

Politically Incorrect Salvation

William Lane Craig

SUMMARY

Contemporary religious pluralism regards the traditional Christian doctrine of salvation through Christ alone as unconscionable. The problem seems to be that the existence of an all-loving and all-powerful God seems incompatible with the claim that persons who do not hear and embrace the gospel of salvation through Christ will be damned. Closer analysis reveals the problem to be counterfactual in nature: God could not condemn persons who, though freely rejecting God's sufficient grace for salvation revealed through nature and conscience, would have received His salvific grace mediated through the gospel. In response, it may be pointed out that God's being all-powerful does not guarantee that He can create a world in which all persons freely embrace His salvation and that His being all-loving does not entail that, even if such a world were feasible for Him, God would prefer such a world over a world in which some persons freely reject His salvation. Furthermore, it is possible that God has created a world having an optimal balance between saved and lost and that God has so providentially ordered the world that those who fail to hear the gospel and be saved would not have freely responded affirmatively to it even if they had heard it.

POLITICALLY INCORRECT SALVATION

Introduction: The Problem of Religious Diversity

"Diversity" is the shibboleth of the post-modern age. Nowhere is this more so than in the realm of theology or religious studies. The Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman, observing that throughout most of Christian church history "the fundamental truth of the basic Christian claim was taken for granted, as was the untruth . . . of the claims of the church's opponents," says that by contrast today there has been "a striking change" among many Christian theologians:

Instead of continuing the traditional attempts to make definitive normative claims about 'Christian truth' or 'the Christian revelation,' many now see the plurality among religious traditions . . . as [itself] of profound human meaning and importance: what seems required now, therefore, rather than polemical pronouncements, is careful and appreciative study, together with an attitude of openness to what can be learned from this great diversity . . . [1]

According to Kaufman, religious diversity calls for a response of openness, and openness is incompatible with normative truth claims and polemical pronouncements (that is, apologetics). Why is

this so? Alan Bloom, I think, puts his finger on the answer when he observes that there is a pervasive conviction in our culture that "Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness--and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth . . .--is the great insight of our times." [2] Religious diversity thus calls for a response of openness, and a necessary condition of openness is relativism. Since religious relativism is obviously incompatible with the objective truth of Christianity, religious diversity therefore implies that normative Christian truth claims can be neither made nor defended.

Thus, we are led to the paradoxical result that in the name of religious diversity traditional Christianity is de-legitimated and marginalized.

Religious Diversity and Objective Truth

But why think that the alleged links between religious diversity and openness on the one hand and between openness and relativism on the other are so firmly forged? Why cannot someone who believes in the normative truth of the Christian world view, as it comes to expression in the catholic creeds, for instance, be open to seeing truth in and learning from other world religions? Arthur Holmes has taught generations of Wheaton students that "all truth is God's truth," regardless of where it is to be found. The orthodox Christian has no reason to think that *all* the truth claims made by other world religions are false, but only those that are incompatible with Christian truth claims. So why must one be a relativist in order to be open to truth in other world religions?

No doubt the post-modernist answer to that question will be that the openness I contemplate here is insufficient; it opens the door only a crack. But religious diversity beckons us to throw open the doors of our minds to the legitimacy of religious truth claims logically incompatible with those of the Christian faith. Religious diversity requires us to view these supposedly competing claims as equally true as, or no less true than, or as equally efficacious as, Christian truth claims.

But why does religious diversity imply *this* sort of openness? The post-modernist is advocating much more than mere intellectual humility here. The post-modernist is not merely saying that we cannot know with certainty which religious world view is true and we therefore must be open-minded; rather he maintains that *none* of the religious world views is objectively true, and therefore none can be excluded in deference to the allegedly one true religion.

But why think such a thing? Why could not the Christian world view be objectively true? How does the mere *presence* of religious world views incompatible with Christianity show that distinctively Christian claims are not true? Logically, the existence of multiple, incompatible truth claims only implies that *all* of them cannot be (objectively) true; but it would be obviously fallacious to infer that not one of them is

(objectively) true. So why could it not be the case that a personal God exists and has revealed Himself decisively in Jesus Christ, just as biblical Christianity affirms?

More than that, it needs to be seriously questioned whether the post-modernist, pluralistic position even makes sense. Here we need to ask ourselves what it means to say that an assertion is true and how we may test for truth. A statement or proposition is (objectively) true if and only if it corresponds to reality, that is to say, reality is just as the statement says that it is. Thus, the statement "The Cubs won the 1994 World Series" is true if and only if the Cubs won the 1994 World Series. In order to show a proposition to be true, we present evidence in the form of either deductive or inductive arguments which have that proposition as the conclusion. In both sorts of reasoning, logic and factual evidence are the keys to showing soundly that a conclusion is true. Since a proposition that is logically contradictory is necessarily false and so cannot be the conclusion of a sound argument, and since a proposition validly inferred from factually true premisses ought to be regarded as factually true, one may generalize these notions to say that a world view ought to be regarded as true just in case it is logically consistent and fits all the facts known in our experience. Such a test for truth has been called *systematic consistency*: "consistency" meaning obedience to the laws of logic and "systematic" meaning fitting all the facts known by experience. [3] Although such a test *precludes* the truth of any world view which fails it, it does not *guarantee* the truth of a world view which passes it. For more than one view could be consistent and fit all the facts yet known by experience; or again, a view which is systematically consistent with all that we now know could turn out to be falsified by future discoveries. Systematic consistency thus underdetermines world views, and so (as in the case of all inductive reasoning) we must be content with plausibility or likelihood, rather than rational certainty.

Now under the influence of Eastern mysticism, many people today would deny that systematic consistency is a test for truth. They affirm that reality is ultimately illogical or that logical contradictions correspond to reality. They assert that in Eastern thought the Absolute or God or the Real transcends the logical categories of human thought. They are apt to interpret the demand for logical consistency as a piece of Western imperialism which ought to be rejected along with other vestiges of colonialism.

What such people seem to be saying is that the classical law of thought known as the Law of Excluded Middle is not necessarily true, that is to say, they deny that of a proposition and its negation, necessarily, one is true and the other is false. Such a denial could take two different forms. (1) It could be interpreted on the one hand to mean that a proposition and its negation *both* can be true (or both false). Thus, it is true both that God is love and, in the same sense, that God is not love. Since both are true, the Law of Contradiction, that a proposition and its negation cannot both be true (or both false) at the same time, is also denied. (2) On the other hand, the original denial could be interpreted to mean that of a proposition and its negation *neither* may be true (or neither false). Thus, it is not true that God is good and it is not true that God is not good; there is just no truth value at all for such propositions. In

this case it is the classical Principle of Bivalence, that for any proposition, necessarily that proposition is either true or false, that is denied along with the Law of Excluded Middle.

Now I am inclined to say frankly that such positions are crazy and unintelligible. To say that God is both good and not good in the same sense or that God neither exists nor does not exist is just incomprehensible to me. In our politically correct age, there is a tendency to vilify all that is Western and to exalt Eastern modes of thinking as at least equally valid if not superior to Western modes of thought. To assert that Eastern thought is seriously deficient in making such claims is to be a sort of epistemological bigot, blinkered by the constraints of the logic-chopping Western mind. But this judgement is far too simplistic. In the first place, there are thinkers within the tradition of Western thought alone who have held the mystical views in question (Plotinus would be a good example), so that there is no warrant for playing off East against West in this matter. Secondly, the extent to which such thinking represents "the Eastern mind" has been greatly exaggerated. In the East the common man--and the philosopher, too--lives by the Laws of Contradiction and Excluded Middle in his everyday life; he affirms them every time he walks through a doorway rather than into the wall. It is only at an extremely theoretical level of philosophical speculation that such laws are denied. And even at that level, the situation is not monochromatic: Confucianism, Hinayana Buddhism, pluralistic Hinduism as exemplified in Sankhya-Yoga, Vaishesika-Nyaya, and Mimamsa schools of thought, and even Jainism do not deny the application of the classical laws of thought to ultimate reality. [4] Thus, a critique of Eastern thought from within Eastern thought itself can be--and has been--made. We in the West should not therefore be embarrassed or apologetic about our heritage; on the contrary it is one of the glories of ancient Greece that her thinkers came to enunciate clearly the principles of logical reasoning, and the triumph of logical reasoning over competing modes of thought in the West has been one of the West's greatest strengths and proudest achievements.

Why think then that such self-evident truths as the principles of logic are in fact invalid for ultimate reality? Such a claim seems to be both self-refuting and arbitrary. For consider a claim like "God cannot be described by propositions governed by the Principle of Bivalence." If such a claim is true, then it is not true, since it itself is a proposition describing God and so has no truth value. Thus, such a claim refutes itself. Of course, if it is not true, then it is not true, as the Eastern mystic alleged, that God cannot be described by propositions governed by the Principle of Bivalence. Thus, if the claim is not true, it is not true, and if it is true, it is not true, so that in either case the claim turns out to be not true. Or consider the claim that "God cannot be described by propositions governed by the Law of Contradiction." If this proposition is true, then, since it describes God, it is not itself governed by the Law of Contradiction. Therefore, it is equally true that "God can be described by propositions governed by the Law of Contradiction." But then which propositions are these? There must be some, for the Eastern mystic is committed to the truth of this claim. But if he produces any, then they immediately refute his

original claim that there are no such propositions. His claim thus commits him to the existence of counter-examples which serve to refute that very claim. [5]

Furthermore, apart from the issue of self-refutation, the mystic's claim is wholly arbitrary. Indeed, no reason can ever be given to justify denying the validity of logical principles for propositions about God. For the very statement of such reasons, such as "God is too great to be captured by categories of human thought" or "God is wholly other," involves the affirmation of certain propositions about God which are governed by the principles in question. In short, the denial of such principles for propositions about ultimate reality is completely and essentially arbitrary.

Some Eastern thinkers realize that their position, as a position, is ultimately self-refuting and arbitrary, and so they are driven to deny that their position really is a position! They claim rather than their position is just a technique pointing to the transcendent Real beyond all positions. But if this claim is not flatly self-contradictory, as it would appear, if such thinkers literally *have no position*, then there just is nothing here to assess and they have nothing to say. This stupefied silence is perhaps the most eloquent testimony for the bankruptcy of the denial of the principles of logical reasoning.

This same debate between certain Eastern mystical modes of thought and classical logical thinking is being re-played in the debate between modernism and radical post-modernism. I want to say clearly that I carry no brief for Enlightenment theological rationalism. According to this modernist viewpoint, religious beliefs are rational if and only if one has evidence on which those beliefs are based. While I am convinced that there is sufficient evidence to make Christian belief rational, I do not believe that such evidence is necessary for Christian belief to be rational. [6] Not only is theological rationalism predicated on an epistemological foundationalism which is overly restrictive and finally self-refuting, but the Christian belief system itself teaches that the ground of our knowledge of the truth of the Christian faith is the self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8. 15-16; I Jn. 5. 7-9). Argumentation and evidence may serve as confirmations of Christian beliefs and as means of showing to others the truth of those beliefs, but they are not properly the foundation of those beliefs. In a sense, then, my own religious epistemology could be called post-modern, and the provisional character of systematic consistency accords with intellectual humility advocated by post-modernism. But radical post-modernists would scorn these sops. They would regard me (perhaps justifiably!) as hopelessly pre-modern. They reject altogether Western rationality and metaphysics, claiming that there is no objective truth about reality. "The truth," as John Caputo says, "is that there is no truth." [7] But such a claim falls prey to precisely the same objections that I raised above [8]--indeed, the post-modernist claim is not really distinguishable from certain Buddhist philosophies. To assert that "The truth is that there is no truth" is both self-refuting and arbitrary. For if this statement is true, it is not true, since there is no truth. So-called deconstructionism thus cannot be halted from deconstructing itself. Moreover, there is just no reason that can be given for adopting the post-modern perspective rather than, say, the outlooks of

Western capitalism, male chauvinism, white racism, and so forth, since post-modernism has no more truth to it than these perspectives. Caught in this self-defeating trap, some post-modernists have been forced to the same recourse as Buddhist mystics: denying that post-modernism is really a view or position at all. But then, once again, why do they continue to write books and talk about it? They are obviously making some cognitive claims--and if not, then they literally have nothing to say and no objection to our employment of the classical canons of logic.

The Offense of Christian Particularism

So I ask again: Why could not the Christian world view be objectively true? Here we come to the nub of the issue. The problem seen by post-modernists in the objective truth of the Christian religion is that if that religion is objectively true, then multitudes of people, most of whom belong to other religious traditions, find themselves excluded from salvation, often through no fault of their own, due simply to historical and geographical accident, and therefore destined to hell or annihilation. [9] Many theologians find this situation morally unconscionable and have therefore abandoned the objective truth of Christianity in favor of various forms of religious relativism.

My own doctoral mentor John Hick is illustrative. Hick began his career as a fairly conservative Christian theologian. One of his first books was entitled *Christianity at the Centre*. Then he began to study more closely the other world religions. Though he had always had, of course, an awareness of these competing world views, he had not come to know and appreciate their adherents personally. As he learned to know some of the selfless, saintly persons in these other traditions, it became unthinkable to him that they should all be condemned to hell. These religions must be as equally valid channels of salvation as the Christian faith. But Hick realized that this meant denying the uniqueness of Jesus; somehow he and his exclusivistic claims must be got out of the way. He therefore came to regard the deity and incarnation of Christ as a myth or metaphor. [10] Today Hick is no longer even a theist, since what he calls "the Real," which is apprehended in the various world religions under culturally conditioned and objectively false religious paradigms, has objectively none of the distinctive properties of the God of theism.

Universalism is thus the *raison d'être* for the response of openness to religious diversity thought to be required by post-modernist thinkers. [11] Total openness and religious relativism spring from an abhorrence of Christian particularism.

The situation is not, however, so simple as it might seem at first. There are a number of distinctions that need to be made here which are often blurred. On the one hand there is the distinction between universalism and particularism of which I have spoken. *Universalism* is the doctrine that all human persons will partake of God's salvation; *particularism* holds that only some, but not all, human persons

will partake of God's salvation. Particularism ranges between *broad* and *narrow* versions, one extreme being that scarcely any shall be lost in comparison with the saved and the other extreme that scarcely any shall be saved in comparison with the lost.

A second set of distinctions needs to be made between *pluralism*, *inclusivism*, and *exclusivism*.

Christian exclusivism is the doctrine that salvation is appropriated only on the basis of Christ's work and through faith in him. Although exclusivism is most naturally associated with particularism, this is not necessary: Thomas Talbot, for example, would be one who is both a Christian exclusivist and universalist, holding that hell is at worst a purgatory through which people pass until they freely place their faith in Christ and are saved. [12]

Christian inclusivism is the doctrine that salvation is appropriated only on the basis of Christ's work, but not necessarily through explicit faith in him. The term "inclusivism" has been misused to denominate the doctrine that salvation is *available* to all persons on the basis of Christ's work, but not necessarily through explicit faith in him. [13] Analogously, "exclusivism" has been misused to refer to the doctrine that salvation is *available* only on the basis of Christ's work and through faith in him. These represent a misuse of terms because on these definitions those who are saved could be extensionally equivalent--that is, the very same persons--whether inclusivism or exclusivism is true. [14] For clearly, just because salvation is *available* to more people under inclusivism than exclusivism, so defined, that does not imply that more people actually *avail* themselves of salvation under inclusivism than under exclusivism. But it seems perverse to call a view inclusivistic if it does not actually include any more people in salvation than so-called exclusivism.

Rather the distinction which has been mislabeled here is between what may be more appropriately dubbed *accessibilism* and *restrictivism*. Restrictivists typically maintain that salvation is accessible only through the hearing of the gospel and faith in Christ. Accessibilists maintain that persons who never hear the gospel can avail themselves of salvation through their response to God's general revelation alone.

Genuine inclusivists believe that salvation is not merely accessible to, but is actually accessed by persons who never hear the gospel. Inclusivism may be *broad* or *narrow*, ranging all the way from universalism to narrow particularism.

Although a broad inclusivism has become increasingly popular among Christian theologians who want to maintain the truth of Christianity in the face of religious diversity, the view faces severe biblical and missiological objections. Biblically, the teaching of the New Testament and of our Lord himself seems to be that while the harvest of redeemed persons will be multitudinous, the number of the lost will be also and perhaps even more multitudinous (Matt. 7.13-14; 24.9-12; Lk. 18.8b). In particular the fate of those

who have not placed their faith explicitly in Christ for salvation seems bleak, indeed (Rom. 1.18-32; Eph. 2.12; 4.17-19).

Missiologically, a broad inclusivism undermines the task of world mission. Since vast numbers of persons in non-Christian religions are in fact already included in salvation, they need not be evangelized. Instead missions are reinterpreted along the lines of social engagement--a sort of Christian peace corps, if you will. Nowhere is this reinterpretation of missions better illustrated than in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Council declared that those who have not yet received the gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. [15] Jews, in particular, remain dear to God, but the plan of salvation also includes all who acknowledge the Creator, such as Muslims. The Council therefore declared that Catholics now pray for the Jews, not for the *conversion* of the Jews and also declares that the Church looks with esteem upon Muslims. [16] Missionary work seems to be directed only toward those who "serve the creature rather than the Creator" or are utterly hopeless. The Council thus implies that vast multitudes of persons who consciously reject Christ are in fact saved and therefore not appropriate targets for evangelization.

Unfortunately, this same perspective has begun to make inroads into evangelical theology. At a meeting of the Evangelical Theology Group at the American Academy of Religion convention in San Francisco in November of 1992, Clark Pinnock declared, "I am appealing to evangelicals to make the shift to a more inclusive outlook, much the way the Catholics did at Vatican II." [17] Pinnock expresses optimism that great numbers of the unevangelized will be saved. "God will find faith in people without the persons even realizing he/she had it." He even entertains the possibility of people's being given another chance after death, once they have been freed from "whatever obscured the love of God and prevented them from receiving it in life." This move leads immediately to universalism, as Talbott recognizes, since once a person is free of everything that prevented his receiving salvation then, of course, he will receive salvation! Pinnock poses the question whether his inclusivism does not undermine the rationale and urgency of world mission. No, he answers, for (1) God has called us to engage in mission work and we should obey. But this provides no rationale for why God commanded such a thing and so amounts to just blind obedience to a command without rationale. (2) Missions is broader than just securing people's eternal destiny. True enough; but with that central rationale removed we are back to the Christian peace corps. (3) Missions should be positive; it is not an ultimatum "Believe or be damned." Of course; but it is difficult to see what urgency is left to world missions, since the people to whom one goes are already saved. I must confess that I find it tragically ironic that as the church stands on the verge of completing the task of world evangelization, it should be her own theologians who would threaten to trip her at the finish line.

Finally, *pluralism* is the doctrine that salvation, or what passes for salvation, is appropriated by persons through a multiplicity of conditions and means in various religions. One would naturally associate

pluralism with universalism, but that is not strictly necessary, for a religious pluralist could regard some religions--say, those that focus on human sacrifice or cultic prostitution--as not furnishing legitimate avenues of salvation, if salvation is defined solely in "this-worldly" terms (for example, the production of a saintly character). If the pluralist is motivated to solve the problem of persons' being excluded from salvation by historical or geographical accident, however, then he must hold that salvation is accessible through every religion. Otherwise the unfortunates who languish in degenerate religions would be excluded from salvation.

The Problem with Christian Particularism

Now with those distinctions in mind, let us examine the problem before us more closely. What exactly is the problem with Christian particularism supposed to be?

Is it simply that a loving God would not consign people to hell? It does not seem to be. For the New Testament makes it quite clear that God's will and desire is that all persons should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (2 Pet. 3.9; c2 Pet. 3.9). He therefore draws all people to Himself by His prevenient grace. Anyone who makes a free and well-informed decision to reject Christ thus seals his own fate: he is self-condemned. In a sense, then, God does not send anybody to hell; rather people send themselves.

In response to these considerations, Marilyn Adams complains that damnation is so inconceivable a horror that human beings cannot fully understand the consequences of choosing for or against God. [18] She infers that they cannot exercise their free choice in this matter "with fully open eyes" and intimates that they should not be held fully responsible for such a choice. She goes on to argue that the consequences of sin (namely, hell) are so disproportionate to the sinful acts themselves that to make a person's eternal destiny hinge on refraining from such acts is to place unreasonable expectations on that person. God's punishing people with hell would be both cruel and unusual punishment: cruel because the conditions placed on them are unreasonable and unusual because *any* sin, small or great, consigns one to hell.

A great deal could be said about Adams's reservations; but a little reflection shows most of them to be simply inapplicable to the situation as I envision it. First of all, Adams seems to assume that the consequences of sin are optional for God, that He could have simply chosen to absolve and sanctify everyone if He pleased. But for God simply to pardon all sin regardless of the response of the perpetrator would be for God merely to blink at moral evil. If God left the impenitent sinner unpunished, His holiness would be compromised and He would not be just. And even if God determined to absolve everyone, how could He sanctify the impenitent without violating their free will? So long as God respects the human freedom He has bestowed, He cannot guarantee that everyone can be made

willing and fit for heaven. Thus, the consequences of sin are not arbitrarily up to God. They follow from the necessity of His moral nature and the character of human agency. The question, then, is really whether God was being cruel in creating significantly free creatures at all.

I do not think that Adams's argument shows that He was. Her argument concerns the undue burden laid on people by God's placing them in a situation in which they will go to hell unless they refrain from every single sin, no matter how small. But this is not our situation as I understand it. The orthodox Christian need not hold that every sin merits hell or has hell as its consequence; rather hell is the final consequence (and even just punishment) for those who irrevocably refuse to seek and accept God's forgiveness of their sins. By refusing God's forgiveness they freely separate themselves from God forever. The issue, then, is whether the necessity of making this fundamental decision is too much to ask of man.

We may agree with Adams that no one fully comprehends the horror of hell--or, for that matter, the bliss of heaven--and therefore fully grasps the consequences of his decision to accept or reject God's salvation. But it does not follow that God's giving people the freedom to determine their eternal destiny is therefore placing too heavy a responsibility on them. One need not understand the *full* consequences of heaven and hell in order to be able to choose responsibly between them. It is not unreasonable to expect of people that they should be able to decide *a fortiori* between infinite loss and infinite gain simply on the basis of their comprehension of the choice of enormous loss versus enormous gain. To deny to man the freedom to make this decision would be to side with Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor in holding that God ought to have given men earthly bread and circuses rather than the Bread of Heaven because men cannot bear so dread a freedom. [19]

Moreover, Adams has left wholly out of account what I conceive to be an absolutely crucial element in this story: the prevenient grace of God mediated by the Holy Spirit. God has not left us to make this momentous choice on our own; rather it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict people of sin and righteousness and judgement (Jn. 16.8) and to draw them to Himself (Jn. 6.44). God lovingly solicits and enables the human will to place one's faith in Christ. The exercise of saving faith is not a work we perform for salvation, but merely the allowing of the Holy Spirit to do His work in us. Far from making unreasonable expectations, God is ready to equip anyone for salvation. We have only not to resist. When someone refuses to come to Christ and be saved, therefore, it is only because he has willfully ignored and rejected the drawing of God's Spirit on his heart. Therefore, I cannot see that in providing us with the freedom to determine our destiny by deciding for or against Christ, God has placed an unreasonable demand upon us.

Well, then, could the problem with Christian particularism be that God would not consign people to hell because they were uninformed or misinformed about Christ? Again, this does not seem to me to be the

problem. For here the Christian may advocate some form of accessibilism. We can maintain that God does not judge those who have not clearly heard of Christ on the same basis as those who have. Rather we can, on the basis of Rom. 1-2, maintain that God judges persons who have not heard the gospel on the basis of God's general revelation in nature and conscience. Were they to respond to the much lower demands placed on them by general revelation, God would give them eternal life (Rom. 2.7). Salvation is thus universally accessible. Unfortunately the testimony of Scripture is that people do not in general live up to even these meager demands and are therefore lost. No one is unjustly condemned, however, since God has provided sufficient grace to all persons for salvation. Perhaps some do access salvation by means of general revelation, but if we take Scripture seriously we must admit that these are relatively few. In such a case, at most a narrow version of inclusivism would be true. Thus, given accessibilism, I do not see that Christian particularism is undermined simply by God's condemnation of persons who are not clearly informed about Christ.

Rather the real problem with Christian particularism is much more subtle. If God is all-knowing, then presumably He knew the conditions under which people would freely place their faith in Christ for salvation and those under which they would not. [20] But then a very difficult question arises: why does God not bring the gospel to people who He knew *would* accept it if they heard it, even though they reject the general revelation that they do have? Imagine, for example, a North American Indian--let us call him "Walking Bear"--who lived prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries. Suppose Walking Bear sees from the order and beauty of nature around him that a Creator of the universe exists and that he senses in his heart the demands of God's moral law implanted there. Unfortunately, like those described by Paul in Rom. 1, Walking Bear chooses to spurn the Creator and to ignore the demands of the moral law, plunging himself into spiritism and immorality. Thus suppressing the knowledge of God and flouting His moral law, Walking Bear stands under God's just condemnation and is destined for hell. But suppose that if only Walking Bear were to hear the gospel, if only the Christian missionaries had come earlier, then he would have believed in the gospel and been saved. His damnation then appears to be the result of bad luck; through no fault of his own he was born at the wrong place or time in history; his salvation or damnation thus seem to be the result of historical and geographical accident. Granted that his condemnation is not *unjust* (since he has freely spurned God's sufficient grace for salvation), nonetheless is it not *unloving* of God to condemn him? Would not an all-loving God have given him the same advantage that is enjoyed by that lucky individual who lives at a place and time such that he hears the gospel? Now Walking Bear's situation is essentially no different from the billions of people living today who have yet to hear a clear presentation of the gospel. Is not God cruel and unloving to condemn them?

It will be no good trying to answer this problem by any form of Christian inclusivism short of virtual universalism. The difficulty with Christian inclusivism is not simply that it goes too far in its unscriptural

optimism that vast numbers of persons in non-Christian religions will be saved. Rather in truth it does not go far enough: for inclusivism makes no provision for those who *do* reject God's general revelation and so are condemned, but who *would have* accepted God's special revelation and been saved, if only they had heard it. Because inclusivism deals only in the indicative mood, so to speak, it is impotent to resolve a problem framed in the subjunctive mood.

A Solution to the Problem of Particularism

Let us therefore make a fresh start on this problem. What is the logical structure of the objection to Christian particularism? The claim seems to be that Christian particularism is internally inconsistent in affirming on the one hand that God is all-powerful and all-loving and on the other that some people never hear the gospel and are lost. But why think that these two affirmations are inconsistent? After all, there's no *explicit* contradiction between them. So the post-modernist or universalist must think that these two statements are *implicitly* contradictory. But in that case there must be some hidden assumptions which need to be surfaced in order to show that these two statements are in fact inconsistent. But what are these hidden assumptions?

The detractor of Christian particularism seems to be making two hidden assumptions:

1. If God is all-powerful, then He can create a world in which everybody hears the gospel and is freely saved.
2. If God is all loving, then He prefers a world in which everybody hears the gospel and is freely saved.

Both of these assumptions must be necessarily true if Christian particularism is to be shown to be inconsistent.

But are they necessarily true? I think not. Consider assumption (1). I think we should agree that an all-powerful God can create a world in which everybody hears the gospel. But so long as people are free, there's simply no guarantee that everybody in that world would be freely saved. Sure, God could force everyone to repent and be saved by overpowering their wills, but that would be a sort of divine rape, not their being freely saved. It's logically impossible to *make* someone do something *freely*. So long as God desires free creatures, then, even He cannot guarantee that all will freely embrace His salvation. In fact, when you think about it, there is not even any guarantee that the balance between saved and lost in that totally evangelized world would be any better than it is in the actual world! It certainly seems possible that in any world of free creatures which God could create, some people would freely reject His salvation and be lost. Thus, assumption (1) is not necessarily true.

The possibility that assumption (1) is false already invalidates the argument against Christian

particularism. But there is more: assumption (2) does not seem necessarily true either. Let us concede that there are in fact possible worlds in which everyone hears the gospel and is freely saved. Does God's being all-loving compel Him to prefer one of these worlds to be actual world? Not necessarily; for these worlds might have over-riding deficiencies in other respects. Suppose, for example, that the only worlds in which everybody hears and believes the gospel are worlds with only a handful of people in them. In any world in which God creates more people, at least one person refuses to receive God's salvation. Now I ask you: must God prefer one of these radically underpopulated worlds to a world in which multitudes do freely receive His salvation, even though others freely reject it? I think not. So long as God provides sufficient grace for salvation to every person in any world He creates, He is no less loving for preferring one of the more populous worlds, even though that implies that some people would freely reject Him and be lost.

Thus, neither of the assumptions underlying the objection to Christian particularism is necessarily true. It follows that no inconsistency has been shown in affirming both that God is all-powerful and all-loving and that some people never hear the gospel and are lost.

But we can go one step further. We can actually show that it is entirely consistent to affirm that God is all-powerful and all-loving and yet that many persons do not hear the gospel and are lost. Since God is good and loving, He 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 (speaking here of the whole history of the world, past, present, and future) has such an optimal balance! It is possible that in order to create this many people who are saved, God also had to create this many people who are 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 create a multitude of saints, God had to create an even greater multitude of sinners.

But then what about persons who will in fact be lost because they never hear the gospel, but who would have been freely saved if only they had heard it? The solution proposed thus far preserves God's goodness and love on a global scale, but on an individual level surely an all-loving God would have done more to achieve such a person's salvation by ensuring that the gospel reaches him. But how do we know that there *are* any such persons? It is reasonable to assume that many people who never hear the gospel would not have believed it 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. In supplying such persons with sufficient grace for salvation, even though He knows they will reject it, God is already exhibiting extraordinary love toward them, and bringing the gospel would be of no additional material benefit to them. Hence, no one could stand before God on the

judgement day and complain, "Sure, God, I didn't respond to your revelation in nature and conscience. All right. But if only I had heard the gospel, *then* I would have believed!" God will say to them, "No, I knew that even if you had heard the gospel, you still would not have believed. Therefore, my judgement of you on the basis of my revelation in nature and conscience is neither unloving nor unfair."

Thus, it is possible that God has created a world which has an optimal balance between saved and lost and that those who never hear the gospel and are lost would not have believed in Christ even if they had heard of him. So long as this scenario is even *possible*, it proves that it is entirely consistent to affirm that God is all-powerful and all-loving and yet that some people never hear the gospel and are lost.

Again Adams objects to this solution that human beings are so burdened with psychological baggage from their childhoods that their freedom as adults is so impaired that they are no more competent to be entrusted with their eternal destiny than a two year old is to be allowed choices that could result in his death or serious injury. [21] If God allowed people to consign themselves to hell, then He would be cruel to create people in a world with the combination of obstacles and opportunities found in the actual world and He would bear the primary responsibility for their damnation.

It seems to me, however, that Adams has a deficient conception of divine providence. God in His providence can so arrange the world that the myriad of obstacles and opportunities in the actual world conspire to bring about an optimal balance between saved and lost. Certainly these obstacles and opportunities are not equally distributed among persons in the actual world, but as a just God who judges fairly God does not require that all persons must measure up to the same standards, but judges them according to the obstacles and opportunities which He has apportioned them. Moreover, as a loving God who wills and works for the salvation of all persons, He ensures that sufficient grace is given to every person for salvation. With respect to persons who do not respond to His grace under especially disadvantageous circumstances, God can so order the world that such persons are exclusively people who would *still* not have believed even had they been created under more advantageous circumstances. Far from being cruel, God is so loving that He arranges the world such that anyone who would respond to His saving grace under certain sets of circumstances is created precisely in one such set of circumstances, and He even provides sufficient grace for salvation to those who He knows would spurn it under any circumstances. In a certain sense, then, God *is* responsible for who is saved and who is lost, for it is He who decrees which circumstances to create and what persons to place in them. But this is simply a description of divine sovereignty, and I take it to be a positive, biblical feature of this account that it affirms a strong doctrine of divine sovereignty. At the same time, it affirms that in whatever circumstances people find themselves, God wills their salvation, and by the Holy Spirit He supplies sufficient grace for their salvation, and those persons are entirely free to embrace this salvation. Should they reject God's every effort to save them, it is they, not God, who are responsible in

the sense of being culpable.

In the end Adams seems to recognize that the problems she raises are soluble for one who advocates a robust doctrine of providence and prevenient grace, according to which God arranges the world such that those who are lost would have been lost regardless of the circumstances under which they were created. But she claims that even if every world of free creatures which is feasible for God to create involved such impenitent persons, that still does not imply that the impenitent need be damned: they could simply be annihilated or maintained in a world like this one. [22] But this riposte strikes me as very weak. The precise form of damnation is an in-house debate among Christian particularists; the salient point is that under Adams's two proposed scenarios not everyone enjoys salvation. Moreover, she again seems to presuppose that the consequences of rejecting God's grace are to some degree arbitrary rather than necessitated by divine justice, the demands of which could well rule out scenarios like annihilation or maintenance in a world so suffused with God's common grace as this one.

Finally, I, too, must deal with a missiological objection against my proposed solution. [23] It might be said, "Why, then, should we engage in the enterprise of world mission, if all the people who are unreached would not believe the gospel even if they heard it?" But this question is based on a misunderstanding. It forgets that we are talking only about people who *never* hear the gospel. On the proposed view, God in His providence can so arrange the world that as the gospel spread out from first century Palestine, He placed people in its path who would believe it if they heard it. In His love and mercy, God ensures that no one who would believe the gospel if he heard it remains ultimately unreached. Once the gospel reaches a people, God providentially places there persons who He knew would respond to it if they heard it. He ensures that those who *never* hear it are only those who would not accept it if they did hear it. Hence, no one is lost because of a lack of information or due to historical and geographical accident. Anyone who wants or even would want to be saved will be saved.

The solution I have proposed to the problem of Christian particularism is only a *possible* solution. But I find it attractive because certain biblical passages also suggest something very close. For example, Paul in his Aereopagus address declared,

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself 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 (Acts 17.24-27).

This passage seems very consonant with the version of Christian particularism defended here.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, salvation through faith in Christ alone may be and will no doubt remain politically incorrect salvation in a day and age which celebrates religious diversity. But that doctrine is not for all that therefore false. No inconsistency has been shown to exist in Christian particularism and exclusivism; on the contrary, we have seen that it is entirely consistent to maintain that God is both all-powerful and all-loving and yet that some people never hear the gospel and are lost, since it is possible that God has so providentially ordered the world as to achieve the optimal balance feasible between saved and lost in a world of free creatures and that He supplies sufficient grace to every person for salvation, ensuring that anyone who would respond to the gospel and be saved if he heard it lives at a time and place in history where he does hear it. Hence, while the Christian may be open to elements of truth found in non-Christian religions, his mind need not be agape to every religious truth claim, since he is under no obligation to embrace religious relativism, having rejected its *raison d'être* universalism. The proper response of the Christian to religious diversity is not merely to garner the elements of truth from the world's religions, but, far more importantly, to share with their adherents, in a spirit of love, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Footnotes:

[1]

Gordon D. Kaufman, "Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 40. For an incisive response to Kaufman see Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Theologically Unfashionable Philosophy," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 329-339. (The reader should be aware that the original Stump-Kretzmann article has a page missing between 329-330, which was supplied with a later issue of the journal.) They point out that Kaufman's religious agnosticism is in fact less open than Christianity, since he must reject virtually all religions truth claims as (objectively) false.

[2]

Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 26. Calling the conflict between relativism and objectivism "the central cultural opposition of our time," Bernstein reports that as a result of this conflict "There is an uneasiness that has spread throughout intellectual and cultural life. It affects almost every discipline and every aspect of culture" (Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983], pp. 7, 1).

[3]

Edward John Carnell, having borrowed this notion from Edgar Sheffield Brightman, popularized it

among evangelical apologists (Edward John Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948], pp. 56-64). My explication of this notion is, however, different than Carnell's.

[\[4\]](#)

For a good discussion, see Stuart C. Hackett, *Oriental Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

[\[5\]](#)

It might be said that when one denies the validity of such logical principles for propositions about God, one is talking in a higher-level meta-language about propositions expressed in another lower-level language, much as one could talk in German, for example, about the rules for English grammar, and that since the principles of the lower-level language don't apply to the meta-language, no self-refuting situations arise. But the futility of this response is evident in the fact that one could then use the meta-language itself to describe God, since the restrictions only apply to the lower-level language.

[\[6\]](#)

For support for both these claims, see my apologetics text *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossways, 1994).

[\[7\]](#)

John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 156.

[\[8\]](#)

For a trenchant critique of post-modern (ir)rationality, as well as attempted responses, see the discussion in James L. Marsh, John D. Caputo, and Merold Westphal, *Modernity and its Discontents* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), pp. 18-19, 89-92, 168-74, 199-201. See also the entertaining discussion in Plantinga, *Twin Pillars*, pp. 17-23.

[\[9\]](#)

I include annihilation here, not because I consider it a biblical alternative to hell, but to underline the fact that adoption of annihilationism does nothing to solve the problem occasioned by religious diversity of less than universal salvation.

[\[10\]](#)

John H. Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977); idem, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1993).

[\[11\]](#)

--As illustrated by Robert Müller's call for "a new universalism" in his plenary address "Interfaith Understanding" at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, August 28-September 4, 1993, in Chicago, a veritable orgy of religious diversity.

[\[12\]](#)

Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 19-42; idem, "Providence, Freedom, and Human Destiny," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 227-245. For discussion see William Lane Craig, "Talbott's Universalism," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 297-308; Thomas Talbott, "Craig on the Possibility of Eternal Damnation," *Religious Studies* 28 (1992): 495-510; William Lane Craig "Talbott's Universalism Once More," *Religious Studies* 29 (1993): 497-518.

[\[13\]](#)

See John W. Sanders, *No Other Name: an Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, with a Foreword by Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992).

[\[14\]](#)

For example, Francis Schaeffer held that salvation is available to all persons through general revelation but that no one avails himself of it (Francis Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, 2d ed.; vol. 4: *A Christian View of the Church* [Westchester, Ill.: Crossways, 1982], p. 278).

[\[15\]](#)

"Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W.M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1960), p. 34.

[\[16\]](#)

"Declaration Non-Christian Religions," in *Documents*, pp. 663-666.

[\[17\]](#)

Clark Pinnock, "The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions," paper delivered at the Evangelical

Theology Group, American Academy of Religion, November 22, 1992.

[\[18\]](#)

Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians," in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 308-311. For a defense of the doctrine of hell, see Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[\[19\]](#)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, ed. with a Foreword by Manuel Komroff, Signet Classics (New York: New American Library, 1957), Book V, Chap. 5, pp. 233-240.

[\[20\]](#)

Even if one denies that God has such knowledge, the problem still remains that some of the unreached who are condemned *might* respond to the gospel if they heard it. So how could a loving God fail to bring the gospel to them? Inclusivism offers nothing to solve this problem.

[\[21\]](#)

Adams, "Problem of Hell," pp. 313-314; cf. p. 319.

[\[22\]](#)

Ibid., pp. 315-316. She also alludes to Robert Adams's argument that there is no truth concerning what people would do under different circumstances. But neither she nor her husband has responded to the refutations of his argument by Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Robert M. Adams," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen, Profiles 5 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), pp. 371-382; Alfred J. Freddoso, "Introduction," to *On Divine Foreknowledge*, by Luis de Molina, trans. with Notes by A.J. Freddoso (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 68-75; William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, Studies in Intellectual History 19 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), pp. 247-269. See further Robert M. Adams, "An Anti-Molinist Argument," in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James E. Tomberlin, Philosophical Perspectives 5 (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeway Publishing, 1991), pp. 343-353, and my response, "Robert Adams's New Anti-Molinist Argument," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming)

[\[23\]](#)

See the critiques of William Hasker, "Middle Knowledge and the Damnation of the Heathen: a

Response to William Craig," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): 380-389; David P. Hunt, "Middle Knowledge and the Soteriological Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 3-26. For discussion see William Lane Craig, "Should Peter Go to the Mission Field?" *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 261-265.