

The Leap of Doubt: Examining Seven Toughest Objections to God and Christianity

Objection 1: “There Can’t Just be One True Religion”

September 20, 2009 by Kevin Haah



I. Introduction

Intro Video

We are kicking off a series called, The Leap of Doubt. We are going to examine one of seven toughest objections people have about God and Christianity. It’s going to be intellectually honest and challenging. It will satisfy some of you but it will leave you with more questions for some of you. I hope you will continue the discussion in our Community Groups. And I hope you continue and read the book, The Reason for God. The seven objections came from that book.

[We will also have a Q&A Session after the message]

The first one is one of the most prevalent in our culture now. “How could there is just one true religion? It’s arrogant to say that your religion is more superior to other religions. It’s intolerable that you are trying to convert people into your religion.”

In fact, I think this worldview has become so strong that even many Christians see it that way as well. So many churches have become universalists. All paths lead to the same place.

But, the teaching of Jesus is clear. He said in John 14:6: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He claimed to be the truth, the only way to God. He used plain language.

Peter said the same things. In Acts 4:12, he said: “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

Paul is equally clear. In 1 Timothy 2:5, he said: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

Christianity makes an exclusive claim to the truth. And other religions also make exclusive truth claims as well. It’s not unique to Christianity.

But this is a huge issue now.

If you asked people now what is the most divisive thing in the world, a lot of people will answer religion. Just look at the terrorists. They all seem to be motivated by religion. Look at all the intolerant people, so many of them are motivated by religion. Look at all the

homophobic people, they are often motivated by religion. Look at all the judgmental people, they are motivated by their religion.

Even though I am a Christian minister, I agree with the criticisms. Religions have a tendency to become narrow minded, judgmental, and divisive. If you believe that what you do and how you act get you in with God, you can't help but to think that people who don't do what you do and act like how you act like are below you. You can't help but to think that and that has a divisive tendency. That makes you less than inclusive of people different than you.

It's a real problem.

There is a wrong way to deal with the problems of divisiveness and intolerance from religion and the right way to deal with those problems.

II. Wrong Ways

First, let's look at some of the wrong ways to deal with the problems of divisiveness and intolerance from religion and examine them one at a time:

1. All religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing.

Some people just make this naked assertion as if it is a conclusion. It is a naked assumption. Obviously, there are some crazy religions out there. Jim Jones. Heaven's Gate. Branch Davidians. They couldn't all be equally valid. I think though most people who argue this are talking about one of the major world religions. But even then, this is not a logical position because there are dramatic differences in doctrine about God and human being among the major religions. They disagree about the nature of God. Buddhist and Hindus don't even believe in a personal God. And among Islam, Judaism and Christianity who believe in a personal God, there are clear disagreements about who Jesus is and what he did and why he did what he did. There are differences in doctrine about human beings, why we are the way we are, and the path to salvation. They are all different and irreconcilable because their position is mutually exclusive.

Those who espouse this view say, these doctrinal differences don't matter because God is above all that. But that is a doctrine itself. It holds a certain view of God which is argued as more enlightened and superior to other views of God in the major religions.

So, those who hold this view essentially have their own doctrine of God and view of God. They are making exclusive truth claims, exactly the thing they criticize other religions about.

2. Each religion sees part of the picture and no one sees the whole picture.

I think one of the most commonly heard illustration is the elephant and the blind men. There are several blind men and they all come upon an elephant. One grabs hold of the trunk, and he says the elephant is round and flexible. Another grabs the leg: and he says it is like a tree. Another holds the body, and says it is flat and tough. The illustration goes on to say that everyone is right and wrong. No one can see the whole picture. They are all partly right and partly wrong. And they say, so is religion. Each religion has a part of the spiritual truth but none can see the whole truth.

But, this illustration has a major flaw.

Leslie Newbigin, a British missionary to India, wrote a book called *The Gospel in the Pluralistic Society*, points out that the only way you can know that none of the blind men had the whole story is if you see the whole elephant. The only way you could know is if you assume that you have the whole truth. The only way you would know that all religions have a part of the truth is if you assume that you have the absolute know. That is an arrogant and imperialistic position.

Newbigin: “There is an appearance of humility in the protestation that the truth is much greater than any one of us can grasp, but if this is used to invalidate all claims to discern the truth it is in fact an arrogant claim to a kind of knowledge which is superior to [all others] ... we have to ask the person: what is the [absolute] vantage point from which you claim to be able to relativize all the claims that different scriptures and religions make.”

If you say that people only know in part and don't see the whole picture, it sounds good, but what you are doing is making an absolutely exclusive claim that you see the truth and it looks like an elephant.

3. Religious beliefs are a product of culture; so, your cultural product can't be the only truth.

The argument is that people believe what they do because they grew up in it. If you grew up in the United States, you have a higher chance of being Christian, but if you grew up in Saudi Arabia, you will probably be a Muslim, and if you grew up in India, you might be a Hindu.

The philosopher Alvin Plantinga responds to this arguments as follows:

Suppose we concede that if I had been born of Muslim parents in Morocco rather than Christian parents in Michigan, my beliefs would have been quite different. [But] the same goes for the pluralist. . . . If the pluralist had been born in [Morocco], he probably wouldn't be a pluralist. Does it follow that . . . his pluralist beliefs are produced in him by an unreliable belief-producing process.”

You can't say that all claims about God are historically and culturally conditioned except for the claim I am making right now. If you do that, you are making an exclusive truth claim and somehow exempting yourself from your own critic.

4. Any exclusive claims to a superior knowledge of spiritual reality cannot be true.

This objection, however, is itself a religious belief. It assumes that God is unknowable, or that God is loving but not wrathful, or God is just the force and just some spiritual loving force. All of these are unprovable faith assumptions. If you believe that the world will be a better place if no one believed in any traditional religion, that itself is a religious view. It is an exclusive view of spiritual reality that you claim.

The point is that everybody makes an exclusive claim on spiritual reality. Everybody's got a set of exclusive beliefs. Therefore, what really matters is: which set of beliefs help us to be the most loving, peaceful, and inclusive people?

II. The Right Way

I want to look at the right way to fight the problems of divisiveness and intolerance that religion brings.

I want to do that looking at four things that are unique about the gospel, the core of Christianity. Most people would say, don't stress what is different, let's see what we have in common. Of course, we have stuff in common with other religions, but those are not the thing that will change the world.

1. It is about Jesus, the incarnate God.

In John 1:1, Apostle John starts out his book by saying:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . .
(skipping down to verse 14) The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

Jesus pre-existed his birth. He is God himself in human form. He is God incarnate.

Every other religion says that the founder is human but here, it is God. And it is about how God left the glory of heaven and came down to earth, into a dusty little place called Palestine, born in a stable, laid in an animal trough. Why?

John 3:16-17: “16”For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

We see a picture of God who loves us, and wanted to have a relationship with us that he came down here in a way that we can relate to him. He came down to reconcile us into a relationship with him and serve us.

So, the gospel teaches us to live an upside down lifestyle. Where we serve others, where we love our enemies, wash other people feet, where we love an embrace all people like Jesus did.

Also, other religions see the purpose of salvation as liberation from the material universe, from the flesh. In other religions, flesh is bad and spirit is good. The purpose of salvation is to liberate you from the world and go to heaven. For us, God became flesh to redeem us. In the same way, we are called not to escape the world but to redeem it, to get rid of what is broken about it through our lives and love.

2. Second, it is about grace.

All of the other religions say you have to perform. You have to love God, love other people, do this and that. Then, God will bless you and save you. Rather, the Christian gospel says you are not saved by your performance--how good you are, but through a gift (grace) from God.

If you have a performance based religion, there is self-righteousness. There is judgment against the secular people.

If you are a secular person, you look down on those narrow minded religious people.

But, if you believe in the gospel, you can't look down on other people because they might very well be better than you. In fact, you expect them to be better than you. The gospel leads you to humility, whereas every religious system leads you to believe you are better than others. No other system does that. So, when you know that your worth came to you not based on your hierarchy but by grace, you become inclusive, tolerant, loving, serving, peace-makers.

3. Third, it's about the restoration of the world.

Most religion is about heaven. All that matters is that you save people for heaven. Let earth go get trashed. But if the purpose of salvation is to establish the new heavens and the new earth, you are working to make this a new world. We are called to work for the prosperity of the city. We get involved in social justice. We get involved in environmental issues. We get involved in helping the poor. We get involved in helping immigrants.

4. Fourth, it's about heaven down here now. Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It's about building an inclusive community called church.

It's interesting that when the church first started, it started in a very similar situation as the culture now. The Greeks and Romans had an inclusive theology. No one had an exclusive God. They questioned exclusivists. They were adoptionistic. They adopted all of the gods of the areas they conquered. Then, Christians came and declared that Jesus is the Lord of All. But, the Christians created the most inclusive community in history. Greeks did mix the poor and the rich. Christians were multi-socioeconomic community from the get-go. Jews didn't mix with other races. Christians were multi-ethnic from very early on. Why were they so inclusive? When God became visible, you see a man on the cross loving and serving people who do not love or serve him. When this reality came into people hearts, it changed them. How could they be cruel?

Everyone's got an exclusive view. Which set of beliefs lead to the most inclusive behavior. I submit this.

Take moralistic –superior

Take secularist view of reality—superior

Take the gospel: you will live based on the life of person who love when no one love him.

Exclusivity of Christian teaching leads to humble service, reconciling, non-patronizing and love of people who does not agree.

