

The Uniqueness of Christianity

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Ronald Knox once quipped that "the study of comparative religions is the best way to become comparatively religious." The reason, as G. K. Chesterton says, is that, according to most "scholars" of comparative religion, "Christianity and Buddhism are very much alike, especially Buddhism."

But any Christian who does apologetics must think about comparative religions because the most popular of all objections against the claims of Christianity today comes from this field. The objection is not that Christianity is not true but that it is not the truth; not that it is a false religion but that it is only *a* religion. The world is a big place, the objector reasons; "different strokes for different folks". How insufferably narrow-minded to claim that Christianity is the one true religion! God just has to be more open-minded than that.

This is the single most common objection to the Faith today, for "today" worships not God but equality. It fears being right where others are wrong more than it fears being wrong. It worships democracy and resents the fact that God is an absolute monarch. It has changed the meaning of the word honor from being respected because you are superior in some way to being accepted because you are not superior in any way but just like us. The one unanswerable insult, the absolutely worst name you can possibly call a person in today's society, is "fanatic", especially "religious fanatic". If you confess at a fashionable cocktail party that you are plotting to overthrow the government, or that you are a PLO terrorist or a KGB spy, or that you molest porcupines or bite bats' heads off, you will soon attract a buzzing, fascinated, sympathetic circle of listeners. But if you confess that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, you will find yourself suddenly alone, with a distinct chill in the air.

Here are twelve of the commonest forms of this objection, the odium of elitism, with answers to each.

1. "All religions are the same, deep down."

That is simply factually untrue. No one ever makes this claim unless he is (1) abysmally ignorant of what the different religions of the world actually teach or (2) intellectually irresponsible in understanding these teachings in the vaguest and woolliest way or (3) morally irresponsible in being indifferent to them. The objector's implicit assumption is that the distinctive teachings of the world's religions are unimportant, that the essential business of religion is not truth but something else: transformation of consciousness or sharing and caring or culture and comfort or something of that sort — not conversion but conversation. Christianity teaches many things no other religion teaches, and some of them directly contradict those others. If Christianity isn't true, why be a Christian?

By Catholic standards, the religions of the world can be ranked by how much truth they teach.

- Catholicism is first, with Orthodoxy equal except for the one issue of papal authority.
- Then comes Protestantism and any "separated brethren" who keep the Christian essentials as found in Scripture.
- Third comes traditional Judaism, which worships the same God but not via Christ.
- Fourth is Islam, greatest of the theistic heresies.
- Fifth, Hinduism, a mystical pantheism;
- Sixth, Buddhism, a pantheism without a *theos*;
- Seventh, modern Judaism, Unitarianism, Confucianism, Modernism, and secular humanism, none of which have either mysticism or supernatural religion but only ethics;
- Eighth, idolatry; and
- Ninth, Satanism.

To collapse these nine levels is like thinking the earth is flat.

2. "But the essence of religion is the same at any rate: all religions agree at least in being religious."

What is this essence of religion anyway? I challenge anyone to define it broadly enough to include Confucianism, Buddhism, and modern Reform Judaism but narrowly enough to exclude Platonism, atheistic Marxism, and Nazism.

The unproved and unprovable assumption of this second objection is that the essence of religion is a kind of lowest common denominator or common factor. Perhaps the common factor is a weak and watery thing rather than an essential thing. Perhaps it does not exist at all. No one has ever produced it.

3. "But if you compare the Sermon on the Mount, Buddha's *Dhammapada*, Lao-tzu's *Tao-te-ching*, Confucius' *Analects*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Proverbs of Solomon*, and the *Dialogues of Plato*, you will find it: a real, profound, and strong agreement."

Yes, but this is ethics, not religion. The objector is assuming that the essence of religion is ethics. It is not. Everyone has an ethic, not everyone has a religion. Tell an atheist that ethics equals religion. He will be rightly insulted, for you would be calling him either religious if he is ethical, or unethical because he is nonreligious. Ethics maybe the first step in religion but it is not the last. As C.S. Lewis says, "The road to the Promised Land runs past Mount Sinai."

4. "Speaking of mountains reminds me of my favorite analogy. Many roads lead up the single mountain of religion to God at the top. It is provincial, narrow-minded, and blind to deny the validity of other roads than yours."

The unproved assumption of this very common mountain analogy is that the roads go up, not down; that man makes the roads, not God; that religion is man's search for God, not God's search for man. C. S. Lewis says this sounds like "the mouse's search for the cat".

Christianity is not a system of man's search for God but a story of God's search for man. True religion is not like a cloud of incense wafting up from special spirits into the nostrils of a waiting God, but like a Father's hand thrust downward to rescue the fallen. Throughout the Bible, man-made religion fails. There is no human way up the mountain, only a divine way down. "No man has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."

If we made the roads, it would indeed be arrogant to claim that any one road is the only valid one, for all human things are equal, at least in all being human, finite, and mixtures of good and bad. If we made the roads, it would be as stupid to absolutize one of them as to absolutize one art form, one political system, or one way of skinning a cat. But if God made the road, we must find out whether he made many or one. If he made only one, then the shoe is on the other foot: it is humility, not

arrogance, to accept this one road from God, and it is arrogance, not humility, to insist that our manmade roads are as good as God's God-made one.

But which assumption is true? Even if the pluralistic one is true, not all religions are equal, for then one religion is worse and more arrogant than all others, for it centers on one who claimed, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man can come to the Father but by me."

5. "Still, it fosters religious imperialism to insist that your way is the only way. You're on a power trip."

No, we believe it not because we want to, because we are imperialistic, or because we invented it, but because Christ taught it. It isn't our way, it's his way, that's the only way. We're just being faithful to him and to what he said. The objector's assumption is that we can make religion whatever we want it to.

6. "If the one-way doctrine comes from Christ, not from you, then he must have been arrogant."

How ironic to think Jesus is arrogant! No sin excited his anger more than the arrogance and bigotry of religious leaders. No man was ever more merciful, meek, loving, and compassionate.

The objector is always assuming the thing to be proved: that Christ is just one among many religious founders, human teachers. But he claimed to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life; if that claim is not true, he is not one among many religious sages but one among many lunatics. If the claim is true, then again he is not one among many religious sages, but the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

7. "Do you want to revive the Inquisition? Don't you value religious tolerance? Do you object to giving other religions equal rights?"

The Inquisition failed to distinguish the heresy from the heretic and tried to eliminate both by force or fire. The objector makes the same mistake in reverse: he refuses to condemn either. The state has no business defining and condemning heresy, of course, but the believer must do it-if not through the Church, then by himself. For to believe x is to condemn non-x as false. If you don't believe non-x is false, then you don't really believe x is true.

8. "I'm surprised at this intolerance. I thought Christianity was the religion of love."

It is. It is also the religion of truth. The objector is separating two divine attributes. We are not. We are "speaking the truth in love".

9. "But all God expects of us is sincerity."

How do you know what God expects of us? Have you listened to God's revelation? Isn't it dangerous to assume without question or doubt that God must do exactly what you would do if you were God? Suppose sincerity were not enough; suppose truth was needed too. Is that unthinkable? In every other area of life we need truth. Is sincerity enough for a surgeon? An explorer? Don't we need accurate road maps of reality?

The objector's implicit assumption here is that there is no objective truth in religion, only subjective sincerity, so that no one can ever be both sincere and wrong; that the spirit does not have objective roads like the body and the mind, which lead to distinct destinations: the body's physical roads lead to different cities and the mind's logical roads lead to different conclusions. True sincerity wants to know the truth.

10. "Are non-Christians all damned then?"

No. Father Feeney was excommunicated by the Catholic Church for teaching that "outside the Church, no salvation" meant outside the visible Church. God does not punish pagans unjustly. He does not punish them for not believing in a Jesus they never heard of, through no fault of their own (invincible ignorance). But God, who is just, punishes them for sinning against the God they do know through nature and conscience (see Rom 1-2). There are no innocent pagans, and there are no innocent Christians either. All have sinned against God and against conscience. All need a Savior. Christ is the Savior.

11. "But surely there's a little good in the worst of us and a little bad in the best of us. There's good and bad everywhere, inside the Church and outside."

True. What follows from that fact? That we need no Savior? That there are many Saviors? That contradictory religions can all be true? That none is true? None of these implied conclusions has the remotest logical connection with the admitted premise.

There is a little good in the worst of us, but there's also a little bad in the best of us; more, there's sin, separation from God, in all of us; and the best of us, the saints, are

the first to admit it. The universal sin Saint Paul pinpoints in Romans 1:18 is to suppress the truth. We all sin against the truth we know and refuse it when it condemns us or threatens our self-sufficiency or complacency. We all rationalize. Our duty is plain to us — to be totally honest — and none of us does his duty perfectly. We have no excuse of invincible ignorance.

12. "But isn't God unjust to judge the whole world by Christian standards?"

God judges justly. "All who sinned without [knowing] the [Mosaic] law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law" (Rom 2:12). Even pagans show "that what the law requires is written on their hearts" (Rom 2:15). If we honestly consult our hearts, we will find two truths: that we know what we ought to do and be, and that we fail to do and be that.

Fundamentalists, faithful to the clear one-way teaching of Christ, often conclude from this that pagans, Buddhists, et cetera, cannot be saved. Liberals, who emphasize God's mercy, cannot bring themselves to believe that the mass of men are doomed to hell, and they ignore, deny, nuance, or water down Christ's own claims to uniqueness. The Church has found a third way, implied in the New Testament texts. On the one hand, no one can be saved except through Christ. On the other hand, Christ is not only the incarnate Jewish man but also the eternal, preexistent Word of God, "which enlightens every man who comes into the world" (Jn 1:9). So Socrates was able to know Christ as word of God, as eternal Truth; and if the fundamental option of his deepest heart was to reach out to him as Truth, in faith and hope and love, however imperfectly known this Christ was to Socrates, Socrates could have been saved by Christ too. We are not saved by knowledge but by faith. Scripture nowhere says how explicit the intellectual content of faith has to be. But it does clearly say who the one Savior is.

The Second Vatican Council took a position on comparative religions that distinguished Catholicism from both Modernist relativism and Fundamentalist exclusivism. It taught that on the one hand there is much deep wisdom and value in other religions and that the Christian should respect them and learn from them. But, on the other hand, the claims of Christ and his Church can never be lessened, compromised, or relativized. We may add to our religious education by studying other religions but never subtract from it.

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