

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 48
Answering Religious Pluralism

Some of the arguments for religious pluralism are almost textbook examples of logical fallacies – really weak arguments. But just because these arguments are pretty unimpressive don't think that religious pluralism is not a significant threat today for Christian belief. On the contrary, I think religious pluralism does present an extremely serious challenge to Christian belief. But by clearing away these fallacious arguments we can get to the real issue that lies beneath the surface.

The real issue, I think, raised by religious pluralism is the fate of unbelievers who lie outside of one's particular religious tradition. Christian particularism consigns such persons to hell. Pluralists simply find that unconscionable.

Nowhere is this problem better illustrated than in the life of my own doctoral mentor, John Hick, at the University of Birmingham. Professor Hick began his career as a relatively conservative theologian. His first book was entitled *Christianity at the Centre*. That is where he thought it belonged. But as he began to study other world religions and to become acquainted with many of their saintly followers, he found it simply inconceivable that such good people could be on their way to hell.

He realized what that meant. Somehow he had to get Jesus Christ out of the center. But so long as one affirmed Christ's incarnation and atoning death Christ could not be successfully marginalized. So Hick came to edit a book entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate* in which he argues that these central Christian doctrines like the incarnation and atoning death of Christ are not true but are mere myths. He wrote as follows,

. . . the problem which has come to the surface in the encounter of Christianity with the other world religions is this: If Jesus was literally God incarnate, and if it is by his death alone that men can be saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is Christian faith. It would follow from this that the large majority of the human race so far have not been saved. But is it credible that the loving God and Father of all men has decreed that only those born within one particular thread of human history shall be saved?¹

Hick's answer to that question was *no, it is not credible*. Therefore he came to reject the deity and atoning death of Christ. This, I think, is the real problem that is raised by the religious diversity of mankind, namely, the fate of those who stand outside of the Christian tradition.

¹ John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM, 1977), pp. 179-80.

But I want to invite you to think with me about this question. What exactly is the problem here supposed to be? What is the problem with holding that salvation is available only through Christ? Is it supposed to be simply that a loving God would not send people to hell? I don't think that this is the essence of the problem. The Bible says that God wills the salvation of every human person that he creates. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance."² 1 Timothy 2:4 says, "God our Savior desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." In the Old Testament God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel and says,

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? . . . For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord God; so turn, and live. . . . Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die . . . ? (Ezekiel 18:23,32; 33:11).

Here God literally pleads with unbelievers to turn back from their self-destructive path and to be saved.

So in one sense, at least, God doesn't send anybody to hell. This isn't to deny that hell is an expression of God's retributive justice. But I am saying that God's desire is that no one go there. His desire is that everyone be saved, and therefore he seeks to draw every person to himself. If we make a free and well-informed decision to reject Christ's sacrifice for our sin then God has no choice but to give us what we deserve. He has to give us the just desert of our sin. So God is not to blame for people's going to hell; rather we are. Our eternal destiny thus lies in our own hands. It is a matter of our own free choice where we spend eternity. Those who are lost therefore are self-condemned. They separate themselves from God irrevocably despite God's will and every effort to save them, and God grieves over their loss.

The pluralist might admit that given human freedom God cannot guarantee that everyone will be saved. There may be some who will reject God's grace and separate themselves from him forever. Some people might freely condemn themselves by rejecting God's offer of salvation. But, the pluralist might say, it would be unjust of God to condemn such people forever for even terrible sins like those of the Nazi war criminals in the death camps still deserve only a finite punishment. Therefore, at most hell could be a sort of temporary punishment, a kind of purgatory which will last an appropriate length of time for each person until that person is released and admitted into heaven. Eventually, given enough time, hell will be emptied and heaven will be filled. So, ironically, on this

objection hell is incompatible not with God's love but rather with his justice. The objection charges that God is unjust because the punishment doesn't fit the crime.

But again, this doesn't seem to me to be the real problem. The objection seems to be flawed in at least two ways. First, the objection equivocates between every sin that we commit and all the sins that we commit. We could agree that every individual sin that a person commits deserves only a finite punishment. But it doesn't follow from that that all of a person's sins taken together as a whole deserve only a finite punishment. If a person commits an infinite number of sins then the sum total of all such sins would deserve an infinite punishment even though each individual sin only deserved a finite punishment.³

Now, you will say, *But nobody commits an infinite number of sins in the earthly life!* True. But what about in the afterlife? Insofar as the inhabitants of hell continue to hate God and reject him, they continue to sin and so accrue to themselves more guilt and more punishment. So in a real sense hell is self-perpetuating. In each case every sin does have only a finite punishment but because the sinning goes on forever so does the punishment.

Secondly, why agree that every sin does have only a finite punishment? We could agree that sins like theft, lying, adultery, even mass murder and terrorism, for example, are only a finite consequence and therefore they only deserve a finite punishment. But in a sense these sins are not what separate us from God. Christ has died for those sins. The penalty for those sins has been already paid. One has only to accept Christ as his Savior to become completely free and forgiven and cleansed of those sins. But the refusal to accept Christ and his sacrifice seems to be a sin of a different order altogether for this sin repudiates God's pardon for sin and so decisively separates someone from God and his salvation. To reject Christ is to reject God himself. In light of who God is – the infinite paradigm and source of moral goodness and holiness – this is a sin of infinite gravity and proportion and therefore plausibly deserves an infinite punishment.

So I don't think we should think of hell primarily in terms of being the punishment for the array of finite sins that we all commit in this life. Rather, it is the just penalty – the just desert – for a sin of infinite consequence which is the rejection of God himself.

So I don't think that the problem posed by religious diversity is simply that God, whether loving or just, would send people to hell.

START DISCUSSION

Student: In your discussion, is it the sin or the sinner? Is it the hopes and desires that are in rebellion, in which case anything they do is going to be further hopes and desires against God, more rebellion? Is that not what the bringing in of a better hope outside of ourselves, the only repentance that counts?

Dr. Craig: If I understand the question, a person who commits wrongdoing, who commits sins, that are immoral acts is culpable for those sins. He is guilty and blameworthy and therefore liable to punishment. Because a person does wrong, does immoral things, he himself is guilty and condemned and therefore liable to punishment.

Student: From all what you said, it may be the condition of the conscience that separates us from heaven and hell because a person that continuously rejects the good and the conscience that agrees with God. In his mind he is not purposefully doing wrong but his conscience is directing him in a contrary way and he does not want to realign.

Dr. Craig: I think I'd agree with that. When you read the book of Revelation and John describes the plagues and the catastrophes that God brings upon the unbelieving world, it is almost as though John is baffled and bewildered by their reaction.⁴ He says, *Still they did not repent of their wrongdoing*. I think that we should not think of those in hell as sorry for what they've done and grieving and wishing that they could escape. On the contrary, I suspect that they grow even more implacable in their hatred of God because of what he is doing to them. As you say, their conscience is so twisted that they don't recognize how evil they are. The idea that sinning would go on forever in hell, I think, is very plausible.

Student: In support of what you were just saying, man moved away from God after he sinned in the Garden. It is not God that moved from man; it is man continues to move from God. That is why you have all these segmented religious expressions. Also, I think the problem is when man in works tries to inject himself into his own salvation. They reject God. Man is the problem. If he refuses to take himself out of his own redemption he is sealing his own fate because he or she is the problem. If, to your point, in hell the only example we have is Lazarus and the Rich Man, even in hell the Rich Man is making dictates – *send* – he didn't say *Help me out of this*. It was *cool my pain and send somebody to my brothers. Do this and do that*. He is still trying to inject himself into the situation and direct traffic where he is the problem.

Dr. Craig: Without wanting to deny the point that you are making, I would just caution – be careful about using parables to teach Christian doctrine. Because these parables are stories. They are made up, and they are meant to teach one overriding point. So we must not press the details in these parables too much. So be careful about appealing to parables to extract Christian doctrine from them.

Student: In the instance like Bryant refers to as unreached people groups – if you have an unreached person who is morally a good person – but they have never experienced an awareness of God and certainly never been taught about Jesus, how do you . . . ?

Dr. Craig: We are going to get to that. I am trying to explore with you what is the problem of religious diversity. I think you put your finger on it. But we will get there after I've tried to clear away some of these other problems that I think, though difficult questions, aren't at the heart of the issue. I would just say, by way of preview, that don't think that in fact these people do live moral lives. The doctrine of sin that someone earlier alluded to is that all human persons are sinful before God and therefore are under his justice and condemnation.

Student: It seems to me (and this is just because I am so morally depraved) that if you sentenced one of these good Christian people to heaven he would be extremely happy. If you sentenced the immoral man to heaven he would be enormously miserable because he would be up there without any chance of ever changing the situation. He would have to worship God like it or not. He didn't really want to in this life so he is literally in hell where he is at. Does that make sense?

Dr. Craig: Yes. I think that is a fair point. In order for God to give these unbelievers a heavenly sort of experience rather than a hellish one, there would have to be a transformation of their hearts – regeneration or something. Then the question is: is God going to do this against their free will? I am suggesting that he won't.

END DISCUSSION

If that is not the problem then, perhaps the problem is supposed to be that a loving God wouldn't send people to hell because they were uninformed or misinformed about Christ.⁵ People who have never heard of Christ or people who have been given a distorted image of Christ can't be expected to place their faith in Christ. Is that the problem?

Again, this doesn't seem to me to be the heart of the problem. According to the Bible, God doesn't judge people who have never heard of Christ on the basis of whether they've placed their faith in Christ. That would be manifestly unfair. They've never even heard of him. Rather, God judges them on the basis of the light that they do have, in particular the light of God's general revelation in nature and in conscience which every man has.

Romans 2:7 says, "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life." I think that this is best understood as a *bona fide* offer of salvation. Someone who has never heard of Christ but who senses his need of God's forgiveness through his guilty conscience and who flings himself upon the mercy of the God revealed in nature around him may find salvation.

This is not to say that people can be saved apart from Christ. It is only through Christ's atoning death that people can be saved. Rather, it is to say that the benefits of Christ's atoning death could be applied to people without their conscious knowledge of Christ. It

⁵ 20:00

is as though you were suddenly to discover that you were the beneficiary in the will of an unknown uncle who has recently passed away and has left you a fortune. You would be the beneficiary of his death even though you had no knowledge whatsoever of this man. These sorts of people would be similar to certain persons who are mentioned in the Old Testament who are sometimes called Holy Pagans of the Old Testament. I am thinking of people like Job and Melchizedek. Job and Melchizedek were only saved through the atoning death of Christ, but they had no conscious knowledge of Christ. In fact, they were not even members of the Old Testament covenant. They were not Jews. They were Gentiles. Yet, they clearly enjoyed a personal relationship with God. Similarly, there could be modern day Jobs living among that percentage of the world's population which has yet to hear the Gospel of Christ.

Unfortunately, the testimony of the New Testament, as we've seen, is that there probably aren't very many people like this. People don't generally measure up even to these much lower standards of general revelation. So there are little grounds for optimism about there being very many people, if any at all, who will actually be saved through their response to general revelation alone. Nonetheless, I think the point remains that salvation is universally accessible through God's general revelation in nature and conscience. So the problem posed by religious diversity can't be simply that God would not condemn persons who are uninformed or misinformed about Christ. That misunderstands the basis on which God will judge them.

START DISCUSSION

Student: John 3:18 says, *Anyone who believes in him (Jesus) is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned because he is not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.* Doesn't that sound like it requires an active belief?

Dr. Craig: Yes, taken in isolation that would be a good proof-text for the opposing point of view. But I think it could be understood to say that these people, as I said in my response earlier, are under the condemnation of God. As sinners, they are condemned and therefore they would be comprised in that. But, for example, there are other verses by Jesus where he says, *Everyone who acknowledges the Son of Man before men will be acknowledged before the angels of heaven.*⁶ But he says, *Everyone who rejects the Son of Man before men will be rejected before the angels in heaven.* There the opposite of accepting is conscious rejection of Christ. Of course we are talking here about people who have not consciously rejected Christ but who are responding in a salvific way to general revelation. So while the verse you quote is a good one for the other side, I don't think that it is decisive.

Student: I believe I heard you comment on this several years ago so I may have this totally incorrect, but you inferred based on God's middle knowledge that he would know how everyone would choose so he, through his knowledge, placed persons at particular times and places so that they might be able to seek and find God. How does that relate to what you are saying?

Dr. Craig: That will be my ultimate solution to the problem after I have dismissed these pseudo-problems. But I commend you for a very concise and accurate summary of the view that I expressed. That was impressive.

Student: It seems to me that a great window into the mind of someone who might respond to the general revelation we see in *The Apology* of Socrates. He lived about 300 BC or so. He certainly wouldn't have heard about Jesus, probably not even Jehovah God, and yet he in his mind understood that Zeus and the guys couldn't be true. He said that there was a small divine voice in his head that led him to a life of justice that he followed all through his life. He died for refusing to recant that. It seems to me that this is a way of seeing how someone could respond to general revelation.

Dr. Craig: I think you are right. When I read the works of some of these Greek philosophers like Aristotle as well as what Plato says about Socrates I really hope we will see Aristotle in heaven. I think that would just be fantastic. So, yeah, I agree with you. I would also say it is fascinating to read some of the writings of Native American Indian spiritualists like Black Elk who wrote about the God of creation – what he called The Great Spirit whom he called the father of all mankind and to whom we are obligated. It is just like reading Romans 1 when you read the thoughts of this Native American spiritualist. I think we do find examples of people who have responded appropriately to general revelation. Lest anyone misunderstand, let me clarify that I am not saying that these people are saved because they recognized God's existence in nature and they obey what their conscience tells them is right and the good thing to do. I am not suggesting that. What I am saying is that they recognize there is a creator of the universe, they sense the moral law on their hearts – the moral demands of his law – and they realize how miserably they fail to live up to it, that they cannot live up to the demands of the moral law and they therefore find themselves condemned before this unknown God of the universe. So they fling themselves on his mercy. This is salvation by faith, not by works. So when I talk about the possibility of salvation through general revelation, it is not works-based. On the contrary, it would be salvation that is accessed through recognizing one's own inadequacy and condemnation and by faith flinging one's self upon the mercy of God.

Student: I agree with that. It sounds like Abraham – hoping the mercy to be revealed in Christ, God's mercy. Another thing – Ezekiel. How do you see about if God sends a

watchman in Israel. Maybe that is only the elect but I think it applies to the whole world.⁷ He says if the watchman doesn't warn then the guilt and the punishment of the people will be required the blood of the watchman. So it is up to us to witness.

Dr. Craig: I know the passages you refer to. They are extremely interesting. Unfortunately, I am not prepared this morning to comment on them. I did a Bible study on these passages where I listed the counterfactuals (as philosophers call them). That is these are subjunctive conditionals like if he were not to tell then this would happen. Or if he were to tell then that would happen. I remember when I listed all those counterfactuals I don't think that any of them clearly taught that if you were to fail to share the Gospel or Christ with someone else that you would then be held culpable and die and be condemned for that. I don't think that Ezekiel is saying anything like that. But I need to look at it again. OK, someone is saying their sins would be passed on to Christ and so covered by him. But, again, I am not prepared to speak to those specific passages this morning but they are extremely interesting and I think would repay careful study. I'd encourage you just to list all those different counterfactuals that Ezekiel uses and see what they amount to.

END DISCUSSION

Having cleared away some of these false problems we are going to get to next week to what I think is the real problem, and that is that if God is all-knowing and all-powerful then he would know who would freely receive the Gospel and who would not. That raises several very difficult questions that I want to honestly wrestle with you when we meet again.⁸

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