

Web Resource: <http://www.theologicalstudies.org/pluralism.html>

## What Are Pluralism, Inclusivism, and Exclusivism?

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Is there only one religion that leads to God or do several? Or, is the truth somewhere in between? Few issues are as controversial and important as this issue of which religion(s) leads a person to salvation. The purpose of this article is to define three key terms related to this issue—Pluralism, Inclusivism, and Exclusivism.

### 1. Pluralism -- *"All major world religions lead to God and salvation."*

Various forms of Pluralism exist. For our purposes, though, the Pluralism we are concerned with is "Religious" or "Philosophical" Pluralism. Religious Pluralism is the view that all major religions are equally valid and lead to God and salvation. Thus, no one religion is inherently better or superior to any other major world religion. With Religious Pluralism, all the major religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are equal. For pluralists, there may be differences in rituals and beliefs among these groups, but on the most important issues, there is great similarity. Most religions, they claim, stress love for God and love for fellow human beings. They also point out that most religions have a form of the Golden Rule. Religious pluralists also point out that there are pious people in all the major religions. Religious Pluralism became increasingly popular in the latter half of the twentieth century. The leading proponent of Religious Pluralism in the last few decades has been John Hick.

### 2. Inclusivism -- *"One religion is best but salvation is possible in other religions."*

"Inclusivism" is the position that one religion is uniquely true but salvation is accessible to those outside of that faith. For example, a Christian inclusivist might say, "I am a Christian and I think Christianity is the most correct religion, but I also think there is saving truth in other religions like Islam and Hinduism. People of other faiths can be saved by Jesus even if they do not explicitly believe in Him." Inclusivists do not go as far as pluralists in that inclusivists do not claim that all religions are equal. They do believe, though, that truth and salvation can be found in other religions. Some Christian inclusivists claim that the salvation of Jesus is unknowingly applied to adherents of other religions who live good, moral lives. Catholic and Inclusivist theologian, Karl Rahner, referred to such people as "anonymous Christians."

The sixteenth century reformer Ulrich Zwingli held to a form of Inclusivism. In more recent years, Karl Rahner helped popularize this perspective. The Roman Catholic Church and several mainline Protestant denominations have also shifted toward Inclusivism in recent decades. The Roman Catholic "Vatican II Council" of the 1960s explicitly declared that people of other religions could be saved. Evangelical theologian, Clark Pinnock, too, has espoused Inclusivism. Traditionally, religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism have been proponents of Inclusivism as well.

### 3. Exclusivism -- *"Salvation is found in only one religion."*

"Exclusivism" (or "Particularism") is the view that there is *only* one way to God and salvation. Thus one religion is uniquely and supremely true and all other religions are false. Christianity is often viewed as an exclusive religion because of Jesus' statement in John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." In addition to Christianity, the religions of Islam and Judaism have traditionally been considered to be exclusive religions. Those who hold to Exclusivism usually affirm that other religions possess elements of truth, but these religions do not teach 'the truth' that is able to save its followers. In fact, much of what is taught in other religions is viewed by exclusivists as false. It should be noted that some groups within Judaism and Christianity have drifted away from Exclusivism in recent decades.