

Tolerance and Other Religions in Western World

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The young man, just back from the Far East, was trying to convince my friends and me that all religions lead to God. To prove his point, he told us a story about four blind men and an elephant. One blind man touched the elephant's side and announced it was like a wall. Another man found the elephant's leg and described the large animal like a tree. The third man held its tail and declared the elephant was like a rope. And the fourth man grasped the trunk and concluded that it was like a snake. "Are any of them wrong?" he asked us rhetorically. "No. Of course not," he continued. "Each of them just has a different perspective on the same animal.

It's similar with religions. They just have a different perspective on God."

His argument seemed quite persuasive and yet I knew deep down there was something wrong with it. As I sat tongue-tied, not knowing how to respond, I felt disturbed and helpless as my friends listened intently. We were a group of typical university students. Asking. Doubting. Challenging. Searching for truth. Some of us were Christians; others were spiritually interested but had not yet made a personal commitment to Christ. And here we were at a weekend retreat, listening to this stranger among us.

I knew Jesus is the way and the truth, but beyond quoting some Bible verses and sharing my testimony, I didn't know how to identify the error in this man's thinking or what to say that would challenge his analogy. My friends, in their quest for truth, gave it serious consideration. They even nodded in agreement. "That makes sense," they replied. "Maybe all religions do lead to God." Would you believe it took me 12 years before I learned how to adequately respond to that illustration?

Believe it or not, the blind men and elephant story is still one of the most common arguments used by people who claim all religions lead to God. Many people think we can all have a share in the truth as we approach God from different angles. The view that one religion might be substantially the true religion is rejected by many as intolerant and arrogant in a pluralistic world. To be truly tolerant many think that they have to believe that all religions are equally true. As I travel and debate across North America and even internationally, university students frequently ask me: "How can you claim Jesus is the only way to God?" Some challenge me:

"You're intolerant. How can you say that what's true for you is true for everyone?"

Is it intolerant for us as Christians to claim that Jesus is the only way to God? Don't worry. We don't need to fear being intolerant or even being labeled intolerant once we properly understand

the relationship between truth, tolerance and pluralism.

TRUTH

When we ask if a religion is true, at the most basic level we mean, is it objectively true? Do its claims accurately correspond with reality independent of anyone agreeing with them? Religious claims are purportedly about reality. That is, people making religious claims are apparently telling what they think is in fact really true. So just like "2+2=4" and "the Nazis were defeated in the Second World War" are objectively true, we are asking whether there are some claims in the realm of religion that are also objectively true. Do they correspond with reality and are they independent of anyone's opinions about them?

Some people think that a religious claim cannot be objectively true but can only "become true for you" as you personally appropriate it. This, however, is a different sense of the word "truth." In philosophy the mistake being made here is called an equivocation. Here the word true refers to "meaningful". That is different than the notion of truth being a correspondence with reality. It may be that a truth only becomes meaningful to us when we personally appropriate it, but it does not follow that it can't be objectively true. The statement "true for you but not for me" can only legitimately refer to the personal application of truth, not the objective truth value of a claim. "True for you and not true for me" really just means "you believe it and I don't", but this is irrelevant to our question of whether one true religion is even possible. If a religious claim is true, it is true for everyone, even though only a few people might apply that truth to their life. Religious claims are claims about reality. These claims are objectively either true or false.

But some one might say "Don't all religions teach basically the same thing anyway?" When you get right down to it, aren't all religions essentially the same? No - apart from some common moral principles, all religions aren't the same. In fact, many of the ideas that Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Jews and Hindus have about God, reality, truth, the basic human dilemma and the solution to that dilemma are contrary to each other. For example, there is no question that in Islam, Allah is the religious ultimate. But that's not the case with Buddhism. In fact, there are several strains of Buddhism and only one thinks of God in terms even close to a personal being. And the rest have differing impersonal concepts of the religious ultimate.

In Hinduism, there is also a variety of god concepts. Some consider Vishnu or Krishna as personal deities. Yet other Hindus consider the entire cosmic process as an impersonal ultimate. When religions differ about God any similarities they may have in ethical teachings is merely incidental. And not only do most religions not make the same claims, they often don't

even address the same issues.

Now, contrary statements can't all be true. There is the logical possibility that all religions may be false. But it is not even a logical possibility that all, or most religions are true. This means that a person can't rule out the distinct possibility that only one religion may be true.

There is Buddhist story which starts off so much like Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. But in the Buddhist story the boy comes home, is met by the father and has to work off the penalty for his past misdeeds by years of servitude to his father. In Jesus' parable, the boy is welcomed home by an expectant father, completely forgiven and given special loving treatment. You see, the principle of karma (cause and effect, paying off your guilt) is poles apart from grace (free forgiveness when you don't deserve it a bit).

Some people assume that since religions function in roughly the same way in people's lives that there must be a common reality behind them. But even if this assumption is true, the conclusion does not follow. Imagine two men, Fred and Barney, who are married to two women, Wilma and Betty. Just because Wilma functions in Fred's life roughly the same way Betty functions in Barney's life, is no reason to believe that Wilma and Betty are just different names for the same entity.¹

So God either exists or He doesn't. God is either personal or impersonal. God has revealed Himself at a certain time in history or He hasn't. What a religion affirms is either true or it is not. Therefore, the most significant question we can ask of any religion is whether or not its fundamental claims are true. Religious belief may be more than mental agreement with truth claims, but it is never less. In believing, one always believes something and what one believes is an objective truth claim.

In addition, it is possible to know truly without knowing exhaustively. For example, we may not be able to know an infinite God exhaustively, but this does not mean that we cannot know some true things about God. Finally, (since truth by its very nature rules out contrary views as false) truth itself is exclusive and intolerant of error.

TOLERANCE

Many people think that tolerance means never saying someone else is wrong. But notice that the concept of tolerance contains the notion of disagreement. If there is no disagreement, then there is nothing to tolerate. Thinking or even stating that another view is false is not intolerance. True tolerance allows differing views to have an equal right to exist without the threat of violence. You can be truly tolerant without accepting another person's beliefs. Furthermore, truth should take priority over tolerance. There is nothing intolerant about telling the truth. No one should suppress the truth just because it may hurt someone's feelings or may

go against their beliefs. Is it intolerant to claim the Earth is round because others might think it is flat? Scholars are not considered intolerant if they believe one hypothesis to be true and another false. One may need to communicate truth with gentleness and respect, but it is clearly not intolerant to claim that one religious hypothesis is true and another false. Many people reject Christianity as false for one reason only, that it claims to be exclusively true. But this is absurd. When tolerance is valued at the expense of truth and a position is rejected only for claiming to be true, then the necessity of valuing truth above tolerance becomes obvious. Should we believe views that claim to be false?! Tolerance must be valued, but never ahead of truth. There is nothing intolerant about making exclusive claims to truth.

PLURALISM

Some people think that because we live in a pluralistic society, we have to believe that all religions are equally true. The idea of a truly pluralistic society, that is, one where differing views have an equal and legal right to exist, is a concept that I believe we need to support. However, more recently the word pluralism has had another concept smuggled into its meaning. It usually now includes the concept of relativism, that all truths are equal and that what is true for one person or culture is not necessarily true for another. Thus relativists say people should not make exclusive claims to truth.

What is strange, though, and worth noting is that people are not relativists in their everyday beliefs and practices. It seems only when religion and morality are at issue that people invoke relativism. We don't hear people claiming that mutually exclusive statements are true when it comes to the stock market. Relativistic pluralism is appropriate only in matters of taste, not in matters of truth. In matters of truth, we are expected to work towards agreement, to search for the objective truth, unlike matters of taste where diversity is encouraged. But clearly, the issues of religion are issues of factual truth because the claims a religion makes about reality are either true or false.

Many people claim that relativism is the answer to the truth question about religions. That is, they are claiming that relativism is exclusively and absolutely true. But this reveals that relativism is just another absolute in sheep's clothing, and is therefore no more tolerant than any other exclusive claim to truth. In fact, it is worse because it hides its exclusivity behind a deceptive façade of alleged openness, when in reality it requires the conclusion that all other religious views are not equally true, but equally flawed and that relativism is the larger, grander truth that everyone should believe.

In practice relativists do not recognize the right of others to reject their relativistic view. The proceedings of the 1993 World Parliament of Religions showed how intolerant tolerance can

become with its consistent attack on exclusive religious claims. But religious relativism is not only deceptive and intolerant, it is also incoherent. Relativists claim that "all religious claims are relative" but that is a religious claim that is not relative. It fails its own test and is thus self-contradictory; and self-contradictory statements are false. The real question is: "Which exclusive claim is really true—Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, relativism, etc.?" And that can only be determined by an investigation into the evidence supporting the claims of each view.

But maybe you are thinking, "Isn't the claim of one group to have the truth potentially disastrous to human peace and unity?" There is a kernel of truth here but it is actually a trick question. It is true that if everyone believed all roads lead to God, then there would likely be more peace and unity. But this is like saying if everyone wore red hats, all heads would be covered. The obvious question would be "why red hats?" Likewise, if everyone believed one thing about religion, of course there would be more peace and unity but which one thing should everyone believe? Just as any color hat will cover our heads, so too any common belief, by definition, would produce more unity. But why should that common belief be religious relativism? Why not Islam, Buddhism, atheism, wicca or Christianity? The real question is: "Which one view is true?" The even greater danger hidden within this question is the implication that people should not be permitted to publicly claim exclusive religious truth (see CRTC and Vision TV policies). This amounts to the imposition of religious relativism via the censorship of religious exclusivism.

ELEPHANTS

But doesn't the blind men and elephant story show us that we should view different religions as just having a different perspective on the same thing, and therefore as different paths to the same God? No! If it were true that all religions lead to God, the blind men and elephant story would be a wonderful illustration of that fact. But as an argument attempting to prove that all religions lead to God, it makes the classic logical mistake of assuming the very point it is trying to prove. By assuming all four men are touching an elephant, the analogy is assuming all religions are in touch with God. But this is what it's trying to prove. Whenever an argument assumes what it is trying to prove, it is guilty of the logical error of "arguing in a circle."

An alternative analogy makes the point clear.² Three blind men are in a room and are asked to describe an elephant. The first blind man walks out of the room and falls down a flight of stairs. "Oh," he says, "an elephant is hard and lumpy." The second man turns and walks into the restroom. "No, not at all. An elephant is cool and smooth like porcelain." The third man walks

out of the building into the woods. “No, an elephant has branches and leaves like trees.” The relativist asks, “Are any of them wrong? Aren’t they really expressing different parts of the same thing?” Of course not. They’re all wrong because none of them is even touching an elephant. Similarly, religions are claiming to experience God but how do we know that they have hold of God at all?

In summary, many people think that to be truly tolerant they have to hold that all religious views are true. But they recognize that all religious views can’t be objectively true since they make claims that clearly contradict each other. Therefore, they conclude truth must be relative. But as we’ve seen, tolerance contains the notion of disagreement, which presupposes the existence of objective truth.

To be truly tolerant, therefore, one does not need to be a religious relativist. Genuine tolerance demands love and respect, not relativism. We show more respect for another religion when we evaluate its truth claims seriously, than when we clothe them with the patronizing cloak of relativism. Denying our differences does no one any favors.

Discovering truth (or thinking you have) may have at times led people to act intolerantly. But there is no necessary connection, and the same intolerance is often shown by religious relativists, who think relativism is true. Therefore, we don’t need to be afraid of being labeled intolerant when we share with others the greatest news they could ever hear.

Tolerance needs to be seen in its proper place, as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Tolerance is a virtue when it is used to cultivate and preserve truth. It is a vice when it becomes the end, pursued apart from truth. We should be inclusive of people but not necessarily beliefs. We should listen and learn from all people, but we should not necessarily agree with all people. Even though we live in a world that no longer values truth, as thinking and moral people, we should be committed to both truth and tolerance. After all, God wants all people to come to a knowledge of the truth (1Timothy 2:3,4). Jesus wants us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27). And Paul exhorts us to “speak the truth in love” .((Ephesians 4:15

Notes

- This is based on a similar response in Winfried Corduan’s book, “Reasonable Faith: Basic .1 Christian Apologetics,” Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993, pp 258, 259.
2. This example is contained in a series of tapes on communication skills by Tim Downs of .the Communications Center, Campus Crusade for Christ, Cary, North Carolina