

## "DEFEATERS" II: RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

### REVIEW ON 'DEFEATERS'

#### What are they?

A defeater is a one belief that automatically makes another belief invalid. A person with a 'defeater' for Christianity is saying: "I don't really have to sit and listen and examine and weigh all the Christian claims and evidence. I know that they just *can't* be true." In every time and culture there is a different set of 'defeaters' for Christianity. Most operate informally, in 'oral tradition'. We are looking at four which are most potent among people with whom we work and live in Manhattan. They are: a) The Freud-Marx-Neitzsche Objection ("*Christian belief leads to repression and oppression.*"), b) Historical Criticism ("*You can't trust the Bible as a historical document*"), c) Religious Pluralism ("*If there are any ways of spiritual salvation Christianity is only one among many other valid ones.*"), d) Evil and Suffering ("*The presence of appalling evil proves that God may be either good or powerful but he cannot be both.*") You can neither explain nor commend your faith to people in NYC without having some facility with these issues. Often you can't even give simple comfort and sympathy to a hurting person without being ready to give some response to them.

#### Remember the Two Problems.

We must keep in mind during discussions with others that there is often a *personal* problem hiding under the *theoretical* problem(s). That is easy to see with the issue of evil and suffering, but personal tragedy may stand behind *any* of the intellectual objections. And another underlying personal problem is often a deeply disillusioning experience of exclusion, ostracism, unjust treatment, or inconsistent behavior from religious believers. At one end of the spectrum, there are people whose objections to Christianity are sheerly theoretical. Classic example--Aldous Huxley<sup>1</sup>. In such a case, there is no reason why you can't engage in a lively debate at an academic level. At the other end of the spectrum, you may be speaking to someone whose hurt is very deep and who most needs some Christian to simply listen to complaints with real respect and with almost no retorts or arguments at all. This will often be the most effective way to bring him or her toward openness and even faith. But usually, both the personal (usually mainly valid) problem with Christianity and the theoretical (usually mainly invalid) problem with Christianity need to be kept in mind. So you should almost never just 'dump' full, long arguments on people (for their theoretical issues), but should give parts and pieces in the context of a personal relationship (that deals with the personal).

#### GENERAL PROCESS

- **Personal over Theoretical.** Remember that your life and attitude, and your relationships in Christian community are the first way to undermine the personal objections and problems that keep people away from Christian faith. This is the first element of 'persuasion'. (Aristotle's "*ethos*".) Your personal demeanor when Christianity is criticized is more important (almost) than what you say. Your own attitude toward suffering or your own conduct of power relations is "*ethos*". In general, you should build a relationship with

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<sup>1</sup> "I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently assumed it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics. He is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do...For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political." Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), p. 273.

someone just to know and serve them--not to persuade them. Persuasion should be a means to the end of love, not love a means to the end of persuasion.

- **Theoretical and Personal.** Secondly, you should be completely aware of and conversant with the basic responses to each defeater so you can draw on them in pieces as you engage friends who don't accept Christianity. They will come up. If you let people know about your faith, they will have to ask you about them, since their culture has 'inoculated' them from the gospel with these defeaters. But again, you should seldom 'dump' a whole set of arguments on someone. Salt and pepper your conversation with them when appropriate. The main purpose of the brief 'soundbytes' is to keep them thinking and open. In general, the better the friendship, the more you can move from listening and short provocative statements to sustained discussions.
- **The Truth that Became a Person.** Thirdly, the final element in helping someone find faith is Jesus-exposure. Arguments for God and against defeaters is really only medicine, not food. Or maybe you could say they are white corpuscles, not red. They remove barriers, but they can't positively generate vital faith. It is exposure to Jesus in reading, discussion, and teaching that creates faith. We must see how *he* treats people--so lordly and tender--and what *he* says about the Big Issues of life.

So the part we are giving you here--intellectual articulation with regard to defeater--is only one of three parts to helping someone receive faith. Ultimately we get what Plantinga calls 'an internal defeater defeater'--the *sensus divinitas*, the witness of the Holy Spirit.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE 'RELIGIOUS PLURALISM' DEFEATER

Religious pluralism has a strong air of plausibility today in a world where technology and (relative) peace have created an environment for multi-cultural cities and countries to develop. It is not easy to vilify, demonize, and caricature the adherents of other faiths when they live across the hallway from you and are quite nice people!

The "Religious Pluralism" objection to the Christian faith goes like this: ***"If there are any ways to 'find God' or ways 'of salvation', then Christianity is only one among many valid ones. You should not try to convert others or insist that your beliefs are true and theirs are not."*** John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith are prominent and articulate proponents of this 'defeater'.<sup>2</sup> Some clear versions of this objection to Christianity:

"Except at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: '...we believe that we know God and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong.'"<sup>3</sup>

"Nor can we reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst others are not. We can of course claim this; and indeed virtually every religious tradition has done so, regarding alternative forms of religion either as false or confused or inferior versions of itself....Let us avoid the implausibly arbitrary dogma that religious experience is all delusory with the single exception of the particular form enjoyed by the one who is speaking."<sup>4</sup>

There are correlating questions that often go along with the basic one:

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<sup>2</sup> John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Phila: Westminster, 1977) and *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1989). Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985). Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity* (NY: Harper, 1976) and *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1979) and *Towards a World Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity*, p.14.

<sup>4</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.235

- *"How can you hold people responsible for rejecting Jesus when people in general just believe what their family and society tell them. If you were born in a Muslim country, you'd probably not even be a Christian."*
- *"What about all the people who've lived their whole lives and died without ever even hearing about Jesus Christ? If they are lost in your view, your view is patently unjust."*

Because R/P is now so widely accepted, the average person holds the view without much reflection, using slogans such as "there are many paths to God", and appealing to the well-worn images of many roads up to the same mountain summit or the Hindu parable of the blind men feeling different parts of the elephant and each mistaking his part for the whole. This is so common and so popular that the R/P view has achieved the level of being considered "common sense" in our Western societies, and those who differ with it can be seen as extremely odd, intellectually marginal, or dangerous. This attitude of disdain or incredulity will often come up in a discussion of the R/P objection to classic Christianity. Many Christians sense it and bristle and fail.

### **THE THEORETICAL AND THE PERSONAL--AGAIN**

It is important for Christians to remember that there is a lot of legitimate practical concerns behind the R/P objection. The devastating religious wars of the 17th century virtually drove the intelligentsia of Europe into the R/P position. They concluded that we needed to 'defang' religion if we were ever to have peace in the world. They began to say, "you may hold your particular beliefs, but you must not do so in such a way that de-legitimizes the truths of other religions, faiths, and cultures."

#### **The Concern for Human Unity**

This very valid concern can have either a more general or more personal aspect to it. The more general concern is for *human unity*. Lesslie Newbigin summarizes the motives of so many religious pluralists:

In the past decades, European peoples have become accustomed for the first time to the presence in their midst of large numbers of people of other faiths. It has not taken long for them to discover that many of these Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Muslims are devout and godly people. Since the inter-religious issue is usually compounded by the inter-racial issue, and since we are aware of the racism which infects us so deeply, there are the strongest emotional reasons for regarding religious pluralism as something to be accepted and welcomed.....To maintain the old missionary attitude is positively dangerous. In a world threatened with nuclear war and global ecological crisis, a world more and more closely bound together in its cultural and economic life, the paramount need is for unity, and an aggressive claim on the part of one of the world's religions to have the truth for all can only be regarded as treason against the human race.<sup>5</sup>

The R/P proponent asks: "How are we going to live together in peace if each religion sees all other religions as virulent heresies?" That will be a pre-text for exploiting and abusing members of those religions and cultures.

#### **The Experience of Exclusion**

On the other hand, this concern can have a more personal aspect to it. People are more sensitive today to 'power-relations'. In a given body of people, who gets to lead and who must follow? Who can interrupt and who has to be quiet? Whose ideas are taken seriously immediately and who has to go get another person to 'legitimize' them? Many people have felt coerced, excluded, and exploited by professing Christians. Many people have been in ostensibly Christian organizations and have seen power being exercised in the same old way as in the world. (*"You know that the rulers of the pagans lord it over them...Not so with you. Instead*

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<sup>5</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans, 1989), p.25, 155-156.

*whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...Mark 10:42-43*). This can even occur in a simple discussion. When Christians are disdainful and dismissive during a dialogue with a non-believing person, they are only confirming the fears of religious pluralists that we will never experience a truly coherent, tolerant, and welcoming society until the R/P view is adopted. This also is the reason that there is enormous antipathy toward 'evangelism' and the effort to try to convert others to your faith.

As we said last week--the theoretical and personal aspect of the R/P issue are connected but not identical. You may technically 'solve' the theoretical one with arguments, but you could do it in such a way and with such an attitude that you only strengthen the personal problem!! (Actually, this happens constantly in so much 'personal evangelism'. Many Christians have not truly listened to the concerns of the people who don't believe, and therein they show themselves out of accord with the spirit of the one who '*came not be served, but to served*' (Mark 10:45) and who was so tender that '*He will not quarrel or cry out...a bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out...*' (Matt. 12:19-20).

## THE THEORETICAL PROBLEM

The R/P position is in many ways the easiest objection to articulate. In its popular form it is heard on hundreds of college campuses every day like this: "*Who can know who is right? Nobody can! So don't insist your religious beliefs are righter than anyone else's*". Because it is so easy to articulate, it is perhaps the most popular and widely held 'defeater' against classical Christianity. Yet the theoretical basis of R/P is by far the weakest of the four main objections or defeaters we are looking at. Evil/Suffering, Historical criticism of the Bible, and the Freud/Marx/Neitzsche objection are all much more serious and substantial charges against Christianity. The R/P defeater disintegrates much more quickly than the others do under sustained reflection. (Sometimes we find that this one melts away easily with some incisive questions. But we should not assume that the others will 'go away' in the same manner.)

### "The Fatal Flaw"

There is one fatal flaw in the R/P position that can be found in virtually any form of it (even the most sophisticated) or in any of its "sub-objections" (see below). The flaw is this: *The R/P objection is a religious belief, claiming to be more true than opposing beliefs, and as such is subject to all the criticisms it levels at traditional religions..* It is understandable why the R/P proponent resists the idea that their own view is just one more religious belief, but there is no reasonable way to deny it. Think it out:

**1)** First, the R/P view is a *belief*. It is not an empirically verifiable hypothesis. There is no way to 'prove' it. **2)** Second, the R/P view is a *religious* belief. It is a belief about the nature of spiritual reality, and it is really quite a detailed description of that reality. As we will see below, R/P strongly asserts that the Ultimate is unknowable and impossible to describe accurately in words. As a result of this belief, R/P proponents do not believe there is a God of holy, just wrath who demands that all people believe in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Now surely all this is nothing less than a series of beliefs about the nature of God and spiritual reality--it is a religious belief.<sup>6</sup> **3)** Third, R/P proponents want to persuade those opposing them. They believe that the world would be a better place and people would be better off, etc. if more people held the R/P position on spiritual reality rather than the traditional Christianity. If this is not the case--why write books or even have a conversation? So the R/P is a belief, a religious belief, and one that claims to be a better or more accurate or preferable view of God than other ones. R/P objectors will emotionally, vigorously (even angrily) deny that they are simply proposing one religious belief for others, but that is the case.

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<sup>6</sup> Of course the R/P objector may say: "I'm not saying anything specific about God--I'm only saying that we can't know for sure what he is or what he's like." But the Christian view of God is that God has done self-revelation (in Christ) so we can know him. The R/P objector *is* saying, 'God is not like that (a revealer), but is like this (a non-revealer)'. The R/P position is a definite religious view of God.

If it is true that the R/P is itself a religious belief, then any objection that undermines the legitimacy of other religious beliefs will undermine the R/P itself, only more so. We say "more so" because if R/P proponents are--even as they speak--doing the very thing they are forbidding others to do, then their position is unusually inconsistent and incoherent. I call this a "fatal flaw" because it is so much thoroughly discrediting to the R/P position than any comparable difficulty in Christianity or any other religion. Watch how this 'fatal flaw' comes up in most forms of this defeater.

### **Sub-Objections.**

When you ask the R/P objectors, "*what exactly is wrong with claiming that Christianity is the best or only way to God?*" you will find that there are many somewhat different answers. There a number of related but distinct concerns that may be on the objectors mind and heart. You should listen carefully to see the 'sub-objections' within the objection. Some people are thinking of all of them, while others have only one in mind. By breaking them out and answering each one, we can see how inadequate the R/P objection is theoretically.

### **#1- THE "ALL THE SAME" OBJECTION-**

*All religions are basically the same, so don't claim that your religious beliefs are "righter" than others.*

Most true proponents of the R/P objection are not atheists, but rather are happy to agree that people can have genuine experiences of God or the Ultimate. What they will insist on, however, can be called 'doctrinal inessentiality'. I.e. "It doesn't matter what you believe--what matters is how you live." They insist that no one can know what ultimate reality is like in itself. We immediately interpret our experiences through our own cultural grid, so that our descriptions of the Ultimate (as we experience it) will in many ways be contradictory to other religious interpretations of God. Other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism are more open than Christianity to the idea that God has many incarnations and that experience of God is ineffable and impossible to put into absolute categories and doctrines. Doctrines, therefore may contradict but they do not matter. What matters is the common core. In all religions we experience the one "Infinite", and the effect is moving from self-centeredness to 'Ultimate-Reality-centeredness'.

It crucial to always acknowledge and agree with the personal/practical issue behind the theoretical. Many R/P's were raised in Christian environments where other world religions were demonized, but then they found riches in these other faiths. A Christian's response to this objection should agree without quibbling that there is lots that is true and virtuous about the other world religions. This is of course a big subject, and if you can't truly grant this, you may want to read Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* (IVP, 2000) or C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (See the Appendix). It is true that (in quite different ways) every religion sets itself against individualism and self-centeredness. It is true that there is enormous consensus between religions on ethics. It will only aggravate the 'personal' R/P problem if you maintain ignorance of and/or no appreciation of other major faiths.

Having said that, this is the weakest form of the R/P objection, because--ironically--it is oppressive and exclusive itself. First, this most 'liberal' sounding statement is one of the most illiberal possible positions, because it refuses to listen to the religionist's actual "voice". It insists on papering over enormous the enormous differences. A couple of years ago I was in a panel discussion with a Muslim cleric, and Imam, at Cooper Union. Both of us were (I think) quite cordial but pointed in showing the differences between us. One student said, "Well, despite all your claims, I see you as both saying exactly the same thing--Love God and love others." I looked at him and said, "Certainly we have much in common, but consider this. If we are right about Jesus Christ *being* God, then Muslims are failing in a serious way to love God as he's revealed himself and to get the power for loving others. If, however, Muslims are right about Jesus being *not* God but a prophet, then Christians are failing in a serious way to love God as he's revealed himself. We are doing blasphemy. Now one of us is loving God in a significantly better way than the other. And the two approaches produce rather significantly different kinds of people. We can't both be right." To my relief--the Imam nodded his assent.

(Whew!) But then, to our shock, the young man said, "No--I don't agree. You aren't different at all. You are exactly the same." The Muslim and I both felt 'violated'. He was refusing to let us say who we were. The R/P position claims to be promoting religious tolerance--but only after it forces every religion to deny the heart of its distinctives. This is extremely intolerant.

What of the claim that Eastern religions are more open to the idea that creed and doctrine are all alike? This isn't really true. In general, Hindus and Buddhist scholars will tell you that the idea of 'all religions being paths up the same mountain' is largely an Enlightenment Western idea. Here's an example. The Dalai Lama (leader of Tibetan Buddhism) gives a very popular lecture in the U.S. called "Overcoming Our Differences". In it he stresses that Buddhism is not the best religion for everyone, and that sincere Christians who find that their faith leads them to a life of compassion should by all means continue in it. They do not have to convert to Buddhism. This seems to fit the R/P view that doctrine doesn't matter, that all religious experience is good if it leads away from self-centeredness to compassion.

But as a journal article in the mid-90's pointed out<sup>7</sup>, according to Tibetan Buddhism, it is *essential* to ultimate salvation or liberation that a person believes in "*sunyata*", the doctrine of emptiness, the truth that the physical world is an illusion. But this tradition also believes in reincarnation. It believes that acts of compassion in this life lead to better incarnations in the next life, where eventually the person may learn the doctrinal truths necessary for final liberation. In other words, the Dalai Lama's seeming 'relaxed' attitude toward doctrinal differences rests on his commitment to some very specific doctrinal beliefs that differ sharply not only with Christianity but also with religious pluralism.

**"Fatal Flaw" spotting:** The R/P position is at loggerheads with most if not all world religions, who all have sharply different views of reality and believe that those beliefs are non-negotiable. So the R/P is not a tolerant attitude toward all religions, but a new religion itself that essentially demands every other faith to re-make itself in the R/P image. In other words, it ironically refuses to admit the diversity of world religions--often in the name of promoting diversity! It refuses to let religions actually speak with their own voices and name themselves. Worse, it is actually doing the very thing it forbids other religions to do. It is claiming that *its* view is 'righter than others'. It is essentially 'proselytizing' as it tells the other religions not to 'proselytize'. To be a "R/P Buddhist" you would have to drop the essential doctrines of Buddhism, just as you would to be a "R/P Christian". In essence, you'd have to convert.

**Addendum:** It is disingenuous to claim that all religions are alike and doctrine doesn't matter, when it is rather obvious that some religions and cults are destructive. Do we really want to say that the Branch Davidians or Aum Shin Rikyo cult (of Japan) are equally authentic experiences of the Ultimate. And if the R/P says--"but they don't bring you out of self-centeredness", we must ask "Isn't that a doctrine? And who gives you the right (on your own terms) to choose that as a standard by which to judge all religions and not some other?" The fact is that the R/P position actually does evaluate religions as better or worse according to a doctrinal standard which it chooses. (Thus it speaks approvingly of Buddhists who don't try to convert Christians, though we have seen this approval stems from a failure to listen to what Buddhists are actually saying.) "We can't avoid making judgments as best we can even where others disagree. Pluralists themselves invariably make highly contentious assumptions about morality and rationality. They can do so, however, only by exempting themselves from their own arbitrary standard".<sup>8</sup>

So in the end, the 'all the same' objection is self-destructive. If "all views about spiritual reality are equally valid" then that would make that very statement equally valid. So why believe it over traditional religions? "Doctrine about God doesn't matter", but what is that statement but

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Compson, "The Dalai Lama and the World Religions: A False Friend?" *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): 271-279, cited in Timothy O'Connor, "Religious Pluralism" in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. M. Murray (Eerdmans, 1999), p.168-169.

<sup>8</sup> O'Connor, p. 175.

a statement of doctrine about God. Then it doesn't matter. As Chesterton said: "*There is a kind of thought that stops thought. That is the only kind of thought that should be stopped.*"

## #2- THE "ARROGANCE" OBJECTION

*Lots of good and intelligent people differ with you, so it is arrogant to claim that your religious beliefs are "righter" than others.*

In the first quote cited above, Wilfred Cantwell Smith is making this sub-objection. He says that it is insensitive, delinquent, and 'not morally possible' to tell others that you are right about God and they are wrong. John Hick poses a more careful and sophisticated version of the arrogance objection. He says that it was possible to be a religious 'exclusivist' in former centuries, when you did not actually know others who held different religious views from yours. There was nothing 'immoral' about believing in your own exclusive truth then. But, once you become aware that a) others disagree intelligently and profoundly with you, and b) you have no argument for your position that is likely to convince most of the reasonable, good people who disagree with you, then c) it is arrogant of you to continue to try to convert others to it or even to hold it as the exclusive truth.<sup>9</sup>

Now (as usual) it is *critical* to acknowledge and admit the personal/practical issue behind this objection. And this is an even more valid personal complaint than the previous one. The terrible fact is that the Christian church has never lacked for truly arrogant people. Truth-claims will always attract arrogance and moral absolutes will always attract moralists. And it is very possible that the person saying that "efforts to convert others to your religion are arrogant" *has* been the object of a truly arrogant would-be converter! To simply argue at the theoretical level that "No, evangelism is *not* arrogant!" is to forget to distinguish between the theoretical and the personal.

But the objector needs to distinguish between the theoretical and the personal as well. Imagine that a research scientist claims she has discovered the cure to some rare disease. Imagine that she immediately publishes articles and gives lectures about it that are arrogant in tone. She says: "I found the cure, and the rest of you stupid doctors and research scientists did not! Ha! Ha! Ha! You fools! I'm going to make so much money! I'm going to get a tenured position at a major university. And you're not!" Now surely it is true that her arrogance will move many people in medicine and research to try desperately to prove her wrong. But does her arrogance prove that she is wrong about what she says? Of course not. Or reverse the circumstances, would it be arrogant of a research scientist *per se* to declare, in *any* tone of voice, that she has found the cure that no one else has found? Again, of course not. Then why would it necessarily be arrogant for any person to say that they'd discovered a spiritual cure that no one else had found. They may be wrong about the claim, but is it necessarily arrogant? (Note: The normal rejoinder will be #3 below. But let's first finish with this sub-objection first.)

**"Fatal Flaw" spotting:** But most damaging at all to the Arrogance Objection is how it "boomerangs" on the user. Why? Because you are intellectually obliged to apply it to *any* assertions about religious or spiritual reality, not just those that are "institutionally" or "formally" religious. If "all insistent assertions about spiritual reality are arrogant" then that very statement would be arrogant and thus self-destructive. Recall John Hick's version of the 'Arrogance' Objection. The R/P objection is *also* a religious belief, and it is being put forward for adoption over traditional religious beliefs, and most people in the world don't believe it, and plenty of those people are good and intelligent. Why isn't it arrogant and 'immoral' for the R/P objector to hold his or her beliefs? The person who says, "It is arrogant to persuade others to your religious position--stop it" is actually doing the very thing he is forbidding--at the moment he is forbidding it. "Believing the principle [of arrogance] in the face of informed disagreement, as the pluralist does, violates the very principle...Pluralism has is no way of escape from the

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<sup>9</sup> See this summary in Peter Van Inwagen, "Non Est Hick", in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* ed. T.Senor (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1995).

charge of arrogance [with regard to beliefs about God]."<sup>10</sup> The Arrogance Objection deconstructs itself.

### #3- THE "NO WAY TO KNOW" OBJECTION

*Nobody can know whose religion is right, so don't claim that your religious beliefs are "righter" than others.*

As we hinted above, the Arrogance Objection rather easily slides into the "No Way to Tell" Objection, which brings us to the heart of the theoretical objection. If you say 'why is it not necessarily arrogant to claim you've found a cure for a disease, but it *is* necessarily arrogant to claim you've found the only true way to the Father?' Almost always the retort comes back, "But religion is not like science. In science we have a commonly agreed upon, objective way to decide whose theory is right. In religion we don't. Therefore, no one can know if they have the truth or the superior way to God." This is now a deeply rooted conviction in our culture. A recent (January 2001) Nickelodeon Channel TV special called "A Walk in Your Shoes" was about two 15 year old girls--one Jewish and one Catholic--who exchanged places and went to the other girl's religiously oriented summer camps. In the end one girl summarized the point of the program like this: "*Nobody knows whose religion is right--so be accepting of all.*" This is almost 'common sense' now. But there are two very major problems with this view.

The first problem with it is a rather esoteric one, and I don't recommend trying to articulate it--at least not yet. Over the last 15 years, philosophers of science have been doing a rather remarkable about face with regards to the claims of 'objectivity' in science. This objection assumes that scientific theories are either proven or disproven empirically and then we go on from there. In actuality, most of the 'cutting edge' scientific theories *cannot* be directly proven. (e.g. Theories about molecules and atoms; or theories about human behavior.) Rather, theories are put forth as 'explanatory' paradigms and for many years they are argued about before they finally (if ever) win widespread acceptance. And there are many areas of science in which consensus is no where to be found. The point: if we were not allowed to claim we are 'right' about a subject if we don't have a fool-proof way to prove it to most people, then science would grind to a halt. And the fact is--from science we derive enormous benefits. So it is simply specious to insist that we can't make truth-claims unless we can prove them to most of the human race. (I don't suggest using this because the average person is still rather out of touch with the changes in scientific self-understanding.)

The main problem with this objection, however, is that it *is* a massive claim to religious knowledge *itself*--though it is hidden beneath a veneer of humility. It says, "no one can know about these spiritual things," but that statement presumes a rather astonishing amount of spiritual knowledge.

Two famous examples:

"You have heard of the illustration...that the various religions are each a different road going up the same mountain. Although the travelers along the roads cannot see others who are climbing up the mountain, to their surprise they all meet at the top, that is, at God. This picture seems to illustrate a fair-minded, non-judgmental, and enlightened approach to the plurality of religions, but in reality it is deceptive. The one who accepts this illustration has actually created an 'over-religion'....We must ask where the observer stands who can tell us of this picture. Such a one cannot be a mere human traveler on the mountain with vision limited by his or her perspective. Rather, the observer would have to be able to see the whole mountain, from an airplane. It is a God's eye view. And how is it that *only the [religious pluralist] has access to the airplane?*...The [R/P position] is really a closet absolutism, though it scorns absolutism as naive, arrogant, and ethnocentric. It denies that any other religious view can have

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<sup>10</sup> O'Connor, p. 171.

public factual status, but it insists on uniformity regarding its own view of ultimate truth, which does have public factual status."<sup>11</sup>

"In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant [see above], so often quoted in the interests of religious agnosticism, the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of [someone] who is not blind but can see what the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of the truth. The story is constantly told to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them [can *know*]. But...the story is told by one who claims to see [and know] the full truth which all the world's religions are groping after....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 vantage ground from which you claim to be able to relativize all the absolute claims which these different scriptures make?"<sup>12</sup>

**"Fatal Flaw" spotting:** This is perhaps the ultimate incoherence in the R/P position. If you say, "I don't know which religion is true"--that can be a statement of humility. If you can, "No one can know which religion is right" you are making a very dogmatic assertion, presuming quite a bit of the very 'religious knowledge/certainty' you just doubted that anyone had. If you go further and say, "No one has more truth than anyone else," you are assuming an enormous amount of religious knowledge. The inconsistency is rather rank. You can't say, "No one religious view has more truth than any other" without assuming the superior amount of knowledge you just said can't exist.

**Addendum:** There is another form of this sub-objection that goes like this. *"How can you hold people responsible for rejecting Jesus when people in general just believe what their family and society tell them? If you were born in a Muslim country, you'd probably not even be a Christian."* This form of the objection reasons like this: a) No one really has a chance to know all about the various religious options. Our religious knowledge is limited by our social-cultural circumstances. b) This relativizes all claims. How can you insist your view about religion is the only true one, when you'd not have it, likely, if you were born in Morocco to Muslim parents?

**"Fatal flaw" spotting:** But again, if this objection were true, it would disprove itself. You say, "you'd not even be a Christian if you were born in Morocco, so how can you insist that your views are right and others are wrong?" But if the *pluralist* was born in Morocco, she wouldn't be a pluralist, so how can *she* insist that her view is right and mine wrong?"

"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 he shouldn't be a pluralist or that his pluralist beliefs are produced in him by an unreliable belief-producing process? Self-referential problems loom once more...[the pluralist] is hoist with his own petard."<sup>13</sup>

In summary, I'd go a bit farther (though I seldom say this--it seems like 'piling on'). At least the world religions admit their exclusivism and admit that they are claiming superior religious knowledge over others. But the R/P position also is very exclusive and also claims enormously superior knowledge. But because the R/P position seems unable to admit what they are doing, there is a hypocritical self-contradiction at its very heart. This is spiritually and intellectually pathological. Even Christians should be saying only this: "I believe Jesus is the only way because I've weighed his claims and I believe him. *He* sees the whole mountain (*he* sees the whole elephant)--not me. I don't really know just how much truth the other religions have. All I

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<sup>11</sup> Dick Keyes, "One Truth, One Way" in *Chameleon Christianity* (Baker, 1999), p. 74-75)

<sup>12</sup> Newbiggin, p.9-10, 170.

<sup>13</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism" in *The Analytic Theist* ed. James F. Sennett (Eerdmans, 1998), p.205

know is what he tells me." That is, I believe, a much humbler claim than R/P--and surely it is a much more honest claim.

## PERSONAL PROBLEM

Religious Pluralism, though highly popular, is deeply flawed, and I doubt that it will last in its present form for a long time. The simple fact, however, is that these arguments, though much more devastating than the counter-arguments for the other defeaters, will often not really be conceded at all. Why? Because there is a personal "objection" under the theoretical ones. If you clear away the theoretical without dealing with the personal, people will just 'close down' and not listen. What is this objection? It goes something like this:

*Other people's voices will be stifled and their interests trampled upon, so don't claim that your religious beliefs are "righter" than others.*

This objection is analogous to what is called now a "hostile environment" in legislation about sexual harassment. This begins to get us in to what we've called the "Freud-Marx-Neitzsche" Defeater, but we still need to look at it. How is this to be dealt with? Because it is a personal objection, it needs to be dealt with gradually, in process, and multi-dimensionally.

### Theoretical

Actually, there is a "theoretical side" to this objection. When we are asked not to 'evangelize' or 'espouse Christianity', there is a kind of double standard.

"Efforts to craft a public square from which religious conversation is absent, no matter how thoughtfully worked out, will always in the end say to the religionists that they alone, unlike everybody else, must enter public dialogue only after leaving behind that part of themselves that they may consider most vital."<sup>14</sup>

Notice here again, in a different form, the 'fatal flaw'. Our core 'identities' and 'passions' are always moral and at least quasi-religious. Consider people with a passion for the poor arising out of Marxist convictions. They are basing their actions on what is not an empirical science at all but a 'world-view'--a view of human nature and history and a moral structure--which they accept through a combination of faith and reason. Why should people with *formally* religious commitments (Christianity, Islam) not be allowed to espouse them?

This may be a much better approach than the very philosophical approach given above. In other words, if you say to a R/P objector: "You are doing to me the very same thing you forbid me to do! You're putting forth a religious view and claiming it is better than mine! Why can you do what you forbid Christians to do?" Often the listener will just refuse to think it out and say--"No, I'm not doing what you are doing. I'm trying to keep the world safe for everyone, you are trying to force religion down people's throats". So a better answer may be--"*People's voices are stifled not so much by what is said but by the attitude and motives of the speaker. Why should I not be allowed to bring our passion and identity into public discourse when others can? How does it 'loosen' the tongues of one group by binding the tongue of others?*" Another good recent example of this argument, from a non-Christian:

"As an ethnically Jewish nonbeliever, I find this fuss...[the objection to any efforts by Christians to 'evangelize' Jews] utterly baffling. Jewish leaders complain that conversion attempts imply that Judaism is an inferior religion....But...even Judaism considers itself to be right and Christianity to be wrong about some pretty basic issues. All religions claim to have answers to life's most central questions. Any one of them may be right, but all of them can't be right. And each one's claim to be right necessarily implies that others are wrong....[The view that we must not 'convert' one another] can start to look more like a conspiracy in restraint of trade. The religion cartel. We band together and

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *The Dissent of the Governed* (Harvard U. Press, 1999), p. 90.

solemnly agree not to poach one another's customers. There is, of course, an unattractive history of Christian campaigns to [coercively] convert the Jews....But when you start to object to non-coercive conversion, it starts to look like the opposite of arrogance--theological insecurity. What are you afraid of?" Michael Kinsley--"Don't Want to Convert? Just Say No. *Time* Feb 19, 2001, p. 43

### **Personally**

The most effective way to answer this concern is to *model* relationships and attitudes in which your belief in the gospel makes you less haughty and more respectful of people with whom you differ deeply. The fact is that anyone's main identity-factor--that which gives them a sense of significance--can be a basis for exclusion and oppression. Overt absolutists say: "What makes me special is that I have the truth." But this leads rather naturally to feel superior to and to act exclusively toward people who don't have your truth. Covert absolutists say: "What makes me special I know that there is no absolute truth and everyone is free to be who they choose to be." But this leads rather naturally to feel superior to and to act exclusively toward people who think there *is* truth! Finally there is the gospel absolutist who says: "I have the truth--but the truth is a suffering God, a Lamb that was slain, the one who came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many."

The gospel of salvation-by-sheer-grace leads the Christian to *expect* to find non-Christian people who are much nicer, kinder, wiser, better. Why? You are not related to God by your character and wisdom but by Christ's. Most other religions and philosophies of life rather naturally lead to superiority and exclusion, and lead us to 'screen out' virtue in people who don't believe as we do. The gospel should not. And it is only when skeptics see communities of Christians in which power-relationships are shaped by this gospel that they will begin to drop their personal objections.

### **Jesus and Grace Alone**

The ultimate reason that Christians believe Jesus is the 'only way' to true salvation with God (Acts 4:12) is *not* pride but humility. Here's how it works. It sounds very open-minded to say: "I believe that any good person can find God, not just Christians". But what is the premise? That the good find God and the bad do not. That is 'exclusive'! Very. If you don't have to believe in Jesus to find God, then good works is enough. And if good works is enough, then the way God accepts people is performance. Everyone know that somewhere there is a 'cut off' point for moral performance, or goodness of heart, etc. But that is quite exclusive. What if you were born into an abusive family? What chance do you have for being a kind, nice person? It's not fair.

So the good are 'in' and the bad are 'out'--if there are many ways to God. But *if* salvation is by grace alone and *if* there really is evil and guilt that has to be dealt with, then Jesus *has* to be the way 'in'. Now, we see, however, the 'ins' and 'outs' are different. Now it's the people who admit that they are not good enough that are 'in' and those who think they can make it up the mountain with their good works are 'out'. The many-ways doctrine means the good are in and the bad are out. The Jesus-way doctrine means the humble are in and the proud are out. And Christianity is the only religion that even claims justification by grace/faith alone.

So virtually everyone is 'exclusive' in some way--but who has the most 'inclusive exclusivity'? Isn't it the one who said, "my yoke is easy, and my burden it light"?

### **REJOINDER #1-**

*OK, I believe my view of spiritual reality is more true than your view. But the problem is--you think others are going to hell who don't have your view.*

Imagine the two of us coming upon what looks like a mushroom. You say "it's a mushroom--let's eat it". I say, "you are wrong, it's a toadstool--poison." You say--"No, you are wrong about it." Is my view (that this is a toadstool) more narrow than your view (that this is a mushroom)

just because I think the consequences of your mistake are far, far greater than you think the consequences of my mistake is?" Why is it *necessarily* more narrow of me to think your error is more damaging than you think my error is?

## **REJOINDER #2-**

*But what about all the people who never heard about Jesus. Are they lost just because they haven't heard?*

First, we don't know everything about this! We are only told that it is necessary to believe in Jesus. Second, I can imagine schemes in which God could make this requirement and still be just and merciful. IMPORTANT: I don't believe any such schemas are true. I'm sure the actual system would be vastly beyond my capacity. But here's an example. What if God simply never let a soul be born outside of the hearing of the gospel who *would* have responded to it if it was born under it? That would be fair. Now AGAIN--I doubt anything that simple is actually what God is doing. But if I can imagine schemas that lessen the seeming injustice of this requirement (to believe in Jesus) then I'm sure there is a fine one in place. Just because you can't think of one does not prove there isn't one. Don't fall into that *non sequitur* reasoning.

## **Conclusion**

'What is the vantage ground from which you claim to be able to relativize all the absolute claims which these different [religions] make?' When the answer is, 'We want the unity of humankind so that we may be saved from disaster,' the answer must be, 'we also want that unity, and therefore seek the truth by which alone humankind can become one.' That truth is not a doctrine or a world-view or even a religious experience; it is certainly not to be found by repeating abstract nouns like justice and love; it is the man Jesus Christ in whom God was reconciling the world. The truth is personal, concrete, historical. <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Newbigin, p. 170.