

# Dr. James S. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 12, Religious Pluralism Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

## 1. Abstract of Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 12, Religious Pluralism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Jim Spiegel's philosophy of religion lecture discusses religious pluralism, exploring the question of whether one or many religions lead to ultimate reality. He outlines three main viewpoints: religious pluralism (multiple paths), exclusivism (one true religion), and inclusivism (one true religion, but with covert followers). The lecture then examines John Hick's pluralistic view, suggesting different religions are culturally diverse expressions of a shared human drive for salvation and emphasizing moral outcomes as a criterion for assessment. Keith Ward offers a critique of Hick's position, questioning the idea of an unknowable ultimate reality and the equal validity of all religious paths, proposing alternative perspectives like "soft pluralism." Ultimately, the session grapples with fundamental questions about truth, salvation, and the relationship between different faith traditions.

2. 21 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of  
Dr. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 12 – Double click  
icon to play in Windows media player or go to the  
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link  
there (Theology → Apologetics → Philosophy of Religion).



Spiegel\_PhilRel\_Ses  
sion12.mp3

### 3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 12, Religious Pluralism

#### Briefing Document: Religious Pluralism

##### Main Themes:

This session of Dr. Spiegel's Philosophy of Religion course delves into the complex issue of religious pluralism, which arises from the existence of numerous diverse religions globally. The central question explored is whether there is one true religion or if multiple paths can lead to the ultimate reality or salvation. Dr. Spiegel outlines three primary perspectives on this issue: Religious Pluralism, Religious Exclusivism, and Religious Inclusivism, subsequently focusing on a detailed examination of Religious Pluralism through the lens of John Hick's work and its critique by Keith Ward.

##### Key Ideas and Facts:

#### 1. The Problem of Religious Pluralism:

- The sheer number of religions in the world (ten to twelve major, and hundreds of others) raises the fundamental question: "Is there one true religion, or are there many paths to God?"
- This question is a "major concern among a lot of people, not just scholars, but a typical person on the street, wondering about the implications of the fact that the world has all sorts of religions..."

#### 2. Three Principal Views on Religious Diversity:

- **Religious Pluralism:** The belief that many different religions lead to the ultimate reality and that salvation can be found through various faiths.
- **Religious Exclusivism:** The belief that only one specific religion is true and provides the path to the ultimate reality.
- **Religious Inclusivism:** The belief that while one religion holds the complete truth, followers of other religions can be "covert followers" of the true religion and thus attain salvation.

#### 3. John Hick's Religious Pluralism:

- Hick, a significant 20th and 21st-century philosopher of religion, argues that different religions are "different forms of the more fundamental conception of a

radical change from a profoundly unsatisfactory state to one that is limitlessly better because it rightly relates to the real."

- He posits a "deep unity" among religions, suggesting that their diverse beliefs and practices are various expressions of a universal human desire for God and salvation.
- Hick believes that the validity of these "salvation projects" can be assessed by observing their "fruits in human life," specifically the development of virtues like "unselfish regard for others that we call love or compassion."
- He asserts that there is "no good reason to believe that any one of the great religious traditions has proved itself to be more productive of love or compassion than another," suggesting a parity in their capacity to inspire virtue.
- Hick employs a Kantian epistemological framework, stating that "the mind is active in perception, imposing its own conceptual resources and habits on what one experiences in a religious context or when it comes to the approach to God or the ultimate spiritual reality."
- He proposes two key moves based on this framework:
- Postulating an "ultimate transcendent divine reality that's beyond the scope of human concepts and direct experience."
- Viewing "the various religious deities and absolutes as manifestations of the real within different historical forms of human consciousness."
- Hick clarifies that these "appearances of the real" are not illusions but interpretations of a real, albeit ultimately unknowable, divine reality through different religious and theological categories.

#### **4. Keith Ward's Critique of Hick's Pluralism:**

- Ward, a British scholar, offers a critical perspective on Hick's pluralism. He characterizes the pluralistic thesis as religions providing "different valid but culturally conditioned responses to a transcendent reality and offer ways of transcending self and achieving a limitlessly better state centered on that reality."
- Ward argues that "all truth claims are necessarily exclusive," implying that the competing claims of different religions cannot all be equally true or valid.

- He distinguishes between "extreme pluralism" (all religions are equally true) and "hard pluralism" (many major religions, while having incompatible beliefs, are equally valid paths of salvation). He rejects both.
- Ward challenges the hard pluralist notion that the ultimate reality ("the real") is ineffable. He questions, "if the real is ineffable, if the ultimate reality is beyond the grasp of human thought and language, then how can we know that it exists?"
- He argues that if no truth claim can apply to the real, then Hick's theorizing about it, including the assertion of its existence and the equal validity of paths to it, becomes problematic.
- Ward contrasts Hick's Kantian approach with the Thomistic view of Thomas Aquinas, who believed in genuine (though analogical) knowledge of God, even if God's essence is incomprehensible.
- According to Ward, Hick, like Kant, "applies the categories of the mind beyond the permissible range of cognitive meaning" by making theoretical claims about a noumenal reality that he claims is ultimately unknowable.
- Ward suggests Hick would be on firmer ground by stating that "the real is an ultimate unity of reality and value," which aligns more with an exclusivist perspective.
- He points out an apparent contradiction in Hick's affirmation of a "proper goal of human activity, which is reality-centered life," which implies the need for "certain correct beliefs" to achieve it, seemingly undermining the idea that all paths are equally valid regardless of belief content.

## **5. Alternative Perspectives and Unanswered Questions:**

- The discussion touches upon inclusivist views, citing Karl Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christians" and a recent Pope's statement about universal redemption through Christ.
- The session raises the complex question of the "necessary condition for salvation," regardless of whether one adheres to exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism. This includes considerations about the salvation of infants and the role of cognitive belief in achieving salvation.
- Ward proposes "soft pluralism" as a potentially defensible view, which seems akin to religious inclusivism, suggesting that the real can manifest in various traditions

and humans can respond appropriately within them. He uses C.S. Lewis as an example of a Christian inclusivist.

### Quotes:

- **John Hick on the nature of religious traditions:** "...different forms of the more fundamental conception of a radical change from a profoundly unsatisfactory state to one that is limitlessly better because it rightly relates to the real."
- **John Hick on the moral criteria for assessing religious transformation:** "...by using moral criteria implied by the world religion's shared ethical insights, namely that we should display the, as he puts it, unselfish regard for others that we call love or compassion."
- **John Hick on the parity of religious traditions in inspiring virtue:** "...we have no good reason to believe that any one of the great religious traditions has proved itself to be more productive of love or compassion than another."
- **John Hick on the Kantian influence:** "...the mind is active in perception, imposing its own conceptual resources and habits on what one experiences in a religious context or when it comes to the approach to God or the ultimate spiritual reality."
- **Karl Rahner on inclusivism:** "devout people of other faiths are anonymous Christians within the invisible church, even without knowing it, and thus within the sphere of salvation."
- **Keith Ward's characterization of pluralism:** "...religions provide different valid but culturally conditioned responses to a transcendent reality and offer ways of transcending self and achieving a limitlessly better state centered on that reality."
- **Keith Ward on the exclusiveness of truth claims:** "...all truth claims are necessarily exclusive."
- **Keith Ward on Hick's overreach:** "...applies the categories of the mind beyond the permissible range of cognitive meaning..."

**Conclusion:**

This session provides a valuable overview of the major positions within the philosophy of religion concerning the problem of religious pluralism. It offers a detailed examination of John Hick's influential pluralistic perspective, highlighting his Kantian-inspired arguments for the equal validity of different religious paths. The session also presents a robust critique of Hick's views from Keith Ward, who raises significant epistemological challenges regarding the knowability of the ultimate reality and the coherence of asserting both its utter transcendence and the equal efficacy of various religious interpretations. The discussion concludes by touching upon inclusivist alternatives and the enduring question of the criteria for salvation in a religiously diverse world.

## 4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 12, Religious Pluralism

### Study Guide: Religious Pluralism

#### Key Concepts:

- **Religious Pluralism:** The view that multiple religions offer valid paths to ultimate reality or salvation.
- **Religious Exclusivism:** The view that only one specific religion is true and offers the sole path to ultimate reality or salvation.
- **Religious Inclusivism:** The view that one religion holds the complete truth, but followers of other religions can still be saved through that one true religion, often unknowingly.
- **Ultimate Reality:** The fundamental nature of existence or the divine, as conceived in different religious traditions.
- **Salvation:** A state of ultimate well-being, liberation, or union with the divine, as defined by various religions.
- **Epistemology:** The branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge, its nature, and justification.
- **Kantian Analysis:** An approach, drawing from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, that emphasizes the role of the mind's structure and categories in shaping our experience and understanding of reality.
- **Noumenal Reality (Kant):** Reality as it is in itself, independent of our perception and understanding.
- **Phenomenal Reality (Kant):** Reality as it appears to us, shaped by the mind's categories and our sensory experience.
- **Ineffable:** Incapable of being expressed or described in words; often used to describe the nature of ultimate reality in some religious traditions.
- **Truth Claims:** Assertions made by religions about the nature of reality, God, salvation, and other fundamental aspects of their belief systems.
- **Universalism:** The belief that all people will ultimately be saved.

- **Soft Pluralism:** The view that the real can manifest in many traditions, and humans can respond to it appropriately within those traditions (similar to inclusivism).
- **Hard Pluralism:** The view that many major religions do not contain mutually exclusive beliefs and are equally valid paths of salvation and authentic experience of the real.
- **Extreme Pluralism:** The notion that all religions are equally true.
- **Reality-Centered Life:** A life oriented towards and focused on the ultimate reality, considered a proper goal of human activity by some pluralists.
- **Anonymous Christians (Karl Rahner):** The concept that devout people of other faiths are unknowingly part of the "invisible church" and within the sphere of Christian salvation.

#### Short Answer Quiz:

1. What is the core question that the issue of religious pluralism seeks to address? Briefly describe the three main positions discussed in response to this question.
2. According to John Hick, how should we view the various systems of salvation offered by different religions? What commonality does he propose exists among these diverse traditions?
3. What moral criterion does Hick suggest for assessing the proper orientation to the divine reality across different religions? Provide an example of how this criterion might manifest in different faith traditions.
4. Explain Hick's use of a Kantian analysis in understanding our conception of God and the divine reality. How does the mind play a role in our religious experiences, according to this perspective?
5. According to Hick, what are the two key moves we make in light of his Kantian perspective on religious diversity? What distinction does he draw between the "real in itself" and our experience of it?
6. What is Keith Ward's initial characterization of the pluralistic thesis? What fundamental logical problem does Ward identify with the idea that all truth claims are necessarily exclusive?



7. What is the distinction Ward makes between "extreme pluralism" and "hard pluralism"? What is Ward's primary criticism of the hard pluralist claim that the real is ineffable?
8. According to Ward, what is the potential error in Hick's Kantian approach regarding the "noumenal reality"? How does Ward suggest Hick could offer a more consistent perspective?
9. How does the question of salvation for infants and those with limited cognitive abilities challenge strict exclusivist views that emphasize the necessity of specific beliefs? What alternative perspective does Ward offer regarding what ultimately "saves us"?
10. Briefly explain Ward's concept of "soft pluralism." How does it relate to the idea of religious inclusivism, and provide an example of an inclusivist viewpoint mentioned in the text.

**Answer Key:**

1. The core question is whether there is one true religion or many paths to God. Religious exclusivism claims only one religion is true, religious pluralism suggests many religions lead to ultimate reality, and religious inclusivism posits one true religion where other devotees are unknowingly followers.
2. Hick proposes that different salvation systems are various expressions of a fundamental human drive to move from an unsatisfactory state to a better one through relating to the real. He argues for a deep underlying unity despite the apparent differences in beliefs and practices.
3. Hick suggests using moral criteria, specifically the unselfish regard for others expressed as love or compassion, as a shared ethical insight across world religions. This could manifest as acts of charity in Christianity or selfless service (seva) in Sikhism.
4. Hick applies Kant's epistemology, stating that the mind actively shapes our perception of religious experiences by imposing its own conceptual resources. Just as we don't see the world in a pure way, our understanding of God is filtered through our mental categories.
5. The two moves are: first, postulating an ultimate, transcendent divine reality beyond human concepts; and second, viewing various religious deities and absolutes as manifestations of this real within different historical forms of human

consciousness. He distinguishes between the divine "in itself" and how we experience and interpret it through theological frameworks.

6. Ward characterizes pluralism as religions providing different valid but culturally conditioned responses to a transcendent reality, offering paths to self-transcendence. He argues that since all assertions affirm something, they inherently exclude something else, making the equal validity of all truth claims logically problematic.
7. "Extreme pluralism" is the idea that all religions are equally true, while "hard pluralism" suggests many major religions, despite some incompatible beliefs, are equally valid paths to salvation and authentic experience of the real. Ward criticizes the ineffability claim by asking how we can know the real exists or that claims about it are valid if it's entirely beyond our grasp.
8. Ward believes Hick, like Kant, applies mental categories beyond their legitimate scope by making definitive claims about the noumenal reality (the "real in itself") while simultaneously asserting its unknowability. Ward suggests Hick would be more consistent by stating the real is an ultimate unity of reality and value, aligning more with exclusivism.
9. The salvation of those without cognitive understanding challenges the necessity of specific beliefs for salvation, as these individuals cannot consciously accept religious doctrines. Ward suggests that metaphysics is not what saves us; rather, for Christians, it is God's act of establishing creatures in knowledge and love of Him.
10. "Soft pluralism," as described by Ward, is the view that the real can manifest in various traditions, and humans can respond appropriately within them. This is similar to religious inclusivism, which holds that one truth exists (e.g., salvation through Christ), but God's grace can be applied to individuals outside of formal religious practice.

## Essay Format Questions:

1. Critically analyze John Hick's argument for religious pluralism, focusing on his use of Kantian epistemology and the concept of the "real in itself." What are the strengths and weaknesses of his position?
2. Compare and contrast the three main views on religious pluralism: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Use specific examples or arguments from the provided text to illustrate the key differences between these perspectives.
3. Evaluate Keith Ward's critique of John Hick's religious pluralism. Do you find Ward's arguments compelling? Why or why not? Consider his points about truth claims and the ineffability of the real.
4. Discuss the implications of religious pluralism for interfaith dialogue and understanding. How might different perspectives on religious truth affect the way people of different faiths interact and relate to one another?
5. Explore the challenges and complexities of defining "salvation" and "ultimate reality" in the context of religious pluralism. How do different religions conceptualize these terms, and how does this impact the debate about the validity of multiple religious paths?

## Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Religious Pluralism:** The philosophical stance that multiple religions offer equally valid paths to spiritual truth or ultimate reality.
- **Religious Exclusivism:** The belief that only one particular religion possesses the complete truth and offers the sole legitimate way to salvation.
- **Religious Inclusivism:** The theological position that while one religion is definitively true, salvation or ultimate reality can be accessed by adherents of other religions through the merits of the true religion, often implicitly.
- **Ultimate Reality:** The fundamental, underlying principle or being that is the source and essence of all existence, as conceived differently across religious and philosophical systems.
- **Salvation:** The state of being saved from sin, suffering, or a negative fate, often involving spiritual liberation, redemption, or union with the divine, depending on the religious tradition.
- **Epistemology:** The branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, including its acquisition, justification, and limits.
- **Kantian Analysis:** An approach to understanding experience and reality that draws on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, emphasizing the active role of the mind in structuring our perceptions and knowledge.
- **Noumenal:** In Kantian philosophy, relating to "things-in-themselves" as they exist independently of our perception and conceptual frameworks; considered unknowable in their essence.
- **Phenomenal:** In Kantian philosophy, relating to the world as it appears to us, shaped by our sensory experience and the categories of our understanding.
- **Ineffable:** Beyond the ability to be adequately expressed or described in human language, often used in religious contexts to characterize the transcendent nature of God or ultimate reality.
- **Truth Claims:** Assertions made by religious traditions about the nature of reality, the divine, human existence, and the path to salvation.
- **Universalism:** The theological doctrine that all people will eventually be saved or attain ultimate reconciliation with the divine.

- **Soft Pluralism:** A form of religious pluralism that suggests the ultimate reality can manifest genuinely in diverse religious traditions, allowing for valid responses and paths within each.
- **Hard Pluralism:** A stronger form of religious pluralism asserting that multiple major religions, despite some differing beliefs, are equally valid and effective paths to salvation and authentic experience of the ultimate reality.
- **Extreme Pluralism:** The view that all religious beliefs and practices are equally true and valid.
- **Reality-Centered Life:** A way of living that is primarily oriented towards understanding and connecting with what is considered the ultimate reality or divine essence.
- **Anonymous Christians:** A theological concept, notably associated with Karl Rahner, suggesting that individuals who live according to their conscience and strive for goodness, even outside of explicit Christian faith, may be considered implicitly Christian and recipients of God's grace.

## 5. FAQs on Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 12, Religious Pluralism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions on Religious Pluralism

**1. What is the problem of religious pluralism, and what are the three main philosophical responses to it?** The problem of religious pluralism arises from the existence of numerous diverse religions with differing beliefs and practices. The question is whether one religion is uniquely true or if multiple religions offer valid paths to ultimate reality or salvation. The three principal philosophical views addressing this are:

- **Religious Pluralism:** This view asserts that many different religions lead to the ultimate reality and that salvation can be found through various faiths.
- **Religious Exclusivism:** This perspective holds that only one specific religion is true and provides the sole path to ultimate reality or salvation.
- **Religious Inclusivism:** This view posits that while one religion is true, adherents of other religions can still be considered covert followers of the true religion and thus within its sphere of salvation.

**2. According to John Hick's pluralistic view, how should we understand the diverse religions of the world?** John Hick, a prominent proponent of religious pluralism, suggests that the various systems of salvation found in different religions should be seen as diverse expressions of a fundamental human drive to transition from a state of profound unsatisfactoriness to a limitlessly better state by rightly relating to the real (the ultimate reality). He argues that despite the apparent differences in beliefs and practices, there is a deep underlying unity among religions, all striving for the same ultimate goal.

**3. How does John Hick propose we assess the validity or effectiveness of different religious traditions in achieving spiritual transformation?** Hick suggests that we should evaluate religious traditions based on their observable "fruits" in human life, specifically the moral criteria implied by their shared ethical insights, which he identifies as unselfish regard for others, or love and compassion. He notes that virtues like love and compassion are consistently found within the religiously devout across various major religions, suggesting a parity in their capacity to inspire such virtues.

**4. How does John Hick utilize Kantian epistemology in his argument for religious pluralism?** Hick draws upon Kant's idea that the mind actively structures our experience by imposing its own conceptual resources and habits. He argues that our perceptions of God or ultimate spiritual reality are similarly shaped by the rational categories and conceptual forms provided by our respective religious traditions. Therefore, the different religious deities and absolutes can be seen as manifestations of the same ultimate transcendent divine reality, interpreted through different historical forms of human consciousness and conceptual frameworks.

**5. What are some of the key doctrinal differences among religions that John Hick acknowledges, and how does he address the exclusivist claim of Christianity?** Hick recognizes several levels of doctrinal differences among religions, including their conceptions of ultimate reality, metaphysical beliefs (e.g., creation, human destiny), and historical claims (e.g., about religious figures). Regarding Christian exclusivism, Hick rejects the dogma that salvation is confined to Christianity. He points to inclusivist views within Christianity, such as Karl Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christians" and statements from popes acknowledging universal redemption, as movements away from strict exclusivism.

**6. What is Keith Ward's critique of John Hick's religious pluralism, particularly concerning the nature of the "Real"?** Keith Ward critiques Hick's pluralism by focusing on the implications of Hick's assertion that the ultimate reality (the "Real") is wholly unknowable and beyond human concepts. Ward argues that if the Real is truly ineffable, it becomes problematic to claim that it exists or that all experiences of it are equally authentic and all paths to it are equally valid. He suggests that if no truth claim can apply to the Real, then Hick's own theorizing about it becomes questionable. Ward also points out that Hick's affirmation of a "reality-centered life" as a proper goal implies the need for certain correct beliefs, which seems to contradict a purely pluralistic view.

**7. How does Keith Ward distinguish between different forms of pluralism and offer his own perspective, particularly in relation to inclusivism?** Ward distinguishes between "extreme pluralism" (the notion that all religions are equally true, which he rejects due to their competing claims) and "hard pluralism" (the view that many major religions, despite some incompatible beliefs, are equally valid paths of salvation). He finds hard pluralism problematic due to the existence of mutually exclusive beliefs. Ward then proposes "soft pluralism," which he considers defensible and similar to religious inclusivism. Soft pluralism suggests that the Real can manifest in many traditions, and humans can respond appropriately within them. This aligns with the inclusivist idea that God can work salvifically in individuals even outside of formal religious practice.

**8. According to the discussion, what are some of the challenges in defining the necessary conditions for salvation within different religious perspectives (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism)?** The discussion highlights the difficulty in specifying the necessary conditions for salvation, particularly concerning the role of cognitive beliefs. For exclusivists, the question arises whether specific doctrinal beliefs are required, and if so, what happens to those who lack the capacity for such beliefs (e.g., infants). Inclusivists grapple with understanding how God's saving grace is applied outside of formal religious contexts and what indicators might signify "cognitive salvation." Even for pluralists who emphasize the outcome of love and compassion, the underlying beliefs and practices that lead to such outcomes can vary significantly, making it challenging to define universal prerequisites for salvation.