Religious Pluralism Theories

Traditional Roman Catholic Doctrine:

Other world religions do not have salvific efficacy. Only Catholic Christianity provides the full truth of salvation, other religions and other Christian denominations ‘risk their salvation’.

Moderated Roman Catholic Theory:

Because other world religions are responses to universal divine grace, their adherents may-without knowing it-have implicit faith in Christ sufficient for salvation. This is Karl Rahner’s “anonymous Christian” theory.

Paul Knitter’s Four Models of Religious Pluralism:

1. Exclusivistic/Replacement Model: Without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ there is no salvation. Jesus ‘replaces’ the sinner in ‘substitutionary atonement’. Forty percent of U.S. Christianity-Evangelical, Charismatic, Pentecostal-denominations hold this view.

2. Inclusivistic Model: God can be found in all the world religions, but Jesus Christ has come to ‘complete’ these other religions. Dialogue is possible and necessary with other religions, to show them Christ’s completion of their faith. Ultimately, the definitive claim for Christ’s role in salvation is upheld. Most mainline Protestant denominations hold this theology, e.g. Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, etc.

3. Pluralist Model: The world’s religions are more alike than they are different, ecumenical dialogue is necessary to find their mutuality and common ground. While in different forms, ultimately all religions converge on one ultimate reality. The Protestant John Hick espouses this view. Others religions are valid, but not everything about each religion is ‘true’.

4. Acceptance Model: The world’s religions are indeed ‘common essence’. “Many paths, one mountain.” All religions will equally and effectively lead followers to the top of the mountain. All contain truth.

Steven Kaplan, Different Paths, Different Summits

S. Mark Heim, Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion

Heim and Kaplan are both uncomfortable with a ‘common essence’ approach to pluralism and instead argue for multiple salvations. They both hold that suppressing the very real differences in the world religions ultimately disrespects their uniqueness and variety. Heim argues for “different paths, different summits”, while Kaplan goes even further and argues for multiple ultimate realities, a “plurality of ultimate realities”.

Hick: There is one divine reality, all religions can be true

Heim: There is one divine reality, some religions may more accurately depict/save, are more true

Kaplan: There are many divine realities, all religions true to their realities