

THE REASON FOR GOD

Belief in an Age of Skepticism

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DUTTON

2. Condemn religion

Religion is not going away and its power cannot be diminished by government control. But can't we—via education and argument—find ways to socially discourage religions that claim to have “the truth” and that try to convert others to their beliefs? Couldn't we find ways to urge all of our citizens, whatever their religious beliefs, to admit that each religion or faith is just one of many equally valid paths to God and ways to live in the world?

This approach creates an environment in which it is considered unenlightened and outrageous to make exclusive religious claims, even in personal conversations. It does so by stating and restating certain axioms that eventually achieve the status of common sense. Those who deviate from them are stigmatized as foolish or dangerous. Unlike the first strategy, this approach to the divisiveness of religion is having some effect. It cannot ultimately succeed, however, because at its heart is a fatal inconsistency, even perhaps a hypocrisy, that will eventually lead to the collapse of this way of thinking. What follows are several of these axioms and the problems with each.

“All major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing.”

This assertion is so common that one journalist recently wrote that anyone who believed that “there are inferior religions” is a right-wing extremist.⁷ Do we really want to say that the Branch Davidians or religions requiring child sacrifice are not inferior to any other faith? The great majority of people would almost certainly agree that they are.

Most people who assert the equality of religions have in mind the major world faiths, not splinter sects. This was the form of the

objection I got from the student the night I was on the panel. He contended that doctrinal differences between Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism were superficial and insignificant, that they all believed in the same God. But when I asked him who that God was, he described him as an all-loving Spirit in the universe. The problem with this position is its inconsistency. It insists that doctrine is unimportant, but at the same time assumes doctrinal beliefs about the nature of God that are at loggerheads with those of all the major faiths. Buddhism doesn't believe in a personal God at all. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe in a God who holds people accountable for their beliefs and practices and whose attributes could not be all reduced to love. Ironically, the insistence that doctrines do not matter is really a doctrine itself. It holds a specific view of God, which is touted as superior and more enlightened than the beliefs of most major religions. So the proponents of this view do the very thing they forbid in others.

"Each religion sees part of spiritual truth, but none can see the whole truth."

Sometimes this point is illustrated with the story of the blind men and the elephant. Several blind men were walking along and came upon an elephant that allowed them to touch and feel it. "This creature is long and flexible like a snake" said the first blind man, holding the elephant's trunk. "Not at all—it is thick and round like a tree trunk," said the second blind man, feeling the elephant's leg. "No, it is large and flat," said the third blind man, touching the elephant's side. Each blind man could feel only part of the elephant—none could envision the entire elephant. In the same way, it is argued, the religions of the world each have a grasp on part of the truth about spiritual reality, but none can see the whole elephant or claim to have a comprehensive vision of the truth.

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This illustration backfires on its users. The story is told from the point of view of someone who is not blind. How could you know that each blind man only sees part of the elephant unless *you* claim to be able to see the whole elephant?

There is an appearance of humility in the protestation that the truth is much greater than any one of us can grasp, but if this is used to invalidate all claims to discern the truth it is in fact an arrogant claim to a kind of knowledge which is superior to [all others] . . . We have to ask: "What is the [absolute] vantage ground from which you claim to be able to relativize all the absolute claims these different scriptures make?"

How could you possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless you yourself have the superior, comprehensive knowledge of spiritual reality you just claimed that none of the religions have?

"Religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be 'truth.'"

When I first came to New York City nearly twenty years ago, I more often heard the objection that all religions are equally true. Now, however, I'm more likely to be told that all religions are equally false. The objection goes like this: "All moral and spiritual claims are the product of our particular historical and cultural moment, and therefore no one should claim they can know the Truth, since no one can judge whether one assertion about spiritual and moral reality is truer than another." The sociologist Peter L. Berger reveals the serious inconsistency in this common assumption.

In his book *A Rumor of Angels* Berger recounts how the twentieth century had uncovered "the sociology of knowledge," namely

that people believe what they do largely because they are socially conditioned to do so. We like to think that we think for ourselves, but it is not that simple. We think like the people we most admire and need. Everyone belongs to a community that reinforces the plausibility of some beliefs and discourages others. Berger notes that many have concluded from this fact that, because we are all locked into our historical and cultural locations, it is impossible to judge the rightness or wrongness of competing beliefs.

Berger goes on, however, to point out that absolute relativism can only exist if the relativists exempt themselves from their own razor.⁹ If you infer from the social conditionedness of all belief that “no belief can be held as universally true for everyone,” that itself is a comprehensive claim about everyone that is the product of social conditions—so it cannot be true, on its own terms. “Relativity relativizes itself,” says Berger, so we can’t have relativism “all the way down.”¹⁰ Our cultural biases make weighing competing truth-claims harder, yes. The social conditionedness of belief is a fact, but it cannot be used to argue that all truth is completely relative or else the very argument refutes itself. Berger concludes that we cannot avoid weighing spiritual and religious claims by hiding behind the cliché that “there’s no way to know the Truth.” We must still do the hard work of asking: which affirmations about God, human nature, and spiritual reality are true and which are false? We will have to base our life on *some* answer to that question.

The philosopher Alvin Plantinga has his own version of Berger’s argument. People often say to him, “If you were born in Morocco, you wouldn’t even be a Christian, but rather a Muslim.” He responds:

Suppose we concede that if I had been born of Muslim parents in Morocco rather than Christian parents in Michigan, my beliefs

*would have been quite different. [But] the same goes for the pluralist. . . . If the pluralist had been born in [Morocco] he probably wouldn't be a pluralist. Does it follow that . . . his pluralist beliefs are produced in him by an unreliable belief-producing process?*¹¹

Plantinga and Berger make the same point. You can’t say, “All claims about religions are historically conditioned except the one I am making right now.” If you insist that no one can determine which beliefs are right and wrong, why should we believe what you are saying? The reality is that we all make truth-claims of some sort and it is very hard to weigh them responsibly, but we have no alternative but to try to do so.

“It is arrogant to insist your religion is right and to convert others to it.”

The noted religion scholar John Hick has written that once you become aware that there are many other equally intelligent and good people in the world who hold different beliefs from you and that you will not be able to convince them otherwise, then it is arrogant for you to continue to try to convert them or to hold your view to be the superior truth.¹²

Once again there is an inherent contradiction. Most people in the world don’t hold to John Hick’s view that all religions are equally valid, and many of them are equally as good and intelligent as he is, and unlikely to change their views. That would make the statement “all religious claims to have a better view of things are arrogant and wrong” to be, on its own terms, arrogant and wrong.

Many say that it is ethnocentric to claim that our religion is superior to others. Yet isn’t that very statement ethnocentric? Most

non-Western cultures have no problem saying that their culture and religion is best. The idea that it is wrong to do so is deeply rooted in Western traditions of self-criticism and individualism. To charge others with the "sin" of ethnocentrism is really a way of saying, "Our culture's approach to other cultures is superior to yours." We are then doing the very thing we forbid others to do.¹³ The historian C. John Sommerville has pointed out that "a religion can be judged only on the basis of another religion." You can't evaluate a religion except on the basis of some ethical criteria that in the end amounts to your own religious stance.¹⁴

By now the fatal flaw in this approach to religion in general and to Christianity in particular should be obvious. Skeptics believe that *any* exclusive claims to a superior knowledge of spiritual reality cannot be true. But this objection is itself a religious belief. It assumes God is unknowable, or that God is loving but not wrathful, or that God is an impersonal force rather than a person who speaks in Scripture. All of these are unprovable faith assumptions. In addition, their proponents believe they have a superior way to view things. They believe the world would be a better place if everyone dropped the traditional religions' views of God and truth and adopted theirs. Therefore, their view is also an "exclusive" claim about the nature of spiritual reality. If all such views are to be discouraged, this one should be as well. If it is not narrow to hold this view, then there is nothing inherently narrow about holding to traditional religious beliefs.

Mark Lilla, a professor at the University of Chicago, spoke to a bright young student at Wharton Business School who, to Lilla's bafflement, had gone forward at a Billy Graham crusade to give his life to Christ. Lilla writes:

I wanted to cast doubt on the step he was about to take, to help him see there are other ways to live, other ways to seek knowledge,

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love . . . even self-transformation. I wanted to convince him his dignity depended on maintaining a free, skeptical attitude towards doctrine. I wanted . . . to save him . . .

Doubt, like faith, has to be learned. It is a skill. But the curious thing about skepticism is that its adherents, ancient and modern, have so often been proselytizers. In reading them, I've often wanted to ask: "Why do you care?" Their skepticism offers no good answer to that question. And I don't have one for myself.¹⁵

Lilla's wise self-knowledge reveals his doubts about Christianity to be a learned, alternate faith. He believes that the individual's dignity as a human being rests on doctrinal skepticism—which is, of course, an article of faith. As he admits, he can't avoid believing that it would be better for people if they adopted his beliefs about reality and human dignity rather than Billy Graham's.

It is no more narrow to claim that one religion is right than to claim that one way to think about all religions (namely that all are equal) is right. We are all exclusive in our beliefs about religion, but in different ways.