by introducing a British scholar named John Hick and tell a little of his story. [\[3\]](#) Hick was once a self-declared evangelical who says he underwent a genuine conversion experience as a college student. He immediately began to associate with members of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in England. Over time, however, his philosophical training and reading of certain New Testament scholars made him begin to have doubts about doctrinal matters. He also saw that, on the one hand, there were adherents of other religions who were good people, while, on the other, there were some Christians who were not very nice people but were sure of their seat in heaven. How could it be, he thought, that God would send these good Sikhs and Muslims and Buddhists to hell while saving those not-so-good Christians just because they believed in Jesus? Hick went on to develop his own understanding of religious pluralism and became

probably the best-known pluralist in the scholarly world.

I relate all this to you to point out that, at least as far as the eye of man can see, Hick's motivation was a good one: he wanted to believe that all people, no matter what religious stripe, can be saved. Harold Netland, who studied under Hick and wrote a book on his pluralism, speaks very highly of Hick's personal character.[\[4\]](#) And isn't there something appealing about his view (again, from our standpoint)? Wouldn't we like everyone to be saved? And having heard about (or experienced directly) the violence fueled by religious fanaticism, it's easy to see why many people recoil against the idea that only one religion has the truth. We want everyone included! We want everyone to feel like his or her religious beliefs are respected and even affirmed!

The problem is that we are supposed to view our beliefs as *approximations* of truth, as somehow meaningful to us but not really true. All people are to be welcomed into the universal family of faith—but they are to leave at the door the belief that what they believe is true. It's as though the pluralist is saying, "It is really noble of you to be so committed to your faith. Of course, we know that little of what you believe can be taken as truth, but that's okay. It gives meaning to your life." Or in other words, "We want you to feel validated in your religion, even though your religious doctrines aren't literally true."

To be quite honest, I don't feel affirmed by that. My religious belief is completely undermined by this idea. If Jesus isn't the only way to God, Christianity is a complete lie, and I am believing in vain.

My belief is that salvation—the reconciliation of persons to the one, true trinitarian God—has been made possible by Jesus, *and* that I *know* this to be the case. In his first epistle, John wrote: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:13). If I can't know this to be true, the promises of Scripture are only wishes. In that case, my hope for eternity is no more secure than crossing my fingers and

saying I hope it won't rain this weekend. We are all, in short, forced to abandon our notions of the validity of our religious beliefs and accept the skepticism of the pluralist. And I don't feel affirmed by that.

For my money, to be told I might be very sincere but sincerely wrong if I take my beliefs as true in any literal sense is like being condescendingly patted on the head. To be honest, I take such a notion as arrogance.

So my first objection to religious pluralism is that it does not accomplish its goal of making me feel affirmed with respect to my religious beliefs beyond whatever emotional fulfillment I might get from pretending the beliefs are true.

Religious Pluralism Doesn't Make Sense

My second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. Let me explain.

Christianity is a confessional religion. In other words, there are particular beliefs we confess to be true, and it is partly through confessing them that we are saved. Is that surprising? Aren't we saved by faith, by putting our trust in Christ? Yes, but there are specific things we are supposed to believe. It isn't just believing *in*; it's also believing *that*. For example, Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe *that I am he* you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:23-24). And then there's Paul's clear statement that "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). So what we believe is very important despite what some are saying now about how Christianity is a relationship and how doctrine isn't all that important.

Back to my point. Christians who know what the Bible teaches and the basics of other religions find themselves staring open-mouthed at people who say that all

religions are basically the same. How could anyone who knows anything about the major religions of the world even think such a thing? I suspect that most people who say this do *not* know the teachings of the various religions. They have some vague notions about religion in general, so they reduce these great bodies of belief to a few essentials. Don't all religions believe in a higher power or powers? Isn't their function just to give meaning to our lives? Don't they all typically include such things as prayer, rituals of one kind or another in public and private worship, standards for moral living, holy books, and the like?

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias has said something like this: Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different, but just the opposite is true. People believe there are some core beliefs and practices such as those I just named which are common to all religions, and that religions are different only on the surface. Muslims have the Koran; Christians have the Bible; Jews have the Torah; Hindus have the Bhagavad Gita. Muslims pray five times a day; Christians pray at church on Sundays and most anytime they want during the week. Buddhists have their shrines; Jews their synagogues; Hindus their temples; Muslims their mosques; and Christians their churches. So at the core, the same; on the surface, different.

But just the opposite is true! It is on the *surface* that there is similarity; that is why we can immediately look at certain bodies of beliefs and practices and label them "religion." They aren't identical, but they are similar enough to be under the same category, "religion." On the surface we see prayers, rituals, holy books, etc. It's when we dig down to the *essential* beliefs that we find contradictory differences!

For example, Islam is theistic but is unitarian while Christianity is trinitarian. Hindus believe we are not true individual selves but are parts of the All, while orthodox Jews believe we are individuals created in the image of God. Muslims believe salvation comes through obedience to Allah, while Buddhists believe "salvation" consists of spinning out of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth into

nirvana.

No, religions are *not* essentially the same and only superficially different. At their very core they are drastically different. So while pluralists might take the religious person seriously, they don't take his or her *beliefs* seriously. How can all these different beliefs be true in any meaningful sense? How can the end of human existence be *both* nirvana *and* heaven or hell? Pluralists have to reduce all these beliefs to some vague possibility of an afterlife of some kind; they have to empty them of any significant content.

So what we believe to be true, pluralists know isn't. Isn't it interesting that the pluralist is insightful enough to know what millions of religious adherents don't! That's a strange position to take given that the heart of pluralism is the belief that we can't know what is ultimately true about God!

It is for this reason that my second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. It claims that our different beliefs are essentially the same, which is false on the surface of it. And it claims that the differences result from the fact that we can't know what is true, while the pluralist acts like he or she *can* know what is true.

Pluralism Is Incompatible with Christianity

Religious pluralism may well be *the* most common attitude about religion in America. You might be wondering, Aren't there a lot of Christians in America? According to the polls, one would think so. But I dare say that if you polled people in your church, especially young people, you would find more than a few who are religious pluralists. They believe that, while Christianity is true for them, it isn't necessarily true for other people. Is pluralism a legitimate option for Christians? In short, no.

This, then, is my third objection to religious pluralism, namely, that religious

pluralism is incompatible with Christianity because it demands that Christians deny the central truths of Scripture. If religious pluralism is true, Jesus' claims to deity and biblical teaching about His atoning death and resurrection cannot be true.

The Bible is clear that salvation comes through accepting by faith the finished work of Jesus who is the only way to salvation. Paul told the Ephesians that at one time they "were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (2:12). Without Christ they were without God. He told the Romans that righteousness came through Jesus and the atoning sacrifice He made (5:6-10, 17). Jesus said plainly that "no one comes to the Father but by me" (Jn. 14:6). Because pluralism denies these specifics about salvation, it is clearly at odds with Christianity.

There is a more general truth that separates Christianity and pluralism, namely, that Christianity is grounded in specific historical events, not abstract religious ideas. Pluralists, as it were, line up all the major, enduring religions in front of them and look for similarities such as those we have already noted: prayers, rituals, holy books, and so on. They *abstract* these characteristics and say, "Look. They're all really the same because they do and have the same kinds of things." But that won't do for Christianity. It is not just some set of abstract "religious" beliefs and practices. It is grounded in specific historical events.

This is a crucial point. The historicity of Christianity is critical to its truth or falsity. God's project of salvation is inextricably connected with particular historical events such as the fall, the flood, the obedience of Abraham, the Exodus, the giving of the Law, the fall of Israel and Judah, the return to Israel—all events leading to Jesus, a historical person who accomplished our salvation through a historical event. It is through these events that God declared and carried out His plans, and nowhere do we read that He would do so with other people through other events and teachings. The truth of Christianity stands or

falls with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and their meaning revealed by God. If the resurrection is historically false, “we are to be pitied more than all men,” Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:19). If this *was* God’s way, and Jesus declared Himself to be the *only* way, then no other way is available.

One thing the church must *not* do is let any of its members think that their way is only one way. This isn’t to condone elitism or condescension or discrimination against others, even though that’s what a lot of people believe today. That believing in the exclusivity of Christ does *not* necessarily result in an attitude of elitism is seen in Jesus Himself. His belief that He was and is the only way to the Father is clear, but few people will criticize Him for having the attitudes just mentioned. It is a strange thing, isn’t it? Christians who say Jesus is the only way are condemned as self-righteous bigots, while the One who boldly declared not His religion but *Himself* as the only way is considered a good man!

To sum up, then. Pluralism falls under its own weight, for it cannot affirm all religious beliefs as it seems to desire, and its belief that religions are all pretty much the same, even though their core teachings are contradictory, doesn’t make sense. It also is certainly incompatible with Christianity which declares that the truth of its teachings stand or fall with specific historical events. And frankly, its claim to know that no religion really has the truth because such truth can’t be known, comes off as a rather hollow declaration in light of the knowledge pluralists think they possess.

Notes

1. Steve Turner, *Nice and Nasty* (Marshall and Scott, 1980).
2. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, rev. ed. (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), 3.
3. See John Hick, “A Pluralist View,” in Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralist World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), chap. 1.



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4. Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1991), ix.

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