



Pluralism and Diversity in Christianity

Eduqas A level R.S. G1A Christianity Theme 3F

Key Concepts:

- Christianity has three main positions on truth and salvation in other religions:
 - (i) **Exclusivism** is the view that other religions contain only falsehood; following them leads to damnation (Joshua 23:16).
 - (ii) **Inclusivism** is the view that other religions may be 'included' in the Christian message, though Christianity is the 'final' and full way to experience truth and salvation; Christ as the 'logos' (John 1:1) is active in all religions so that John 14:6 can apply even to those who may not consciously know Christ.
 - (iii) **Pluralism** is a twentieth century development that views God as the ultimate reality and religions as culturally determined responses.
- A number of passages in the Bible are exclusivistic in nature (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Acts 4:12), though inclusivists and pluralists appeal to an omnipotent God who works outside of religion and revelation.
- Karl Rahner was a Catholic theologian who introduced the term '**Anonymous Christians**' - those outside the church that had an implicit knowledge of God. For example, God -pleasing pagans in the Bible, such as Noah, Melchizedek and Job are neither Jews nor Christians, and Acts 17:23.
- Rahner held that the Catholic Church was still the 'absolute religion', but God could use other '**lawful religions**' to help people find the truth.
- Rahner influenced some documents of Vatican II such

as **Nostra Aetate**: 'the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.'

- John Hick believed that inclusivism represented a **patronising** attitude which could only lead to further violence and conflict between religions.
- If 'anonymous Christianity' was correct, then one would expect to find more godly behaviour in the '**absolute**' religion of Christianity. This is not the case.
- Where we are born largely determines our religious adherence. In the universe of faiths, religions represent planets orbiting '**Ultimate Reality**'.
- Hick's view is also known as pluralistic universalism. He uses the analogy of a **prism**: as light is refracted into many colours, so too is the one source of salvation and truth refracted by human culture into the 'rainbow of faiths'.
- Language conditioned** by culture can harden into exclusive doctrines. The key to peace is to return to religious experience away from exclusivistic and inclusivistic **dogmas**.
- Christian universalism is a form of inclusivism: it is the belief that Christ will save everyone in the end. It appeals to Biblical ideas such as a God willing for everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), Jesus dying for the entire world (John 2:2), the promise of a universal restoration (Acts 3:12).
- This view is supported by the beliefs that (i) God cannot fail and (ii) love is incompatible with damnation. Universalism was condemned in 543 CE.

Key quotes:

"*Extra ecclesium nulla salus*" (3rd c. CE; Latin for: 'outside the Church, no salvation') "...every human being is really and truly exposed to the influence of the divine..." (K. Rahner)

"Can we be so entirely confident that to have been born in our particular part of the world carries with it the privilege of knowing the full religious truth?" (J. Hick)

Key arguments/debates:

Pluralism is not the official position of any Christian denomination. For, it does not allow a literal belief in the incarnation of Jesus, but views Jesus as one of many who have attained a high level of God-consciousness. There are also fears that it leads to a relativistic attitude toward doctrine and morality. Hick insists, however, that the Church has never provided a satisfactory explanation of the identity of Jesus and all religions are united in their insistence in a less egoistic and more loving way of life.

There are many exclusivistic passages in the Bible and if one insists on a literal interpretation of the Bible as the objective truths of God then valuing other religions is ruled out. However, God is beyond Jesus. Judaism was a path to God prior to Christianity and exclusivistic passages may be interpreted psychologically: we make exclusivistic statements when we are in love or under threat.

Key questions:

- Has religious pluralism rediscovered the heart of Christianity?
- Is inclusivism patronising?
- Which position does the Bible seem to support the most?
- What's the difference between pluralistic universalism and Christian universalism?

Key words:

Exclusivism | Inclusivism | Pluralism | logos | final | Anonymous Christians | lawful religions | Nostra Aetate | patronising | absolute | Ultimate Reality | prism | conditioned language | dogma