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Jesus the Only Way?

Why Christians Seem Arrogant

The classical Christian claim is this: that Jesus Christ is the only way to God, and that unless people come to God through Jesus, they are destined for hell.

The words are blunt, bald and shocking. Can any thinking person hold such a view in today's pluralistic culture?

The justification for this extreme-sounding claim is often given in the form of quotations from the Bible, such as Jesus' words in John's Gospel: 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No-one comes to the Father [God] except by me.' One of Jesus' closest associates, Peter, is quoted as saying 'There is no other name given under heaven by which we may be saved.' Paul, probably the most influential of early Christian leaders

and teachers, wrote, 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord...you will be saved.'¹

Beyond simple proof-texting, however, Christians have theological reasons for making these claims, all concerning this person Jesus. There are three particular foci to Christian claims about Jesus:

1. Jesus is God in human form, the unique incarnation of God. Of course, if Jesus had appeared in the context of an eastern religion such as Hinduism, there would have been nothing remarkable about such a claim: in a sense, everyone is God anyway. Jesus, however, was born and raised a Jew, and never moved outside his Jewish heritage. For someone in that culture to claim the kind of intimate identification with God that Jesus claimed was nothing less than blasphemy...at least, if it was not true. However, Christians claim that it *was* true, and that Jesus was the incarnation of God unlike any other, and therefore the fullest revelation of God available to humankind.
2. In common with Judaism and Islam, Christians believe humankind is separated from the Creator by a moral barrier—we have not allowed God the Creator's rightful place in the world, but have set ourselves up as little deities in competition with God. Christianity's unique contribution to this understanding is to say that the death of Jesus is the only way this barrier can be overcome. Paul expressed it thus: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'.²
3. Christians also believe that on the third day after Jesus' death, God brought him back from death into a new quality of life which can never be destroyed, and that Jesus' followers will share in that quality of life after death. If this

understanding is correct, it would suggest that this so-called 'resurrection' of Jesus is God's seal of approval on the work of Jesus, as well as the clearest guide we have to the afterlife.

What is wrong with this kind of claim?

Objections to this aspect of Christianity fall into three main categories:

Objection #1: It is arrogant

Exclusive claims may be arrogant but are not necessarily so. Suppose a researcher claims to have discovered a cure for AIDS. Is that necessarily arrogant? There are two possibilities: one is that she announces the breakthrough in a manner which is arrogant—putting down the work of other researchers, highlighting her own brilliance, and so on. This would be unpleasant, but it would still not affect the second issue: the question of whether she was actually correct in claiming to have found a cure for aids. The claim itself is neither arrogant nor humble. Those categories are irrelevant: the only appropriate question is whether the claim is true.

Sometimes Christians make exclusive claims for their faith in an arrogant spirit. That kind of attitude, it must be said, is incompatible with some of the most significant teachings of Jesus. On the other hand, the claim to have found 'the truth' is not arrogant or humble *per se*. It is a claim which should not be ruled out of court without first checking its truth status.

That raises a set of objections which can conveniently be classified under the heading:

Objection #2: It cannot be true

This argument takes several different forms:

- **You cannot know truth in religion**

Lesslie Newbigin has pointed out that since the 18th century Enlightenment, life has been divided, at least in the West, into facts (which are public and publicly verifiable) and values (which are private, personal and ultimately arbitrary) (Newbigin 7).

Emmanuel Kant's (1724–1804) landmark title summarizes the effect this has had on the world of religion: *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone*. Religion may have a place in society, but it will be a place dictated and controlled by autonomous human reason. Since most religions claim phenomena such as direct revelation from God, miracles, and religious experience—things not immediately accessible to reason—they are automatically suspect in a rationalistic world. You may follow whatever religion you please, but you can no longer suggest that it is on the basis of 'truth'. Anyone who does so has clearly not understood the nature of religion or the nature of truth.

This view of truth is no longer universally held, however. A book by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who teaches philosophy at Yale, is entitled *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*. He argues that far from religion having to be subject to reason, reason itself requires some philosophical—or rather theological—basis to justify and prescribe its role in human life. Newbigin himself shows the inconsistencies inherent in trying to keep 'public' and 'private' separate. Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi have demonstrated how even in the realm of science much is subjective and non-rational.³

On these and other fronts the Enlightenment view of omniscient autonomous reason, in a watertight compartment

from other aspects of human personality, is rapidly breaking down under the critique of postmodernity. As a result, the secular world can no longer claim a monopoly on truth, and it no longer seems incredible for religions to make claims about truth.

- **Different religions are appropriate for different cultures**

Some argue that it is better to think of religion as an aspect of culture. Thus John Hick suggests that religions are 'expressions of the diversities of human types and temperaments and thought forms.' Wilfred Cantwell Smith adds that a religion is no more true or false than a civilization is. To compare between them is like making value judgments between Tchaikovsky and Bach (Hick 142).

In practice, however, we do make value judgments between religions. Nobody wants to give the same respect to a religion based on human sacrifice, fear of evil spirits or mass suicide as they do to, say, Zen Buddhism. Nobody seriously suggests that Hitler's claims to divine revelation should be given equal treatment with those of Mohammed or Jesus. We are only tolerant up to a point, and rightly so. Some religions in the history of the world have died out, and it is probably good that they should have done so.

Neither will it do to say 'Well, I affirm all the *great* religions of the world' and to ignore smaller or more recent groupings. The decision as to which religions are 'in' and which are 'out' is inevitably subjective. For example, animism is an ancient and widespread religion, but not generally included among the 'great' religions of the world.

The cultural view of religion also seems difficult to maintain in light of the growing internationalism of the great religions.

When Islam, for example, is found not only in the Middle East but in places as diverse as China and North America, it becomes strained at best to argue that Islam is merely ‘the appropriate religion for a certain culture.’ Like other major religions, it clearly has an appeal which is transcultural.

• All religions are equally valid

As a matter of simple observation, different religions make very different claims, and it is difficult to see how they can all be true. For instance, can God have ‘a son’ in the Christian sense? Christians say yes, Muslims and Jews vehemently say no. Is reincarnation true? Even John Hick, passionate liberal though he is, confesses it is difficult to see how such things can be both true and not true—yet different religions come to different conclusions (Hick 140). Is the physical world, including its evil, real (as Western religions claim) or an illusion (as Buddhism claims)? What makes us acceptable to God? Our beliefs? Our moral actions? Our religious actions? Again, religions differ. Is it appropriate to think of God as (in some sense) a Person? Western religions say yes, Buddhism says no. And, as Hans Kung has remarked, there is a world of difference between the smiling Buddha and the crucified Christ. The list could go on. How can all these views be equally valid?

John Hick summarizes the problem like this:

Wherever the holy is revealed, it claims an absolute response of faith and worship, which thus seems incompatible with a like response to any other disclosure of the holy (Hick 154).

One way of understanding the contradictions is the parable of the elephant, attributed to Buddha. Blind men are trying to discover the nature of an elephant. Yet each offers a different description, according to the part of the elephant he

touches. The one who feels the head concludes that an elephant is like a pot; the one with the ear says, ‘An elephant is like a winnowing basket;’ the one feeling the tusk argues that an elephant is like a ploughshare; and so on. The conclusion is obvious: religious views are different because each grasps only a portion of the truth. The differences are more apparent than real. The truth is only to be found in taking all the parts together.⁴

The problem with the analogy, however, is simple: how could one prove the basic premise that God is like the elephant? How could one prove that different religions are like blind men? Proof is impossible. The parable simply asserts dogmatically: this is the way reality is. In fact, all analogies presuppose the truth of what they illustrate. They cannot establish truth.

Thus in the Buddhist tradition from which this story comes, the story works perfectly—because it illustrates a Buddhist understanding of Ultimate Reality—all expressions and understandings of God are valid, even if they appear incompatible. The story appears to be objective and fair to all religions, yet in fact it speaks out of its own religious convictions. If God is like the elephant, then of course the analogy is helpful—but that is precisely what is in question.

Ninian Smart’s symposium, *World Religions: a Dialogue*, offers a fascinating real-life example of the problem. As the book’s conversations draw to a close, several of the participants are inclined to conclude that all religions are basically the same. Then, however, the Muslim speaker begins to say, ‘But Allah has...’ only to be interrupted by the Hindu speaker, who says:

I hate to interrupt, but I can see what you’re going to say. Please do not say it now, for I’d hate for us to finish on such a note of radical disagreement. But if we were to agree that

our criteria [for truth] are soft, this would support a secret thought of mine: the thought that our argument has led to a rather Hindu conclusion (Smart 139).

Of course, he is right. The Muslim was (presumably) about to raise fresh questions of truth and falsehood. That is in the nature of Islam. The Hindu, also true to his tradition, prefers to end on a note of synthesis which sidelines divisive questions of truth and falsehood.

Some would argue that we can know so little of God that all our religions are merely best guesses, and we should not be dogmatic. But those religions which claim special revelation (for instance, a holy book), while agreeing that our understanding of God is limited, would claim that God has revealed more than we could ever have known by ourselves. By this standard, to be dogmatic is not to be unfaithful to a big view of God. Precisely the opposite: because I can know so little, I must be faithful to what I believe God has revealed.

- **Ultimate spiritual reality is beyond any single religion**

Bishop Michael Ingham, in his 1997 book *Mansions of the Spirit*, offers a more sophisticated version of the view that all world religions are equally valid. To do this, he leans heavily on the point of view of Swiss philosopher Fritjhof Schuon. Schuon acknowledges that religions are different, 'not only dissimilar in their external but also in their internal character' (Ingham 120). God, or 'ultimate reality', however, is beyond all religions. To put it another way, 'all religions meet in their origin and source.'

On this view, however, there is no certain way of knowing or describing or approaching this 'Ultimate Reality', since it is (by definition) beyond anything described in any of the

world's great religions. Indeed, if this Reality is really expressing itself through the world's religions, it is disturbing to realize that Ultimate Reality actually manifests itself in ways that are 'mutually incoherent' (Newbigin 162). In such a muddle of beliefs, where can we find evidence for Ingham's claim that 'all knowledge...radiates from the same transcendent point' (120)? And how can such confusion be a basis for religious, let alone human, unity?

In fact, Ingham finds a degree of commonality in the mystical traditions of the world's religions. Here, there appears to be common experience without a confusion of doctrines. Yet mysticism alone is hardly an adequate basis for his case. After all, '[t]here is much else in all religious traditions' than just mysticism (Newbigin 160). More, the importance, even the validity, of mysticism has in fact varied from one religion to another.

Further, Ingham himself acknowledges that Thomas Merton, the Catholic mystic, 'remained agnostic [even] about whether mystics [in different religions] all experience the same Reality' (Ingham 166). How could we ever know whether two mystics, on opposite sides of the world, are in fact experiencing the same Ultimate Reality? Mysticism, it would seem, is not a strong enough foundation for saying that all religions are expressions of the same Reality.

Perhaps most seriously of all, in order to maintain his own Christian faith while acknowledging the validity of other faiths, Ingham is forced to shape a Jesus who suits his purposes, a Jesus who (for instance) never made exclusive claims about his own importance. Suffice it to say this view is not shared by all New Testament scholars: others, like NT Wright,⁵ present quite a different picture of Jesus from Ingham's, a Jesus not quite so conveniently tied to their theology.

- **Hell is a horrible idea**

It is difficult to disagree with this view. However, as CS Lewis argued:

There is no doctrine I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason (Lewis 106).

Jesus, arguably the most loving person ever to live, clearly believed and taught about hell. Some, like Lewis, have argued that hell is a necessary corollary of freewill. If God has given us freewill, and honours our free choices throughout our lives, is it likely that after death God will revoke that freedom, and compel us to come into heaven?

Dorothy Sayers comments:

If, seeing God, the soul rejects him in hatred and horror, then there is nothing more that God can do for it. God will...if it insists, give it what it desires (Sayers 84f).

Psychiatrist M Scott Peck agrees:

God does not punish us, we punish ourselves. Those who are in hell are there by their own choice... They remain in hell because it seems safe and easy to them... The notion that people are in hell by their own choice is not widely familiar, but the fact is that it is both good psychology and good theology (Peck 67).

What does this mean for the debate about the exclusiveness of Jesus? Will there be people of different religions in hell? It is difficult to speak sensitively enough about such a painful subject, but probably there will be people of all religious backgrounds there. Why? Because they have chosen to be there—in effect, they have chosen against God. After all, people are religious for all sorts of reasons, not all of them to do with

knowing or loving God. This is true of Christianity as much as of any other religion. Bishop John Taylor even suggests that, for some, religion is 'a way of escaping from God' (Taylor 190). One should not assume, then, that anyone who is involved in religion will be in 'heaven'. They may not want to be there, and the God Jesus taught about would not force them.

- **It's unfair to those who never hear about Jesus**

There are conservative Christians who would argue that ignorance of the law (or in this case the Gospel) is no excuse. If God chooses to 'save' only those who responded when they had a chance to hear of Jesus, that is God's prerogative, since nobody deserves to be saved anyway.

Some Christians say that unless you have heard about Jesus and made an explicit commitment to being his follower, you cannot be 'saved'. Leaving aside the question of those who *have* heard about Jesus and not responded, what of those who never hear about Jesus in the first place?

In the Jewish Scriptures, the *Tanakh*, which Christians call The Old Testament, there are many, such as Abraham, who are described as being in intimate relationship with God, and who are regarded as spiritual role models by Christians. Yet, since they lived before the time of Jesus, not only did they not believe in him, they had no chance to do so. From a Christian point of view, why are people like Abraham in relationship with God? Because they responded trustingly to whatever they knew about God, however little it might be.⁶

Does that mean that Jesus was unnecessary for them? Not at all. Christianity contends that, in the death of Jesus, God chose to absorb the effects of human evil and stupidity, and to go on loving us. If Abraham had a relationship with God, it

was because God forgave his wrongdoing, and God's forgiveness is always linked to the death of Jesus—even though it would not happen in history for two thousand years after Abraham's time! The significance of Jesus' death is in this sense 'trans-historical'—it works backwards in time as well as forwards.

These people like Abraham offer a clue for thinking about those who have never heard of Jesus in our day. Many Christians would argue that people of any religion or none can find a relationship with God by the same route as Abraham: if they respond with trust to whatever truth God has shown them. (The technical terms for that response are repentance and faith.)

Is Jesus, then, not necessary for them? Again, as with Abraham, it is only because of the death of Jesus that it is possible for them to have a relationship with God. They can experience the benefits of Jesus' death even if they do not know about it, just as I can experience the benefits of driving my car even if I haven't the first idea how or why the internal combustion engine works. (I haven't.)

At the same time, someone who wants to know God will recognize the importance of Jesus when they do hear about him. Jesus seems to have anticipated this when he said:

Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching [I am giving] is from God or whether I am speaking on my own (John 7:17).

Not infrequently, pioneer Christian missionaries have come across the response to their message: 'This is what we have been waiting for. Why didn't you come sooner?' One tribe is supposed to have responded, 'We knew all this—but we did not know what his name was.' Those who have been pursuing the truth about God with an attitude of humility and faith

(resolving to do the will of God, to use Jesus' words) recognize in the Christian message the fulfilment of that toward which they have been reaching (Richardson 9-71).

A more recent objection to exclusive Christian claims is a postmodern one:

Objection #3: Truth claims lead to oppression

If the Enlightenment denied truth claims to religion, postmodern thinkers have taken the argument a logical step further, and denied the legitimacy of all truth claims—including those based on so-called 'enlightened, objective reason'. The function of truth-claims in the postmodern view is not so much that they are 'really' true as that they give the one who has 'the truth' a club with which to beat those who do not agree. They would point to the co-operation of the European colonial and missionary enterprises as an example of how claims to have 'truth' were used to oppress, exploit and dehumanize the colonized. There is some truth in this claim, not least in the story of the European conquest of the Americas. Yet it has not always been the case.

- **Truth claims can also lead to liberation**

For instance, British colonial powers opposed missionary work, at least in the 18th and early 19th century, because they knew well that the missionaries would oppose injustice and sow visions of justice and independence which would ultimately subvert the colonial power's aims (Bosch 281, 287f, 306f).

Jesus himself was a proclaimer of liberation. Far from believing that truth was oppressive, he promised that ‘the truth shall set you free’ (John 8:32)—and made good his promise in the lives of the marginalized and disempowered of his day.

- **Enforced tolerance itself becomes oppressive**

In a strange reversal, it is enforced tolerance which turns out to be the real oppressor. Paul Griffiths of the Chicago Divinity School writes:

Pluralists want to check and rebuke Christian tendencies to be (as they see it) imperialist and condescending in their judgments about non-Christian religions, but in doing this they are themselves engaging in precisely the activity they wish to rebuke... [There are] close links between the ideology of pluralism and a voracious, omnivorous modernity, whose surface tolerance of all religions is indistinguishable from a profound hostility to all (First Things 50).

Even the elephant analogy can be used to illustrate this problem. After all, how do we feel towards the blind men? Pity and perhaps deprecating humour. How do observers of this scene feel about themselves? Superior and even smug: after all, they see, while the poor blind men do not. And—most significantly of all—how do the observers come to be in a position of omniscience, able to survey the whole scene, superior to everyone else, sighted while others are blind? By what right do they say, ‘This is how things really are’? The parable claims to show that nobody has ‘objective truth’. Unfortunately, the story itself claims to be the objective truth about world religions and Ultimate Reality!

What initially appears to be a benign and liberal analogy proves in fact to be just as intolerant of diversity as the views

it seeks to relativize—maybe more so because it appears at first sight to be so broad minded.

- **True pluralism**

A further argument against this point of view is very simply that in practice, dialogue and friendship are not only possible but are in fact quite common between people of different faith communities. Believing that one religion is closer to the truth than another does not necessarily lead to intolerance or persecution, as some fear.

Strong convictions can, in fact, lead to a greater measure of patience and compassion, rather than less. For instance, I have heard debates between Christians and Jews, and between Christians and Muslims, which were models of clarity, charity and respect, in spite of the acknowledged irreconcilable differences.

Personally speaking, I hope for my Muslim friends to become Christians. They hope for me to become a Muslim. We enjoy one another’s friendship. We enjoy listening to one another and trying to understand one another’s faith. There are issues where we find ourselves closer to one another than to our western secular friends. And we prayerfully leave the outcome of our theological discussions to God.

That, I believe, is pluralism at its best: not seeking an artificial synthesis, not betraying our deepest convictions, but committed to searching together for more love and more truth.

Conclusion

The apparently arrogant claims of classical Christianity are not made lightly, and cannot be held thoughtlessly, in today’s

climate of opinion. They are held out of deep conviction that they are an integral part of the most life-changing story the world has ever heard. It is unfair to dismiss Christianity's exclusive claims out of hand without considering the person and story of Jesus, and understanding why Christians make those claims. A convert to Christianity from Islam spoke at the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches and expressed the heart of Christian conviction when he said:

I am a Christian for one reason alone—the absolute worship-ability of Jesus Christ. By that word I mean that I have found no other being in the universe who compels my adoration as he has done (Taylor 193).

It is this Jesus—by turns intriguing, challenging, infuriating and delightful—who is the key to this whole question.

Notes

1. John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 10:9.
2. 2 Corinthians 5:19.
3. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), and Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, (London: Routledge and Paul, 1962).
4. The parable is quoted in full in Ingham, pp 75-76.
5. *Who was Jesus?*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).
6. For example, Genesis 15:6.

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