

How Can Christ Be the Only Way to God

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SUMMARY

A rigorous attempt to answer the problem of the fate of the unevangelized and the challenge of religious pluralism.

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Introduction

I recently spoke at a major Canadian university on the existence of God. After my talk, one slightly irate co-ed wrote on her comment card, "I was with you until you got to the stuff about Jesus. God is *not* the Christian God!"

This attitude is pervasive in Western culture today. Most people are happy to agree that God exists; but in our pluralistic society it has become politically incorrect to claim that God has revealed Himself decisively in Jesus.

And yet this is exactly what the New Testament clearly teaches. Take the letters of the apostle Paul, for example. He invites his Gentile converts to recall their pre-Christian days: "Remember that at that time you were separated from Christ, aliens to the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2.12). It is the burden of the opening chapters of his letter to the Romans to show that this desolate condition is the general situation of mankind. Paul explains that God's power and deity are made known through the created order around us, so that men are without excuse (1.20), and that God has written His moral law upon all men's hearts, so that they are morally responsible before Him (2.15). Although God offers eternal life to all who will respond in an appropriate way to God's general revelation in nature and conscience (2.7), the sad fact is that rather than worship and serve their Creator, people ignore God and flout His moral law (1.21-32). The conclusion: All men are under the power of sin (3.9-12). Worse, Paul goes on to explain that no one can redeem himself by means of righteous living (3.19-20). Fortunately, however, God has provided a means of escape: Jesus Christ has died for the sins of mankind, thereby satisfying the demands of God's justice and enabling reconciliation with God (3.21-6). By means of his atoning death salvation is made available as a gift to be received by faith.

The logic of the New Testament is clear: The universality of sin and uniqueness of Christ's atoning death entail that there is no salvation apart from Christ. As the apostles proclaimed, "There is salvation

in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4.12).

This particularistic doctrine was just as scandalous in the polytheistic world of the Roman Empire as in contemporary Western culture. Early Christians were therefore often subjected to severe persecution, torture, and death because of their refusal to embrace a pluralistic approach to religions. In time, however, as Christianity grew to supplant the religions of Greece and Rome and became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the scandal receded. Indeed, for medieval thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas, one of the marks of the true Church was its catholicity, that is, its universality. To them it seemed incredible that the great edifice of the Christian Church, filling all of civilization, should be founded on a falsehood.

The demise of this doctrine came with the so-called “Expansion of Europe,” which refers to the three centuries of exploration and discovery from about 1450 until 1750. Through the travels and voyages of men like Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, and Ferdinand Magellan, new civilizations and whole new worlds were discovered which knew nothing of the Christian faith. The realization that much of the world lay outside the bounds of Christianity had a two-fold impact upon people's religious thinking. First, it tended to relativize religious beliefs. It was seen that far from being the universal religion of mankind, Christianity was largely confined to Western Europe, a corner of the globe. No particular religion, it seemed, could make a claim to universal validity; each society seemed to have its own religion suited to its peculiar needs. Second, it made Christianity's claim to be the only way of salvation seem narrow and cruel. Enlightenment rationalists like Voltaire taunted the Christians of his day with the prospect of millions of Chinamen doomed to hell for not having believed in Christ, when they had not so much as even heard of Christ. In our own day, the influx into Western nations of immigrants from former colonies and the advances in telecommunications which have served to shrink the world to a global village have heightened our awareness of the religious diversity of mankind. As a result religious pluralism has today become once again the conventional wisdom.

The Problem Posed by Religious Diversity

But what, exactly, is the problem supposed to be which is posed by mankind's religious diversity? And for whom is this supposed to be a problem? When one reads the literature on this issue, the recurring challenge seems to be laid at the doorstep of the Christian particularist. The phenomenon of religious diversity is taken to imply the truth of pluralism, and the main debate then proceeds to the question of which form of pluralism is the most plausible. But why think that Christian particularism is untenable in the face of religious diversity? What exactly seems to be the problem?

When one examines the arguments on behalf of pluralism, one finds many of them to be almost

textbook examples of logical fallacies. For example, it is frequently asserted that it is arrogant and immoral to hold to any doctrine of religious particularism because one must then regard all persons who disagree with one's own religion as mistaken. This appears to be a textbook example of the logical fallacy known as argument *ad hominem*, which is trying to invalidate a position by attacking the character of those who hold to it. This is a fallacy because the truth of a position is independent of the moral qualities of those who believe it. Even if all Christian particularists were arrogant and immoral, that would do nothing to prove that their view is false. Not only that, but why think that arrogance and immorality are necessary conditions of being a particularist. Suppose I've done all I can to discover the religious truth about reality and I'm convinced that Christianity is true and so I humbly embrace Christian faith as an undeserved gift of God. Am I therefore arrogant and immoral for believing what I sincerely think is true? Finally, and even more fundamentally, this objection is a double-edged sword. For the pluralist also believes that his view is right and that all those adherents to particularistic religious traditions are wrong. Therefore, if holding to a view which many others disagree with means you're arrogant and immoral, then the pluralist himself would be convicted of arrogance and immorality.

Or to give another example, it is frequently alleged that Christian particularism cannot be correct because religious beliefs are culturally relative. For example, if a Christian believer had been born in Pakistan, he would likely have been a Muslim. Therefore his belief in Christianity is untrue or unjustified. But this again seems to be a textbook example of what is called the genetic fallacy. This is trying to invalidate a position by criticizing the way a person came to hold that position. The fact that your beliefs depend upon where and when you were born has no relevance to the truth of those beliefs. If you had been born in ancient Greece, you would probably have believed that the sun orbits the Earth. Does that imply that your belief that the Earth orbits the sun is therefore false or unjustified? Evidently not! And once again, the pluralist pulls the rug from beneath his own feet: for had the pluralist been born in Pakistan, then he would likely have been a religious particularist. Thus, on his own analysis his pluralism is merely the product of his being born in late twentieth century Western society and is therefore false or unjustified.

Thus, some of the arguments against Christian particularism frequently found in the literature are pretty unimpressive. These aren't really the problem. Nevertheless, I find that when these objections are answered by defenders of Christian particularism, then the *real* issue does tend to emerge. That issue, I find, concerns the fate of unbelievers outside one's own particular religious tradition. Christian particularism consigns such persons to hell, which pluralists take to be unconscionable.

But what exactly is the problem here supposed to be? What is the difficulty with holding that salvation is available only through Christ? Is it supposed to be simply the allegation that a loving God would not send people to hell? I don't think so. The Bible says that God wills the salvation of every human being. "The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3.9). Or

again, "He desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2.4). So God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel:

'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 anyone,' 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?"' (Ez. 18.23,32; 33.11).

Here God literally pleads with people to turn back from their self-destructive course of action and be saved. Thus, in a sense, the biblical God does not *send* any person to hell. His desire is that everyone be saved, and He seeks to draw all persons 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. God will not send us to hell—but we shall send ourselves. Our eternal destiny thus lies in our own hands. It is a matter of our free choice where we shall spend eternity. The lost, therefore, are self-condemned; they separate themselves from God despite God's will and every effort to save them, and God grieves over their loss.

Now the pluralist might admit that given human freedom God cannot guarantee that everyone will be saved. Some people might freely condemn themselves by rejecting God's offer of salvation. But, he might argue, it would be unjust of God to condemn such people *forever*. For even terrible sins like those of the Nazi torturers in the death camps still deserve only a finite punishment. Therefore, at most hell could be a sort of purgatory, lasting an appropriate length of time for each person before that person is released and admitted into heaven. Eventually hell would be emptied and heaven filled. Thus, ironically, hell is incompatible, not with God's love, but with His justice. The objection charges that God is unjust because the punishment does not fit the crime.

But, again, this doesn't seem to me to be the real problem. For the objection seems flawed in at least two ways:

(1) The objection equivocates between *every* sin which we commit and *all* the sins which we commit. We could agree that every individual sin which a person commits deserves only a finite punishment. But it does not follow from this 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 deserves infinite punishment. Now, of course, nobody commits an infinite number of sins in the earthly life. 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. In a real sense, then, hell is self-perpetuating. In such a case, every sin has a finite punishment, but because sinning goes on

forever, so does the punishment.

(2) Why think that every sin does have only a finite punishment? We could agree that sins like theft, lying, adultery, and so forth, are only of finite consequence and so only deserve a finite punishment. But, in a sense, these sins are not what separates someone from God. For Christ has died for those sins; the penalty for those sins has been paid. One has only to accept Christ as Savior to be completely free and clean 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 provision for sin and so decisively separates one from God and His salvation. To reject Christ is to reject God Himself. And in light of who God is, this is a sin of infinite gravity and proportion and therefore plausibly deserves infinite punishment. We should not, therefore, think of hell primarily as punishment for the array of sins of finite consequence which we have committed, but as the just penalty for a sin of infinite consequence, namely the rejection of God Himself.

But perhaps the problem is perhaps supposed to be that a loving God would not send people to hell because they were uninformed or misinformed about Christ. Again, this doesn't seem to me to be the heart of the problem. For according to the Bible, God does not judge people who have never heard of Christ on the basis of whether they have placed their faith in Christ. Rather God judges them on the basis of light of God's general revelation in nature and conscience that they do have. The offer of Romans 2.7 "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life" is a bona fide offer of salvation. This is not to say that people can be saved apart from Christ. Rather it is to say that the benefits of Christ's atoning death could be applied to people without their conscious knowledge of Christ. Such persons would be similar to certain people mentioned in the Old Testament like Job and Melchizedek, who had no conscious knowledge of Christ and were not even members of the covenant family of Israel and yet 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 have seen, is that people do not generally measure up even to these much lower standards of general revelation. So there are little grounds for optimism about there being many, if any at all, who will actually be saved through their response to general revelation alone. Nonetheless, the point remains that salvation is universally accessible for anyone who never hears the Gospel through God's general revelation in nature and conscience. So the problem posed by religious diversity cannot be simply that God would not condemn persons who are uninformed or misinformed about Christ.

Rather it seems to me that the real problem is this: If God is all-knowing, then He knew who would freely receive the Gospel and who would not. But then certain very difficult questions arise:

(i) Why did God not bring the Gospel to people who He knew *would* accept it if they heard it, even though they reject the light of general revelation that they do have?

To illustrate: imagine a North American Indian living prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries. Let us call him Walking Bear. Let us suppose that as Walking Bear looks up at the heavens at night and sees the beauty of nature around him, he senses that all of this has been made by the Great Spirit.

Furthermore, as Walking Bear looks into his own heart, he senses there the moral law, telling him that all men are brothers made by the Great Spirit, and he therefore realizes that we ought to live in love for one another. But suppose that instead of worshipping the Great Spirit and living in love for his fellow-man, Walking Bear ignores the Great Spirit and creates totems of other spirits and that rather than loving his fellow-man he lives in selfishness and cruelty toward others. In such a case Walking Bear would be justly condemned before God on the basis of his failure to respond to God's general revelation in nature and conscience. But now suppose that if only the missionaries had arrived, then Walking Bear would have believed the Gospel and been saved! In that case his salvation or damnation seems to be the result of bad luck. Through no fault of his own he just happened to be born at a time and place in history when the Gospel was as yet unavailable. His condemnation is just; but would an all-loving God allow people's eternal destiny to hinge on historical and geographical accident?

(ii) More fundamentally, why did God even create the world, when He knew that so many people would not believe the Gospel and be lost?

(iii) Even more radically, why did God not create a world in which everyone freely believes the Gospel and is saved?

What is the Christian particularist supposed to say in answer to these questions? Does Christianity make God out to be cruel and unloving?

The Problem Analyzed

In order to answer these questions it will be helpful to examine more closely the logical structure of the problem before us. The pluralist seems to be claiming that it is impossible for God to be all-powerful and all-loving and yet for some people to never hear the Gospel and be lost, that is to say, that the following statements are logically inconsistent:

1. God is all-powerful and all-loving.
2. Some people never hear the Gospel and are lost.

But now we need to ask, why think that (1) and (2) are logically incompatible? After all, there is no explicit contradiction between them. But if the pluralist is claiming that (1) and (2) are implicitly

contradictory, he must be assuming some hidden premises that would serve to bring out this contradiction and make it explicit. The question is, what are those hidden premises?

I must say that I have never seen in the literature any attempt on the part of religious pluralists to identify those hidden assumptions. But let's try to help out the pluralist a bit. It seems to me that he must be assuming something like the following:

3. If God is all-powerful, He can create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is freely saved.

4. If God is all-loving, He prefers a world in which everybody hears the Gospel and is freely saved.

Since, according to (1), God is both all-powerful and all-loving, it follows that He both can create a world of universal salvation and prefers such a world. Therefore such a world exists, in contradiction to (2).

Now both of the hidden premises must be necessarily true if the logical incompatibility of (1) and (2) is to be demonstrated. So the question is, are these assumptions necessarily true?

Consider (3). It seems uncontroversial that God could create a world in which everybody hears the Gospel. But so long as people are free, there is no guarantee that everybody in such a world would be freely saved. In fact, there is no reason to think that the balance between saved and lost in such a world would be any better than the balance in the actual world! It is possible that in any world of free people which God could create, some people would freely reject His saving grace and be lost. Hence, (3) is not necessarily true, and so the pluralist's argument is fallacious.

But what about (4)? Is it necessarily true? Let us suppose for the sake of argument that there are possible worlds which are feasible for God in which everyone hears the Gospel and freely accepts it. Does God's being all-loving compel Him to prefer one of these worlds over a world in which some persons are lost? Not necessarily; for the worlds involving universal salvation might have other, overriding deficiencies that make them less preferable. For example, suppose that the only worlds in which everybody freely believes the Gospel and is saved are worlds with only a handful of people in them, say, three or four. If God were to create any more people, then at least one of them would have freely rejected His grace and been lost. Must He prefer one of these sparsely populated worlds over a world in which multitudes believe in the Gospel and are saved, even though that implies that other persons freely reject His grace and are lost? This is far from obvious. So long as God gives sufficient grace for salvation to all persons He creates, God seems no less loving for preferring a more populous world, even though that implies that some people would freely resist His every effort to save them and be damned. Thus, the pluralist's second assumption is also not necessarily true, so that his argument is revealed to be doubly fallacious.

So neither of the pluralist's assumptions seems to be necessarily true. Unless the pluralist can suggest some other premises, we have no reason to think that (1) and (2) are logically incompatible.

But we can push the argument a notch further. We can show positively that it is entirely possible that God is all-powerful and all-loving and that many persons never hear the Gospel and are lost. All we have to do is find a possibly true statement which is compatible with God's being all-powerful and all-loving and which entails that some people never hear the Gospel and are lost. Can such a statement be formulated? Let's see.

As a good and loving God, God wants as many people as possible to be saved and as few as possible to be lost. His goal, then, is to achieve an optimal balance between these, to create no more of the lost than is necessary to attain a certain number of the saved. But it is possible that the actual world (which includes the future as well as the present and past) has such a balance. It is possible that in order to create this many people who will be saved, God also had to create this many people who will be lost. It is possible that had God created a world in which fewer people go to hell, then even fewer people would have gone to heaven. It is possible that in order to achieve a multitude of saints, God had to accept a multitude of sinners.

It might be objected that an all-loving God would not create people who He knew will be lost, but who would have been saved if only they had heard the Gospel. But how do we know there *are* any such persons? It is reasonable to assume that many people who never hear the Gospel would not have believed the Gospel even if they had heard it. Suppose, then, that God has so providentially ordered the world that *all* persons who never hear the Gospel are precisely such people. In that case, anybody who never hears the Gospel and is lost would have rejected the Gospel and been lost even if he had heard it. No one could stand before God on the Judgement Day and complain, "All right, God, so I didn't respond to your general revelation in nature and conscience! But if only I had heard the Gospel, then I would have believed!" For God will say, "No, I knew that even if you had heard the Gospel, you would not have believed it. Therefore, my judgement of you on the basis of nature and conscience is neither unfair nor unloving."

Thus, it is possible that:

5. God has created a world which has an optimal balance between saved and lost, and those who never hear the Gospel and are lost would not have believed in it even if they had heard it.

So long as (5) is even *possibly true*, it shows that there is no incompatibility between an all-powerful, all-loving God and some people's never hearing the Gospel and being lost.

On this basis we are now prepared to offer *possible* answers to the three difficult questions which

prompted this inquiry. To take them in reverse order:

(i) Why did God not create a world in which everyone freely believes the Gospel and is saved?

Answer: It may not be feasible for God to create such a world. If such a world were feasible, God would have created it. But given His will to create free creatures, God had to accept that some would freely reject Him and His every effort to save them and be lost.

(ii) Why did God even create the world, when He knew that so many people would not believe the Gospel and be lost?

Answer: God wanted to share His love and fellowship with created persons. He knew this meant that many would freely reject Him and be lost. But He also knew that many others would freely receive His grace and be saved. The happiness and blessedness of those who would freely embrace His love should not be precluded by those who would freely spurn Him. Persons who would freely reject God and His love should not be allowed, in effect, to hold a sort of veto power over which worlds God is free to create. In His mercy God has providentially ordered the world to achieve an optimal balance between saved and lost by maximizing the number of those who freely accept Him and minimizing the number of those who would not.

(iii) Why did God not bring the Gospel to people who He knew would accept it if they heard it, even though they reject the light of general revelation that they do have?

Answer: There are no such people. God in His providence has so arranged the world that those who would respond to the Gospel if they heard it, do hear it. The sovereign God has so ordered human history that as the Gospel spreads out from first century Palestine, He places people in its path who would believe it if they heard it. Once the Gospel reaches a people, God providentially places there persons who He knew would respond to it if they heard it. In His love and mercy, God ensures that no one who would believe the Gospel if he heard it is born at a time and place in history where he fails to hear it. Those who do not respond to God's general revelation in nature and conscience and never hear the Gospel would not respond to it if they did hear it. Hence, no one is lost because of historical or geographical accident. Anyone who wants or even would want to be saved will be saved.

These are just *possible* answers to the questions we posed. But so long as they are even possible, they show that there is no incompatibility between God's being all-powerful and all-loving and some people's never hearing the Gospel and being lost. Furthermore, these answers are attractive because they also seem to be quite biblical as well. In his open-air address to the Athenian philosophers gathered on the Areopagus Paul declared:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and . . . gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man He made every nation of men , that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17.24-27).

This sounds exactly like the conclusions to which I had come through purely philosophical reflection on the question!

Now the pluralist might concede the logical compatibility of God's being all-powerful and all-loving and some people's never hearing the Gospel and being lost but insist that these two facts are nonetheless improbable with respect to each other. People by and large seem to believe in the religion of the culture in which they were raised. But in that case, the pluralist might argue, it is highly probable that if many of those who never hear the Gospel had been raised in a Christian culture, they would have believed the Gospel and been saved. Thus, the hypothesis we have offered is highly implausible.

Now it would, indeed, be fantastically improbable that by happenstance alone it just turns out that all those who never hear the Gospel and are lost are persons who would not have believed the Gospel even if they had heard it. But that is not the hypothesis. The hypothesis is that a provident God has so arranged the world. Given a God endowed with knowledge of how every person would freely respond to His grace in whatever circumstances God might place him, it is not at all implausible that God has ordered the world in the way described. Such a world would not look outwardly any different from a world in which the circumstances of a person's birth are a matter of happenstance. The particularist can agree that people generally adopt the religion of their culture and that if many of those born into non-Christian cultures had been born in a Christian society instead, they would have become nominally or culturally Christian. But that is not to say that they would have been saved. It's a simple empirical fact that there are no distinguishing psychological or sociological traits between persons who become Christians and persons who do not. There is no way to predict accurately by examining a person whether and under what circumstances that person would believe in Christ for salvation. Since a world providentially ordered by God would appear outwardly identical to a world in which one's birth is a matter of historical and geographical accident, it is hard to see how the hypothesis I have defended can be deemed to be improbable apart from a demonstration that the existence of a God endowed with such knowledge is implausible. And I know of no such compelling objections.

In conclusion, then, pluralists have not been able to show any logical inconsistency in Christian particularism. On the contrary, we've been able to prove that such a position is logically coherent. More than that, I think that such a view is not only possible, but plausible as well. Therefore the fact of

mankind's religious diversity does not undermine the Christian Gospel of salvation through Christ alone.

In fact, for those of us who are Christians, I think that what I've said helps to put the proper perspective on Christian missions: it is our duty as Christians to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world, trusting that God has so providentially ordered things that through us the Good News will come to persons who God knew would accept it if they heard it. Our compassion toward those in other world religions is expressed, not in pretending they are not lost without Christ, but by supporting and making every effort ourselves to communicate to them the life-giving message of Christ.

And for those of us who are not yet Christians, you need to ask yourself, am I here today merely by accident? Is it just by chance alone that I have heard this message? Is there no purpose or reason for which I'm here? Or could it be that God in His providence has drawn me here of my own free will to hear the Good News of His love and forgiveness which He extends to me through Christ? If so, then how will I respond? He's given me an opportunity; will I avail myself of it or will I turn my back on Him once more and shut Him out? The decision is up to you.