

Religion and Social Inclusion: The Struggle to Include The Excluded – and The Excludable?



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Introduction

In this short piece I look at social inclusion from the perspective of religion. I argue that on matters of social justice, such as the challenge to reduce or end poverty, religions can and do play a significant and often varied role. But, noting that the idea of social inclusion goes way beyond poverty, I pose a question: how does religion itself, in a world of different religions and often great diversity within a religious tradition, deal with inclusion and exclusion.

I must point out that the latter part of this essay is something of a preliminary study on my part, an attempt to look at a problem of which there seems to be little extant empirical or theoretical literature. By drawing on some of the literature on ‘theology of religions’ (how a faith understands itself in relation to another faith), I shall try to tease out if not some provisional answers then some points demanding further reflection.

Poverty and Social Inclusion

In a brilliant piece of applied political philosophy, University of Johannesburg professor Hennie Lötter highlights poverty as one of the greatest challenges facing us today. Poverty is “an evaluative concept used by human societies to set minimum standards for those aspects of lifestyles acquirable through human capacities”¹. The very poor have, first, insufficient means to procure basic necessities or resources to participate in social activity; second, lack actual resources; third, occupy low and uninfluential positions in society; fourth, perform menial, unworthy tasks in society; or, fifth, make little or no contribution to society as a result.²

Lötter distinguishes between extreme poverty and intermediate poverty. Extremely poor people are as a result of poverty excluded from accessing skills, knowledge and the wherewithal to better themselves. This leads to a kind of social illiteracy that creates a vicious circle: too poor access skills, they sometimes lack the skills to get them out of poverty. Intermediate poverty occurs when, though poor people have basic economic capacities and resources, they lack the capacity to participate in wider society: they barely survive.

For Lötter, poverty is a disabling condition since poor people cannot live a life

worthy of human beings. It is privation and a disease, since it excludes not only the poor but all too often their descendants. It is a trap that generates humiliating powerlessness. Ultimately it leads to social exclusion.

It is also something, he argues, that communities are morally obligated to fight, in the name of human dignity and the recognition of the humanity of the poor. This is by no means a simple task since it involves evaluating the causes of poverty and developing means to bring people out of poverty, not simply emergency relief. Emergency relief – charity – maybe important as a temporary measure but does not bring poor people out of their state of social exclusion. Education and development offers the poor an opportunity to help themselves: not simply to acquire material goods but also the human and social capital to live and participate with dignity in society. In short, to move from social exclusion to social inclusion.

Religion, Poverty and Social Inclusion

What Lötter proposes should not be a surprise to persons of faith. All the great religious traditions of the world address the question of poverty. Religions have two broad positions on poverty. One is essentially poverty as a voluntary renunciation of personal wealth and property in favour of a life focused on faith. This is the tradition of those in Christianity who become monks or nuns, giving up personal ownership of goods as a sign of spiritual commitment. Similar traditions exist in other faiths: the holy men and women of Hinduism, Buddhism and sometimes Islam (particularly among Sufi mystics).

By renouncing wealth, they proclaim a certain indifference to, if not rejection of, not of society as such but of materialistic societies as we know them. Paradoxically, far from being socially marginalised within their traditions, they are often seen as the great exemplars of their faiths: by their self-exclusion they are held up as models of sanctity – if anything they are the most included, the spiritual ‘elite forces’, if I may use a somewhat inappropriate military metaphor.

Beyond those who embrace personal poverty as part of their spiritual journey, religious traditions also strongly endorse the struggle against poverty as integral to their social ethics.

In more recent times some public religious figures have also taken steps to embrace personal poverty as part of their way of life, frequently combined with radical social justice activism. The American former Communist journalist Dorothy Day started the lay led Catholic Worker communities in the United States in the 1930s with this in mind; her communities embraces a simple communal lifestyle that combined living and working among the poor with radical pacifist activism – anticipating the more secular commune movement of the 1960s.³

Beyond those who embrace personal poverty as part of their spiritual journey, religious traditions also strongly endorse the struggle against poverty as integral to their social ethics. This can take many forms: commitment to charitable works as part of the religious mission; political advocacy on behalf of the poor and marginalised; even at times active participation in social and political movements of the poor. All of this is backed up by theological reflection on their respective sacred texts, doctrines and traditions of belief⁴.

Direct religious action on poverty – through both social work and advocacy – varies within and between religions. Major development agencies based on faith traditions and their advocacy counterparts tend to operate ecumenically and interfaithfully,

not drawing distinctions between those of their faith and those outside. For many the rationale for their action is rooted in faith that sees all in need as deserving their help. A group like Christian Aid works with people of all faiths, collaborating with global secular organisations like Oxfam, and delivering emergency relief and development projects to whoever is in need.

Faith is the motivation. Poverty is the enemy. The social inclusion of the poor is the goal.

Religion and the Challenge to Social Inclusion

From what I've said above, it is clear that religious communities frequently promote social inclusion through political advocacy and activism, as well as through development and relief work. Much (not all) of it is irrespective of the beliefs (or lack of them) of the poor. But I would be remiss if I left it there.

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Poverty alleviation is by no means the sole mark of social inclusion. People are excluded for a variety of reasons: race, gender, sexual orientation and religious belief among them. It is in the latter that religions are less than socially inclusive.

It is a characteristic of most religions of Middle Eastern origin – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – that on a theological level social inclusion tends to fray at the edges. Central to this is the notion of what constitutes the 'true faith'. Great Asian faiths

like Hinduism, Buddhism and Shinto tend (except when they are drawn into fundamentalism, often tied to nationalism) to adopt fairly pluralist views – all faiths are true for those who hold them; the Divine is big enough to accommodate a range of human searches for Truth.

In the religions of the Book – particularly in Christianity and to some extent Islam – there is a much greater sense that 'ours' is the one true faith, sometimes even holding that one's particular 'brand' of faith is true compared to rival traditions. The rule of thumb is that the more conservative a religious tradition is, the more likely it is to proclaim that it alone holds the Truth. To illustrate this, and to start to address the problem this poses for social inclusion, I shall indicate how my faith tradition, Christianity, has tried to deal with the problem broadly called the 'theology of religions'.

The Christian tradition's battle with a 'theology of religions' began largely with the encounter of Eastern faiths during the great age of European colonisation. Missionaries encountered peoples of other faiths who were too strong to be forcibly converted and were quite happy to practice their own beliefs. Some, like the Hindus, were even willing to acknowledge the truths of Christianity in tandem with their own: after all, if God can manifest Godself in thousands of avatars, why ever not in another one named Jesus!

For Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants alike (who held to varying degrees in the normativity of divine revelation in Scripture and Tradition) this was devastating. Could these non-Christians be, in some way or other, right? Surely not.

One strand of thinking they adopted was termed Exclusivism. Drawing on Biblical

textual claims and on an Aristotelian understanding that ‘the truth was one’, corresponding to reality⁵ – and probably not considering that the authors of the Christian Scriptures may have been perhaps influenced by Greek philosophical thought – the exclusivists rejected the idea that truth about God could exist in other religions (some even being wary of the truth in rival denominations). Hendrik Kraemer, a Calvinist scholar, insisted that salvation was through Christ alone.⁶ More extreme forms of exclusivism held that other religions were demonic. As one might expect, such a position offers little chance for religion as a source of social inclusion in a multi-faith society.

The next strand was Inclusivism. This held, quite simply, that while Christianity was the true, God was present in all great faiths, based on the Biblical claims that (a) salvation was through Christ alone, but that (b) God willed that all might be saved. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner argued that Christ was somehow anonymously present in all religions, redeeming non-Christians within their traditions – in effect making them what he called, controversially, ‘anonymous Christians’.⁷ This position became

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increasingly popular in Catholic circles and a form of it was enshrined in the Second Vatican Council’s Statement on Non-Christian Religions in 1965. Popular as it was in liberal Christian circles for a while – offering as it does a more hopeful source for theology serving social inclusion – it was controversial, not least since many non-Christians could rightly object that it was a form of religious colonialism, Christianisation by stealth. Conservative Christians also objected that it blurred Christian doctrine around the edges.

If inclusivism was controversial, the third position – Pluralism – was for many Christians mind-blowing. Coming from liberal Protestants on one side (notably John Hick and his colleagues⁸) and from a group of (mainly Indian) Asian Catholic theologians (notably Raimundo Panikkar⁹) on the other, it seemed to many Christians to be a capitulation to Hindu and Buddhist ideas: the acceptance that Christianity was not the only way to God, the view that all great faiths are like rivers flowing into a great common ocean. Though different in outward form they share the same source. The pluralist theology of religions does not enjoy much traction with leadership in the Christian churches. Yet in secular society it has become the norm. One might even say that most Christians are exclusivists on Sundays and pluralists in the workplace.

I have looked so far at how religions generate tensions over social inclusion at an interfaith level drawing as an example on a Christian theology of religions that presupposes that faith issues must somehow be worked out in a polite manner. I have not examined the dynamics of militant religious fundamentalism, which might be summed up as Exclusivism with menaces – and occasionally even erupting into sectarian violence.

There is another dimension to all this: the dynamics of inclusion or exclusion within a particular strand of a religious tradition, e.g. Roman Catholicism, Mahayana Buddhism or Shi’a Islam. Here too there are both massive potentialities for inclusion and exclusion, rooted in how particular traditions accept or tolerate differing forms of internal religious belief and interpretation of traditions (heterodoxy) and faith-based social practice (ethics). These too can vary along

a continuum of strict adherence (the internal version of exclusivism) through a certain kind of toleration (inclusivism) to complete doctrinal and ethical ‘relativism’ (pluralism). Each position has its own cost: at one extreme, rigidity may promote such exclusion that the faithful remnant becomes a kind of cult, while at the other the total unconditional acceptance of all position may create a social inclusion without any coherent source for being together.

This highlights a tension for religion and social inclusion: how far can one become truly inclusive as a religion? Too much toleration and the source that calls for toleration dissipates.

An Inconclusive Conclusion

Once we move away from the religious response to poverty as a means to promote social inclusion, the theoretical ground becomes slippery. At points I felt it was dropping away beneath my feet. Yet the questions that my musings raise are important, for religions as much for society. If religions are to maintain their own integrity, how far can they be agencies of social inclusion? Can they find some kind of social – perhaps sociable, in the sense of convivial – middle ground where they can be welcoming of the Other while at the same time recognising that s/he is truly Other?

In an age of religiously-sanctioned political conflict (where religion is the excuse for violence surrounding matters of nationalism or socio-economic alienation) how religions relate between each other and to secular society is important. While Hans Küng’s maxim that without peace between religions there can be no peace between societies¹⁰ is – like Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis – useful but perhaps overplayed, the greater need for social inclusion must take note of the tensions that religious difference (both within and between traditions) plays.

NOTES

1. H P P [Hennie] Lötter, *Poverty, Ethics and Justice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), 26.
2. *Ibid.*, 271.
3. Dorothy Day, *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 2005); Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1984).
4. For examples, see: William A. Galston & Peter H. Hoffenberg (eds), *Poverty and Morality: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2010).
5. Cf. Marion David, “Correspondence Theory of Truth” *Stanford Online Encyclopedia [sic] of Philosophy* (2009) (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/#1>)
6. Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper & Brothers 1938).
7. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations 4* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1966), 180-181; Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1978) 311-321.
8. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld 1979); John Hick & Paul Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (New York: Orbis 1988).
9. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1993) and many others.
10. Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (London: SCM 1997). See also: Global Ethic Foundation website (<http://www.weltheos.org/index-en.php>).