

ISN'T JESUS INTOLERANT? -OR- WHAT ABOUT OTHER FAITHS?

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. **Defeater Beliefs.** Every culture that is hostile to Christianity holds to a set of 'common-sense' consensus beliefs that automatically make Christianity seem implausible to people. Philosophers call these 'defeater beliefs,' namely that if belief A is true, then belief B cannot be true.
- B. **Cultural Conditioning.** Notice that I said above that every culture possesses its own set of defeater beliefs, meaning that Christianity is disbelieved in one culture for completely different reasons than it is in another culture. So, in the West it is widely assumed that Christianity can't be true b/c of the cultural belief that there 'can't be just one religion.' But in the Middle East, people have absolutely no problem with that idea. There Christianity is assumed untrue b/c of the cultural belief that American culture, based on Christianity, is unjust and corrupt. This means that objections to Christianity are culturally relative.

II. STATING THE OBJECTION—WHAT DOES EXCLUSIVISM DO?

- A. **Exclusive Religion Divides**—Thirty years ago, if you asked the question, what is the most divisive thing in the world, people probably would have said, political ideology, i.e. Communism, Socialism, Capitalism. If you asked that same question today, people would probably respond that religion is the biggest dividing factor in the world today. I would largely agree that this is the case, noting that when one group claims to have the truth and the knowledge that people are saved by performing that truth, it creates superiority. The supposed superiority leads to a pulling away, pulling away can lead to stereotyping, stereotyping leads to marginalization and possibly oppression.
- B. **Exclusive Religion is Arrogant.** In the West, it is widely assumed that Christianity (which claims that Jesus is the only way to a relationship with God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12) cannot be true because of the belief that there can't be just one true religion. Christianity is dismissed as untrue *because of the pre-existing assumption* that all religions are equally valid and true. The only "false" religion is one that claims to be the truth rather than one among many valid truths. This creates a tension between the claims of Jesus about Himself (that nobody comes to God except through him) and the deeply held value of inclusivism by the modern person. One time Oprah Winfrey hosted a well-known Christian on her show. When he stated that Christianity is the truth, Oprah quickly responded, "I respect that, *as long as you don't say that your faith is more true than my faith.*" "There is one mountain peak," it is said, "but many paths one may follow to reach it." How can Christians be so arrogant, so narrow-minded, as to propose that Jesus is the only way to God?!?! Can't we all just agree on this?

III. THE MYTH OF INCLUSIVITY

- A. **Elephant Illustration.** The only way to possibly know that every religion only sees part of the truth is if you see all of the truth, the very thing you claim nobody else has. It is imperialistic to claim that all religions are equally valid b/c it forces the question...what is this absolute vantage point of truth you have to know this? When you say that nobody has a superior take on spiritual reality, that is a take on spiritual reality which you say is superior to everyone else's. You are trying to convert them to your viewpoint.
- B. **Oprah Revisited.** Oprah is an accurate reflection of modern culture, which insists that the valid view of God is an "open" view that lets people draw their own personal conclusions about him (or her). There is difficulty with this view, however, because in an effort to be *inclusive*, it actually *excludes* all people everywhere who have specific ideas about what God is like (whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.). The modern "open" view of God itself is actually *closed and exclusive*, because it says that the *only valid view of God* is the view that the "one true God" is the God who is happy to let people think whatever they want to think about him. Western Theology: God is laid back about things!
- C. **The Myth Exposed.** Christianity, while being exclusive on the one hand (by saying that to get to God, you must go through Jesus), is also unbelievably *inclusive*. In fact, Biblical Christianity is more inclusive than *any other religious or non-religious group* anywhere in the world. It is the only religion that

calls radically different people (black and white, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, religious and irreligious, etc.) together into one, single faith community. It is the only faith anywhere that is for “every nation, tribe, language, and people group” (Galatians 3:28; Revelation 7:9-10). The entire New Testament pictures Jesus reaching out not only to the elite, but also and especially to the sick, sinful, poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised people of his day. You can accuse Christianity of many things, but you can’t call it exclusive. However, some would say that they are not forcing this view but arguing that we must check any religious views at the door in the square.

IV. CHRISTIANS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE?

- A. **Defining Religion.** We must begin with a definition of religion. Most of us think of this as attending some religious services or ascribing to some doctrinal or faith beliefs in the supernatural. But I would posit that religion is really your set of answers to all the big questions of life, such as who are we, why are we here, what is right and wrong and how do we decide, what are the most important things to be doing, in what direction is history moving, what is real, how do we know, etc. Thus, religion is one's belief system about spiritual reality. You may claim that there is no spiritual reality but you still have a set of answers to the big questions in life that you must live by and that require "faith" to sustain. This would mean that everyone has religious beliefs that they bring to the table, so there is no way that religion can be excluded from the public sphere. It takes faith to be a Christian, but it also takes faith to be an atheist, humanist, existentialist, utilitarian, pragmatist, deist, i.e. those claims cannot be proved in a lab.
- B. **A practical example:** Let's say that John and I are legislators working together to write divorce laws for our country. For the sake of argument let's say John is a secular humanist/atheist and I am a Christian. As we contemplate whether to make divorce easy or difficult, our decision will come down to what we believe about the purpose of marriage. We all want divorce laws that will work for people, but that will greatly depend on our beliefs of human nature and human flourishing. John may say, individual rights are the most important thing because the happiness and fulfillment of the adults who enter it are the purpose of marriage. Therefore, you will argue, divorce should be a quick and easy procedure done for most any reason. I may say that the family is more important than individual happiness and the purpose of marriage is to create safe and secure space for the raising of children. Thus, I would argue that divorce should take more time and contemplation. Both of our views are based on our belief in the purpose of marriage and our understanding of what is more important in society—the individual or the corporate. This law has to be based on deeply held views about the purpose of marriage, human flourishing, and what is best for society. How can your enlightenment, western, individual views be favored over my traditional views? Why are your faith claims allowed and mine are not? Both of our positions are faith claims. John's completely recent, Western position doesn't somehow become fact while I'm stuck arguing from a religious conviction. This is why to exclude Christianity (as obnoxious as some of us can be) would be unfair because we all are religious in the sense that we all have answers about spiritual reality.

Professor Michael Perry: “To say that religious reasoning must be kept out of the public square because it’s faith based and controversial is itself a faith-based statement which is incredibly controversial, and therefore on it’s on terms ought to be thrown out.” What is really at stake is not “who has exclusive beliefs and who doesn’t. The question is which set of exclusive beliefs can produce peace-loving, reconciling, inclusive behavior. What we need to do is look at what is **unique** about Christianity and we will see that such behavior flows from our uniqueness.

C. UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

1. *Origin of Christianity*—I John 4:2 says that Jesus “has come.” It didn’t say that he was born. To say that he “has come” is to say that he was somewhere else before. Christianity says that in Jesus Christ, God Himself has entered the world.
2. *Purpose of Christianity*—Most religions say that the problem that they want to solve is the physical world. All other religions will say that their purpose is to escape this evil world (whether considered illusory or real) and find some form of ‘salvation.’ The flesh, the physical is the enemy, and our salvation comes by way of escaping this world. But I John

4:2 says that Christ came “in the flesh.” The fact the Jesus took on a body demonstrates the goodness of creation, and His bodily resurrection demonstrates that His purpose is not to destroy or escape but to renew this world. No faith hold out salvation for the *world* like the life and cross of Jesus Christ.

3. *Method of Christianity*—In all other religions we are told that in order to be saved, we must perform the truth, i.e. loving your family or loving your neighbor, and if God sees you loving Him and loving others, then He will bless you and save you. But that’s not what the Gospel says at all. I John 4:10 says, “this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent His son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” God purposely comes and loves those who are not good, who do not love their neighbors, and are not virtuous. Jesus dies so that non-virtuous people can be saved by radical grace.

D. PEACE-PRODUCING, INCLUSIVE CHRISTIANITY. Now we must show how the uniqueness discussed above leads to peaceful, reconciling behavior.

1. *Method of Christianity leads to humility*—In you’re saved by performance, then superiority abounds, but the Gospel says you’re not saved by your performance. This leads us to expect that people who don’t believe as we do might very well be better than us. We’re not saved b/c we’re wise, good, virtuous, or performing the truth; we’re saved because Jesus performed the truth. Thus, many who don’t believe with us can easily be better people. The Gospel humbles us before others with whom we disagree.
2. *Purpose of Christianity leads to service*—If religions say that this world doesn’t matter and all that does matter is going to heaven while the world is destroyed or escaped. But if Biblical salvation is a “new heavens and a new earth,” where death, poverty, and disease are gone, then we are working for the peace and renewal of this world.
3. *Origin of Christianity leads to love*—When Christianity began to grow in the earliest days, they lived in a world of what looked like inclusive religion—everyone had their own god! Christians came along and said, “Jesus is Lord of all.” It seems that this would create division but it actually created the most inclusive society ever known. Greeks didn’t mix rich and poor, but Christians did. The Jews didn’t mix the races but the Christians did. The reason behind this is that ultimate reality is visible in Jesus Christ, and this ultimate reality is always about a man on a cross loving people who don’t love him, forgiving people who abuse him, and sacrificially serving people who oppose him. If that’s ultimate reality, how can we be cruel, coercive, or condescending to anyone? We can’t.

The question is not who has exclusive beliefs but which beliefs lead to people who are humble, serving, and loving.

IV. OTHER OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

Can’t I just be open-minded? Truth is never evaluated on the basis of sincerity. I may *sincerely* believe that the check you gave me for \$50,000 was good, but when it bounces my sincerity won’t get the money in my account! Francis Schaeffer: “It is quite possible to be both sincere and sincerely *wrong*.” In addition, open-mindedness cannot be the criterion for salvation. Open-minded never means not to believe anything. How many of us are open-minded about the red light we approach on a daily basis? G.K. Chesterton: “The purpose of an open mind, like an open mouth, is to close it on something solid.” So the real question is whether or not Christ’s claim to be the only way to God is a solid claim.

Can’t I love and respect Jesus without Him being the only way? The argument goes: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.” C.S. Lewis: That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level wit the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”