

EXCLUSIVE SALVATION IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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It is a privilege to be able to discuss as Christians from different parts of the world an issue of great and increasing importance for the Christian faith. We will begin by looking around the world and seeing what it looks like. When we do so we see very different kinds of religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. And here we Christians are in the midst of the world. You live in a cosmopolitan city world, where you have experienced this religious diversity for some time. For many Christians in the United States, however, this is a new experience. For many people their choice was either to be a Christian or not to believe at all. Of course, for Jewish people it is also the choice of remaining as they are, or of becoming a Christian or simply being secular. Even within the sheltered part of the world there are changes. In many major cities in the United States you may find lots of worshippers of Buddhism, Islam, and many of the religions. And some Christians find persons of very different religious faith living next door.

Now we face a problem when we look at this kind of the world. We want to be courteous. We do not want to insult other people or hurt their feelings. Yet as Christians we know that we should tell them about Jesus because they need to know him. Some of these people are very nice people. Some of them make very wonderful neighbors. They are kind, generous, and helpful. How do you go to someone like that and tell them, "You are a sinner, and you need to accept Jesus Christ"? Further, some of these religions are coming in very aggressively and spreading their message. In the United States, we used to think that we were net exporters of a mission. In fact, we thought we exclusively exported and we did not import religion. That is changing too. Particularly Islam is becoming quite aggressive in evangelizing others. And certain missions and various types by Muslims are being projected especially from Saudi Arabia. Now this is the fact that numerous religions exist, but the question is which religion is true. And how do we decide?

The problem is particularly acute in the kind of culture current in our world today. In the culture known as postmodernism, the idea that "One idea is right and all the other ideas are wrong" is offensive to many people. In particular, the idea that Christianity is the true religion and the others are false is very difficult for many people even to listen to. But Christianity by its very nature is a "conversionistic" religion. We Christians learn that there is only one way to God. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." (John 14:6)

Let me give you two or three examples of the objections to the exclusive view. The first was experienced by my friends, the Southern Baptists. A few years ago, at the time of the Jewish High Holy Days, the Southern Baptists announced that they were praying for the conversion of Jews. A terrible storm of protest went up, not just from Jewish religious leaders to protest. Many liberal Christians said that, "This is awful that you should pray for them to be converted. You are not showing respect for those persons." The second involves the pope. The pope was planning to make a visit to India. India is officially a politically secular country but it is very strongly Hindu.

Hinduism is so strong that McDonalds in India does not serve beef. Driving in India is a challenge, as you move around cows walking down the middle of the street. A Hindu leader said to the pope, "If you come to India without first announcing that Jesus is not the only way of salvation, you are promoting hate crimes against Hindus." The third involves Prince Charles, who could one day become king of the United Kingdom. When the prince becomes the king of England, he will be given a list of titles. One of these is the Defender of the Faith. It is because the king in one sense is head of the Church of England. But Prince Charles, looking ahead to the possibility of becoming king said, "Perhaps it should be done differently when I become king. Instead of the Defender of the Faith, it should be the Defender of the Faiths." This is pluralism in action. By pluralism we do not mean simply the fact that these different versions exist. It is rather the idea that somehow it is wrong to suggest that one is right and the others are not.

It is interesting to notice how similar the situation that we now face is to that of the early church. The Roman Empire was also a very religiously plural place. Any religion could be practiced, with just one limitation. You were not to try to win people from other religions to your religion. In many ways that is what we face now in many parts of the world. Today in many of the developed countries there is really only one sin: the sin of intolerance. Consequently there is only one group of which it is permissible to be intolerant, namely evangelical Christians. Because evangelical Christians say others should become Christians, it is therefore acceptable to be intolerant of those intolerant Christians. This is uniquely a problem of Christianity. Although other religions are becoming more aggressive in winning others, they have been less likely to be disturbed by the presence of contradictions with other religions.

Now a number of solutions have been suggested to this situation. (1) The traditional one is that only Christianity is true. To be accepted by God, you must believe in Jesus Christ. (2) Another earlier view that is not so popular today is called universalism, the view that all will be saved. Either the gospel will be successful and all will be

reached or simply God will save all people regardless of their faith. Now this is said with the effect that no religion including Christianity really is true. (3) There is also a position called inclusivism. That is those who are saved are saved only through the work of Jesus Christ, but many more may be saved than we expected. There may be people who are Christians but do not know it. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner called them "anonymous Christians." They are Christians but do not realize it. (4) The position we want to look at especially here is called pluralism, which is that in one way or another all religions are true.

One person who promoted this idea is a theologian named John Hick. As a young man in the United Kingdom he grew up as a nominal Anglican. He went to church because he was born into it. Then during the days when he was a university student, he encountered evangelical Christianity, was converted and became an evangelical believer in Jesus Christ. He became very zealous in evangelism and tried to reach others. But gradually his ideas began to change. As he came into contact with people from other parts of the world he began to think that all of these people were worshipping the same God. He gave several reasons for this view.

(1) There is a similarity of worship practice in different religions. In his book, *God Has Many Names*, Hick listed the words from some hymns. And sometimes I have taken the words of one of those hymns and have read it to my class. I then ask them, "Have you ever sung this hymn in church?" They usually say no but think those hymns sounded quite good. They talked about loving God and worshipping Him. And then I tell them that they were not Christian hymns at all. They were something Buddhists sang. Hick said that the worship was similar, just with different names of the same God.

(2) A second reason is the presence of saints in all religions. People say that they are godly people. The problem is that they are Hindus, or maybe they are Muslims.

(3) Hick also pointed out the geographical identification of different religions. If you are born in India, the chances are very likely that you are a Hindu. If you are born in Africa, the chances are

very high that you are a Muslim. If you are born in Southern Europe, the chances are high that you are very likely a Roman Catholic. If you are born in Northern Europe, the chances are very likely that you are a Lutheran. If you are born in the Southern part of the United States, the chances are very likely that you are a Southern Baptist, or if you are not, you had better have a very good reason for not being one. So Hick says what we believe is simply a result of where we happen to be born. Now it is interesting that on his own theory he should be an Anglican. But of course he is not.

(4) A further argument is the lack of success of Christianity against other major world religions. If you look at Christian missions you discover that most of the converts are not from the great world religions. Jews, Muslims and Buddhists are not the ones that you can convert to Christianity. It's rather people from the tribal religions that are becoming Christians. On the basis of these considerations, he concludes that all these people in the different religions are worshiping the same God. Christians and Jews call Him Jehovah or Yahweh. Muslims call Him Allah. *God Has Many Names* is the title of one of his books.

He tells a familiar story about five blind men and an elephant. They went out to investigate an elephant. They were not familiar with an elephant and all of them were blind. Each of the five blind men got a different part of the elephant. One got to the side of the elephant and said that it was like a wall. Another took the leg and said that an elephant was like a tree. Another took the tusk and said that an elephant was like a spear. And the poem concluded this way: "Each was partly in the right and all were in the wrong."

This, says Hick, is how religions are. Buddhists take hold of one part of God and say, "This is what God is like." Jews take hold of a different part of God and say, "This is what God is like." They all have part of the truth, but none of them has the whole truth. Hick pictures different religions as being like people marching along in valleys parallel to each other. Each group is singing their own songs as they march toward their goal of the fulfillment of the religion. They are unaware that on the other side of the mountain are other

groups of people marching and singing different songs. But they are all marching together and some day they will all come up to the same clearing together. And then we Christians will all realize that the Muslims will go to the same place but have just traveled a different path.

There are certain problems with this view. One is that religions are quite different in significant ways. It is one thing to believe that we will one day be in heaven and in the presence of God and that will be the place of eternal happiness; it is quite a different idea to believe that the goal of life is to be absorbed back into the whole of the reality and lose individuality. It is also quite a different thing to believe, as Muslims do, that heaven is the place of reward where one will have seventy virgins. You see what it is when the blind men lay their hands on the elephant, and what they find it is quite different. It is as if one of the blind men finds that his part of the elephant has long furry hair, while another finds that there are feathers in his part of the elephant, and yet another man finds that there were scales like those of the fish on his part of the elephant. As one tries to say these are all really the same religion, viewed in different ways, one really has for generalize to say they are the same thing.

There are certain ideas for which you cannot find parallels in other religions. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity is unique to Christianity. A theologian named Raimundo Pannikar has written a book called *The Unknown Christ in Hinduism*. And he also believes that there is the pattern of the Trinity in religions such as Hinduism. He says God the Father represents the experience of God as far away. Jesus represents the experience of God as present in the world. The Holy Spirit represents the experience of God within us. So it is really a matter of experiencing God in different ways. He believes he finds these three kinds of experiences in several religions. If you explain this to a Christian, the Christian will say, "I don't recognize that as the doctrine of the Trinity." And other conceptions are different as well.

Christians believe that each person must be born again by accepting Jesus Christ. Yet some evangelical Christians today say

that they believe in being born again but also believe in reincarnation. They believe they have not been born again only once but many times. This conception of reincarnation, that we die and come back in another form or another person, is, however, very different from the Christian doctrine of new birth. This also conflicts with the Christian command that we have to evangelize. Whether we consider the great commission or the message of the early church, the message is the same. There is only one way or one name by which one is to be saved. Mission in a pluralistic view is quite different. A Christian missionary who believes in the pluralistic view will not try to convince Buddhists to become Christians but rather try to help a Buddhist become a better Buddhist. Let us assume for the moment that this pluralism is true. It is however such a reconstructed Christianity that you can hardly call it Christianity. More than eighty years ago, a theologian, J. Gresham Machen, wrote a book entitled *Christianity and Liberalism*. He said, "Perhaps Liberalism is true, but it is not Christianity." It is so different from what Christianity has always been known to be that if we decide to become liberals we should not call ourselves Christians anymore. Somehow a pluralistic Christian who says, "I'll simply help Buddhists become better Buddhists" is so different from what Christianity has been in the past that this hardly should retain the name "Christianity."

Now you may be thinking, "Well, this is a Westerner. He comes from a country where Christianity is sort of a majority religion. But we live in the part of the world where Christianity is a minority. And we must deal with that fact." Once again I want to remind you of the situation of the early Christian church. Christians were also a minority initially. But they did not say, "Well, we need to live at peace with our neighbors. We won't try to convince them because they might become upset about this."

It should be apparent by now that I am advocating that we must not surrender the uniqueness of Christianity. Those forms of Christianity that tried to compromise did not succeed very well. Dr. Kenneth Scott Latourette, a great church historian of Yale University, wrote an eight-volume history of missions with a title, *A History of*

the Expansion of Christianity. He came to the end of that long work and he looked back on what he had written and wanted to draw a conclusion for his readers. He said there were some forms of Christianity that did not insist that Jesus Christ and Jesus alone was the Son of God, and that was the way of salvation, and they did not have the strength to survive in a hostile world. Those who have no real alternative to offer did not end up with the world becoming Christians. Instead they ended up with the church becoming more like the world.

If we simply want to survive as a church, it must be by insisting on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In our days some evangelicals are advocating a moderate approach. They say, "We must not insist that Christianity is true. Instead we must insist that Christianity is the best religion when it comes to building community." Of course this is saying Christianity is the best version of community that there is. I tried out this idea with some missionaries in Japan. And I asked them if they thought they could preach this well by saying, "Become a Christian, because this is the best form of community that there is?" They did not think that was worthwhile preaching. Rather we must insist on the indispensable essentials of Christianity.

One of these is the doctrine of the Trinity. This is what distinguishes Christianity from several kinds of religions. The teaching that God is three in one distinguishes Christianity from the strict monotheisms such as Judaism and Islam. On the other hand, it distinguishes Christianity from some of the Eastern religions. Some of these say there are many different gods. Some of them say God is everywhere, he is in nature, and everything is God. Christianity by teaching God is three in one, distinguishes itself from both of these kinds of religions. Now this is not an easy doctrine to accept or to understand. I remember a professor in seminary saying this to us, "If you try to understand the Trinity, you'll lose your mind. But if you deny the doctrine of the Trinity, you'll lose your soul." The Bible never says in so many words that God is three and God is one, but it very clearly talks about three being God and insists that God is one. That the Father is God is of course presupposed throughout the Bible.

That Jesus is God in the same way as the Father is also clearly witnessed in many places throughout John's gospel, the book of Hebrews, Paul's letters, and elsewhere. And that the Holy Spirit is God is clear from the fact that to sin against the Holy Spirit is to sin against God (Acts 5:3, 4). At the same time, the Bible makes it very clear that God is one. In Deuteronomy 6, this is one of the things Israelites were to learn, memorize and recite, even marking it on the walls of the houses and round their wrists. It is interesting to me to notice that the Hebrew word used in Deuteronomy 6 that God is one is the same word that used in Genesis 2:24, which says, "the man and the woman shall leave their parents and be united in marriage and they shall be one flesh." When the minister performs a marriage ceremony, two people are before him. When he pronounces them husband and wife, they do not simply cease to be two people and there is only one person standing there. They are still two persons but they are bound so closely together by love that they are one in a very real sense. That is how the Trinity is: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are three persons. They are bound so closely together by their love of one another and their life flows to each of them, that in a very real sense that they are united.

Now this is not an easy message to give to people. It would be easier for people to accept that we just said, "Don't bother about this." And one of the evidences that this is divinely real is that this is not something any human being would think up, but it is the triune God whom we worship and to whom we come for salvation.

The other indispensable pillar of the Christian faith that we must maintain is the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I mention these two great truths of the Christian faith, but I do not wish to imply that these are the only unique things of the Christian faith. These are especially crucial. I sat down one day and I drew up a little brief one-paragraph biography of certain great religious leaders such as Mohammad, Gandhi, Buddha, Mary Baker Eddy, who founded the Christian Science, and several other religious teachers. And they all go something like this: born in such and such a time, lived for a certain number of years, taught teachings that impressed

their followers, and then died at a certain time, and were buried. And for all the others, that is the end of their biography. But for Jesus, the story does not end there. Jesus' biography includes this line: raised again by the power of God on the third day. That is something other religions do not even claim for their leaders, but it was at the very heart of the teaching of the early church: the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When you look at the disciples at the crucifixion, they were a rather discouraged group. When asked if he was one of Jesus' disciples, Peter said three times, "I don't know the man; I have nothing to do with him." At one point he said, "I'm going back to fishing." They were frightened, they were afraid that people would do to them what had been done to Jesus. But then we look at the story of Pentecost and the sermon Peter preached that day. Instead of saying "I don't know Jesus," he now says, "This one whom you put to death, God has brought back to life." What could have made this kind of change in Peter and the other disciples, from being afraid to being fearless and bold? There was only one adequate explanation: that is they had seen Jesus alive again.

Anyone who investigates the evidences will find adequate basis to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have better historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ than many of the events in ancient history that we easily believe. Christianity is willing to compete with other religions in terms of its congruence with the reality of history. I understand that *The Da Vinci Code* has been published and sold in this area. If you have read it or heard about it, you know that it is a very interesting book. It has some surprising things to say about Jesus such as he was married to Mary Magdalene, who bore him a child or children. So according to that book, there are descendents of Jesus walking around this earth now—physical descendents. As I read this book, I was reminded of something that one of my favorite philosophy professors at Northwestern University used to say. When the students would present an idea in class that they thought was very brilliant, the professor would say this "It's a very nice theory. Only one thing is wrong. No evidence!" When I looked at the contentions and ground of that book, it reminded me of this old friend.

It is also true for a group of scholars called the Jesus Seminar. The evidence they present is at best flimsy. It is based upon documents many more years removed from the time of Jesus than the gospel we have. I sometimes ask my students something like this, "Suppose you have a group of people who lived at the very time the event occurred, some of them actually observed it and wrote down their thoughts perhaps ten or fifteen years later. And then you have a group of documents written by people maybe 150 years later. Which documents will you likely trust—the early ones by the eyewitnesses, or these that came much later? The kind of evidence appealed to in *The Da Vinci Code* is those late and rather speculative documents. As we face a world in which there are so many competitors, where so many say, "No, our view is also true," this is what our response must be. We will say it with great respect for the persons and with as much tact as we can use. We will acknowledge the quality of the life of these people. But we will say there is only one way to God. It is through the crucified and resurrected Son of God who Himself made the way to the presence of God. This is the message and the task that Jesus has given us, and this is the message and the task that we will carry on.

ABSTRACT

In the article, Dr. Erickson points out that value judgment in a postmodern culture is doomed to arouse protest; yet Christianity requires men to repent and be converted, and proclaims that be the only way to God. The author lists three examples as to demonstrate modern views that against exclusivism: (1) Southern Baptists on one Jewish Holy Day claimed that they were praying for the Jews to be converted, and this aroused protests from both Jewish religious leaders and liberal Protestants. (2) When the Pope planned to visit India, Hindu leaders proclaimed that the Pope was actually prompting hate crimes against Hindus should he insist that Jesus is the sole way to salvation. (3) Prince Charles states that while he be king, he will change the title "Defender of the Faith" to "Defender of the Faiths."

Intolerance is regarded as a crime in postmodern societies; people require Christians to give up their stance that to believe in Christ is the only way to salvation. Dr. Erickson observes that there are four Christian responses: First, there is exclusivism, which insists that to repent, be converted and believe in Jesus Christ is the only way to God. Second is universalism, which believes that all will ultimately be saved by God. Third, the inclusivism approach, which claims that salvation is from Jesus Christ, yet there are numerous anonymous Christians among other religions and non-believers. And fourth is pluralism, which claims that all religions are of truth.

Erickson restates that men have to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and be born again, that is what Christians believe. Quoting Kenneth Scott Latourette's analysis on church history, he points out that there had been churches that denied Jesus as son of God, or He be the only way to salvation, and all these churches were eventually extinguished, that if the church is not able to provide the world a true way and thus bring forth changes, she will be assimilated into secular culture. Erickson restates that the doctrine of the Trinity and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are the foundation of Christian beliefs.

撮 要

艾利克森博士指出，在後現代文化中進行價值判斷，是惹人反感的；然而，基督教卻要求人悔改歸信基督，並指稱這是通往上帝的唯一道路。艾利克森列舉了三個反對排他觀點的例子：(1) 美南浸信會透過一位姊妹宣告在猶太聖日為猶太人歸信基督祈禱，受到猶太教領袖反對，並招來自由派基督徒批評；(2) 教宗計劃訪問印度，但印度教領袖聲稱若教宗宣告耶穌是得救的唯一途徑，就是在印度教徒中散播仇恨；(3) 查理斯王子表示若他成為君主，會將「維護英格蘭教會信仰」的稱號，改為「維護眾多宗教信仰」。

後現代社會文化視不寬容為罪，要求基督徒放棄惟有信靠耶穌才得救的立場。艾利克森認為基督教回應這情況有四種取向：第一種是排他主義，認為悔改歸信耶穌基督是通往上帝的唯一道路；第二種是普救主義，即相信所有人最終得著上帝拯救；第三種是包容主義，認為救恩由耶穌基督而出，不過在其他

宗教或非信徒中，也有無數隱名的基督徒；第四種是多元主義，認為所有宗教都是真理。

艾利克森提醒我們，基督徒相信人必須接受耶穌基督為救主，經歷重生。他引用來德里 (Kenneth Scott Latourette) 對教會歷史的分析，指出歷史上那些認為耶穌基督並非上帝的兒子，或耶穌基督並非得著救恩唯一道路的教會，最終也無力在歷史舞台上生存。若果教會不能為世界提供真實的出路而改變世界，最終會被世界同化。他重申三一論、耶穌基督復活是基督教信仰的基石。