

An Analysis and Appraisal of the Exclusivist Claims of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity

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Abstract. It is commonly held these days that Christianity is uniquely exclusivist. This paper will point out how both Hinduism and Buddhism, in their representative texts *The Baghavad-Gita* and the *Dhamapadda* respectively, make clear claims to exclusivity as well. Pluralists do not generally take these claims seriously, and this and other problems with the pluralists' thesis will be discussed, including the glaring problem of contradiction. The paper will include a defense that the Bible's claim to exclusivity is consistent with itself and subsequent Christianity orthodoxy while Hinduism and Buddhism fail to maintain such continuity throughout their written documents, and the subsequent teachings of their followers.

Introduction and Focus

In this paper I propose, after briefly surveying a trend toward religious pluralism in the contemporary mindset, to analyze in some detail the original texts of Hinduism and Buddhism demonstrating that both of these systems have patent claims to exclusivity. I will then provide an appraisal of these claims compared to Christianity via a further analysis and criticism of two major flaws in John Hick's version of religious pluralism.

Christianity and Religious Pluralism

In his chapter, "There Can't Be Just *One* True Religion"¹ author and pastor Timothy Keller explains that the past two decades ministering in New York City has led him to discover that what many people find "most troubling" about Christian belief or practice is its claim to

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: NY, 2008), p.3.

exclusivity.² Keller quotes a couple of people from actual encounters he has had. “How could there be just one true faith? . . . Surely all the religions are equally valid,” and “Religion . . . may be the greatest enemy of peace in the world. If Christians [and other religions] insist that they have ‘the truth,’ the world will never know peace.”³ This sentiment is increasingly common, and the basis of rejecting “organized religion” vying for a more amorphous, subjectivist spirituality that seeks to see a common core of truth in all religions, and that insists that all religions are basically teaching the same thing if you get below the surface. Philosopher of religion, Huston Smith writes, “in the foothills of theology . . . the religions are distinct, . . . but beyond these differences, the same goal beckons” and, finally, on life’s mountain, whatever religion one happens to believe, “when the top is reached, all the trails converge.”⁴

It is common today, in our increasingly multicultural and religiously plural societies, to hear the claim that all religions are one, or are ultimately somehow teaching the same truth. This is done in an effort to calm religious quarrels, of course, and encourage everyone to “coexist” in peace and tolerance.⁵

This quest for a common truth is exemplified in the thought and writing of John Shelby Spong. Although claiming Christianity for himself, Spong ultimately sees all the religions of the world as coming from the same “Ground of Being” but offering different “points of entry” into the truth. Our job, then, is to distill that common truth. He writes,

My hope is that my brothers and sisters who find Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism as their point of entry, based on their time and place in history, will also explore their pathway into God in a similar manner, until they too can escape the limits of their

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Huston Smith, *The World’s religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 73.

⁵ In his most recent book, *God is not One*, Stephen Prothero exposes the preposterousness of this notion that all the religions are teaching the same thing, but that the very attempt to force them into this syncretistic perennialism is what threatens peace in the world. He argues that recognition of the undisputable fact of the religions’ radical and mutually exclusive core teachings are what will do more to promote peace than denying them.

tradition at its depths and, grasping the essence of the their system's religious insights, move on to share that essence with me and all the world. Then each of us, clinging to the truth . . . that we have found in the spiritual wells from which we have drunk, can reach across the once insuperable barriers to share as both the givers and receivers in the riches present in all human sacred traditions.⁶

Spong's project actually seems to take us beyond coexistence to a discovery of what unites the religions. His assumption is that the "essence" of all religions, will be the same and bring us to one "truth" which we are all seeking in our limited systems.

Could he be correct? This wisdom seems to have been birthed in some of the more ancient religions. For example, the *Rig Veda*, one of Hinduism's, and the world's, oldest scriptures tells us, "The One Being sages call by many names" (1.164.46). Perhaps this had some influence upon Gandhi who taught, "Belief in one God is the cornerstone in all religions,"⁷ Ramakrishna who said, "One can realize God through all religions,"⁸ and Hindu teacher Swami Sivananda who declared, "The fundamentals or essentials of all religions are the same. There is difference only in the non-essentials."⁹ From the Buddhist perspective, the Dalai Lama insists, "the essential message of all the religions is very much the same,"¹⁰ and "all the different religious faiths, despite their philosophical differences . . . ha[ve] more or less the same viewpoint."¹¹

⁶ John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying & How a new Faith is Being Born*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 182.

⁷ Mohandas Gandhi, as cited by Stephen Prothero in *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), 1.

⁸ Swami Nikhilananda, trans., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekenanda Center, 1942), 191.

⁹ Swami Sivananda, as cited by Stephen Prothero in *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Dalai Lama, cited by Harold Netland in *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, p. 216.

Prothero critiques this as “Godthink,” by which he means lumping all the religions together; for good or ill.¹² This way of thinking has apparently some influence on current evangelical thought. Findings in a national survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life from July 31-Aug. 10, 2008, among 2,905 adults, indicate that a majority (52%) of all American Christians think that “at least some non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life.”¹³ Christians are abandoning the historical Christian teaching received from Jesus and the Apostles that He is the only way to salvation. Some people, of course, welcome this developing trend as a spiritual breakthrough. Spong writes, “Jesus understood, as all of us must sooner or later, that God cannot be bound by the limits of our religious systems . . . that realization will enable us to walk into an ecumenical future that will . . . see the Ground of Being in Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, and Krishna, as well as in Jesus.” He continues, “It will be a step beyond every religious symbol. Jesus will become the doorway into the holy for those of us who have been privileged to know his name, but there will be other doorways for other people”¹⁴

On a popular level this is perhaps best represented by Oprah Winfrey’s diatribe on one of her programs in which she emphatically asserts, “one of the mistakes that human beings make is believing that there is only one way to live, and that we don’t accept that there are diverse ways of being in the world, and there are millions of ways to be a human being . . . there couldn’t possibly be one way!” If a personal way of worshipping “brings her to the same place it brings

¹²Stephen Prothero. *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), 1. Prothero sees the New Atheists, like Dawkins, Dennet, Harris and Hitches, as seeing all religions as equally worthless and dangerous, while pluralists, like Spong and John Hick see them as equally “salvific” and useful. Either way, according to Prothero, “Godthink” is a mistaken notion.

¹³ *Most Christians Say Non-Christian Faiths Can Lead to Salvation* Dec. 18, 2008 The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Accessed 11/20/09 Available From <http://www.pewforum.org/Many-Americans-Say-Other-Faiths-Can-Lead-to-Eternal-Life.aspx>

¹⁴John Shelby Spong. *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional faith is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born*. (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 137-138.

you, it doesn't matter if she calls it 'god' along the way or not.”¹⁵ Her rejection of her own Christian heritage was blatant, when, after being asked about Jesus, she asks, “what about Jesus? Do you think if you are somewhere on the planet and you never heard the name of Jesus, but lived the way He wanted you to, that you cannot go to heaven?”¹⁶ Apparently, many are siding with this viewpoint, and saying with Oprah it does not matter what you call god or whether you ever know Jesus, just so long as you live faithful to your religion, that's what God wants. With this, even Oprah implies that all religions derive from the same source and are headed toward the same goal, what all pluralists eventually say. Where does this place Christianity?

In his brief exploration of “Why Christ is the Only Way,” Louis Markos frames the questions for debate well. He asks, “Can Jesus' exclusivist claims be taken seriously in a pluralistic society? In a world of so many religions is not Christianity a hindrance to global peace and understanding? Isn't the claim that Jesus is the only way a form of religious imperialism?”¹⁷ The late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, professor of religion at Harvard seems to have answered affirmatively to the first question and vehemently in the negative to the latter two when he wrote, “It is morally not possible . . . to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent human beings: ‘We are saved, and you are damned’; or, ‘We believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God and you are totally wrong.’”¹⁸ Huston Smith goes so far as to call such activities “contrary to the spirit of Christ.”¹⁹ Spong likewise criticizes Christianity for hanging on to such exclusivist claims in the face of religious pluralism. There is

¹⁵ Program, n.d. Available From <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bESXATmQy5s>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Louis Markos, *Apologetics for the 21st Century*. (Wheaton Illinois: Crossway, 2010), 176.

¹⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York, NY: The New American Library of World Literature, 1963); p. 119. It seems more people, whether scholars or every day lay people, are feeling this way. This puts the church in an awkward position in which simply citing John 14:6, and Acts 4:12 are not going to cut it for most people in our contemporary society. This context requires that we make a case for the plausibility of these biblical propositions, rather than simply cite them as authoritative.

¹⁹ Ibid.

no room for this in his thinking or the “new Christianity” he proposes. This ambitious goal articulated by Spong actually seems to have been reflected in the last, and I might add disappointing, episode of the TV series *LOST* where Christian Shepherd, opens the door into the holy light inviting people from all religious traditions and backgrounds in.²⁰ Should we, as Christians, jettison our passé exclusivism and lead the way in finding the one truth in all faiths? Are Hinduism and Buddhism leading the way? It seems for many in the world that Christianity is guilty of “religious imperialism.”

In light of this demonization of Christianity for its exclusivist claims, the first thing we must do is dispense with the notion that Christianity alone, or perhaps along with Islam, claims exclusivity, because the unspoken reality is that both Hinduism and Buddhism, generally seen to be more tolerant and peaceful, make claims in their source documents that they are the *only* way to salvation/liberation/freedom.

Exclusivism in Hinduism and Buddhism

Despite the statements above that indicate pluralism among some of Hinduism’s chief thinkers and leaders past and recent, as well as Tibetan Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama, it can be readily demonstrated this movement toward “Godthink,” to use Prothero’s word, is antithetical not only to the biblical revelation of God both in the *Shema* and in Christ as the only name by which humanity may be saved, but also to the ancient texts of Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Dhammapada*, respectively, both of which teach that there is ultimately and only “one way.”

²⁰ Lieber, Jeffrey and Abrams, J. J. (Writers), & Bender, Jack (Director). (2010). Final chapter Part 2; “The End,” In Bad Robot and Touchstone Television, *LOST*.

A word is in order for why these two religions and their respective texts were chosen. First, Hinduism and Buddhism are the third and fourth largest religions in the world, next to Christianity and Islam, and so represent nearly a third of earth's inhabitants, and secondly, they are often thought of in the modern mind as models of pluralism and tolerance in the world, and never considered exclusivist and intolerant of any other faiths. They are upheld as the model of these contemporary ideals, while Christianity is railed against as representing just the opposite because it has historically claimed that salvation is only through Jesus Christ.²¹

The rationale for choosing the *Gita* and the *Dhammapada* is that these texts are generally accepted by most adherents within those faiths as representing the core of their faith and thought. In a sense these are distillations of all the volumes of their sacred writings. The following quotes bear this out. Indian philosopher Adi Shankara (708-820) stated, "From a clear knowledge of the Bhagavad-Gita all the goals of human existence become fulfilled. Bhagavad-Gita is the manifest quintessence of all the teachings of the Vedic scriptures."²² Sri A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada has said the following of the Gita; "In this present day, people are very much eager to have one scripture, . . . let there be one scripture only, one common scripture for the whole world—Bhagavad-gita."²³ In writing the preface to an online translation of the Dhammapada for BuddhNet, Acharya Buddharakkhita, also the translator, has called the *Dhammapada*, "a perfect compendium of the Buddha's teaching, comprising between its covers all the essential principles elaborated at length in the forty-odd volumes of the Pali Canon."²⁴ Bikkhu Bodhi,

²¹ It almost goes without saying that Islam is a very exclusivist religion and condemns all non-Muslims to hell. In light of this well-known fact, Islam will not be considered presently.

²² The Bhagavad Gita: The Divine Song of God. Trans. By Sri A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. "Introduction to the Bhagavad Gita." Available From <http://www.bhagavad-gita.us/articles/660/1/Introduction-to-Bhagavad-Gita/Page1.html> (Emphasis Added)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Acharya Buddharakkhita. Preface for "BuddhaNet Presents The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path to Wisdom." Available From <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/dpreface.htm>

writing the introduction, calls it, “the chief spiritual testament of early Buddhism - the teachings closest to Buddha’s own actual teachings.”²⁵

Having identified these two texts as of the essence of these two faiths/philosophical systems, we want to examine them in light of our suggestion that both Hinduism and Buddhism, at least in these primary and foundational sources, teach exclusivism. We start with Hinduism. The *Bhagavad Gita*²⁶ is an eighteen chapter discourse between Lord Krishna and a human warrior, named Arjuna, to whom the former reveals the essence of himself as well as the essence of all the scriptures (particularly the *Vedas*) which preceded this dialogue. The primary thrust of the *Bhagavad Gita* is to teach renunciation of all earthly attachments through various disciplines of yoga. Krishna reveals to this human follower and “friend” exactly what it takes to be liberated from the cycles of death and rebirth, so that he will never be reborn again, but instead achieve Nirvana. The way to this “Supreme Abode,” Krishna says, is through himself. As the dialogue is coming to its end it reaches a climax in which Krishna emphatically instructs, “Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear” (*Gita*, 18:66).

This is just 12 verses until the end of the chapter and the *Bhagavad Gita* itself, and if one examines the context, just 6 verses before the end of the final and climactic instruction, the ultimate revelation of the *Gita* as a whole. Those who have commented on the *Bhagavad Gita* have found the essence of the message in this one verse, thus entitling the chapter “Final Revelations of the Ultimate Truth.”²⁷ In his commentary on this definitive verse in the *Gita* Ramanuja writes, “The phrase *sarva-dharmam parityajya* means renouncing all conceptions and

²⁵ Bikkhu Bodhi. Introduction for “BuddhaNet Presents The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path to Wisdom.” Available From <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/dpintro.htm>

²⁶ In Sanskrit the term means “the Song of God.”

²⁷ The *Bhagavad Gita*. “Chapter 18, Moksa Opadesa Yoga: The Final Revelations of the Ultimate Truth.” Available From <http://www.bhagavad-gita.org/Gita/chapter-18.html>

methods of religiosity completely. . . all other methods and conceptions must be renounced and relinquished. The phrase *mam ekam saranam vraja* means to take exclusive shelter in the Supreme Lord Krishna.”²⁸ Sri A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada summarizes chapter eighteen thus.

Krishna explains the meaning of renunciation and the effects of the modes of nature on human consciousness and activity. He explains Brahman realization, the glories of the Bhagavad-gita, and *the ultimate conclusion of the Gita: the highest path of religion is absolute, unconditional loving surrender unto Lord Krishna*, which frees one from all sins, brings one to complete enlightenment, and enables one to return to Krishna's eternal spiritual abode.²⁹

In the actual commentary on the verse itself, Prabhupada says, “

The Lord has described various kinds of knowledge and processes of religion—knowledge of the Supreme Brahman, knowledge of the Supersoul, knowledge of the different types of orders and statuses of social life, knowledge of the renounced order of life, knowledge of nonattachment, sense and mind control, meditation, etc. He has described in so many ways different types of religion. Now, in summarizing Bhagavad-gita, the Lord says that Arjuna should *give up all the processes that have been explained to him; he should simply surrender to Krishna. That surrender will save him from all kinds of sinful reactions.*³⁰

and,

One should unhesitatingly accept Krishna as *the supreme savior of all living entities*. With faith and love, one should surrender unto Him. According to the devotional process, one should simply accept such religious principles that will lead ultimately to the devotional service of the Lord. . . *Anything that does not lead to . . . Krishna consciousness should be avoided.*³¹

Finally, in his comment on the Bhagavad Gita in general, and extolment of its climax, Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati says, “If we continue and patiently take the time to complete the Bhagavad-Gita and try to ascertain the truth of its closing chapter we can see that the ultimate

²⁸ The Bhagavad Gita. “The Final Revelations of the Ultimate Truth: Chapter Eighteen Verse 66.” Available From <http://www.bhagavad-gita.org/Gita/verse-18-62.html>

²⁹ The Bhagavad Gita: The Divine Song of God. Trans. By Sri A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. “Chapter Summaries.” Available From <http://www.bhagavad-gita.us/articles/661/1/Chapter-Summaries-of-the-Bhagavad-Gita/Page1.html> (Emphasis Added).

³⁰ The Bhagavad Gita: The Divine Song of God. Trans. By Sri A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. “Bhagavad Gita 18.66.” <http://www.bhagavad-gita.us/articles/13/1/Bhagavad-Gita-1866/Page1.html> (Emphasis Added)

³¹ Ibid. (Emphasis Added)

conclusion is to *relinquish all the conceptualized ideas of religion which we possess and fully surrender directly unto the Supreme Lord.*³² When Lord Krishna allegedly tells Arjuna to “abandon all varieties of religion . . . surrender only to me . . . [to be released] from all sinful reactions,” it seems that he is being made to claim something quite similar to that of Jesus Christ who said, “If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). One cannot ignore the fact that the way of Krishna is posited as the best, if not only, way to achieve the goal.

Coming now to the *Dhammapada* we will actually discover that Siddhartha Gautama, aka the Buddha (or Awakened/Enlightened One), makes exclusive claims for his “path of truth” (the meaning of *Dhammapada*) on a par with those of Jesus Christ. While one could possibly interpret the *Gita* text, as some do, as meaning that there are many ways, but the best and quickest to the goal is through full devotion to Krishna, making all others inferior, this cannot be done with the alleged teachings of the Buddha. The *Dhammapada* is a collection of the essential teachings of the Buddha in 423 maxims grouped into 26 chapters. According to Bikkhu Bodhi, “Each maxim is believed to have been precipitated by a specific event and remembered by those closest to him, his original bikkhus, or disciples. Nearly immediately upon his ‘death’ or achievement of paranirvana, they sat down to collect his sayings that they had remembered.”³³ A most useful volume for understanding the *Dhammapada* is the translation entitled *Treasury of Truth: The Dhammapada* by the Ven. Weragoda Sarada Maha Thero.³⁴ Its value is that it

³² The Bhagavad Gita: The Divine Song of God. Trans. By Sri A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. “Famous Reflections on the Bhagavad Gita.” Available From <http://www.bhagavad-gita.us/articles/662/1/Famous-Reflections-on-the-Bhagavad-Gita/Page1.html>. (Emphasis added).

³³ Bikkhu Bodhi. Introduction for “BuddhaNet Presents The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path to Wisdom.” Available From <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/dpintro.htm>

³⁴ The Ven. Weragoda Sarada Maha Thero. *The Treasury of Truth; Illustrated Dhammapada*. (Taipei, Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1993). Available From http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/dhammapadatxt1.pdf

actually translates each verse of the Dhammapada and analyzes it according to its original Pali language. It then interprets the verses by giving the backstory that precipitated them.

Two passages of particular interest in the Dhammapada are verses 188-192 and 273-274. These are found in the chapters “The Buddha” and “The Way” respectively. In Chapter 14, “the Buddha,” Gautama allegedly claims,

Driven only by fear, do men go for refuge to many places — to hills, woods, groves, trees and shrines. Such, indeed, is no safe refuge; such is not the refuge supreme. Not by resorting to such a refuge is one released from all suffering. He who has gone for refuge to the Buddha, the Teaching and his Order, penetrates with transcendental wisdom the Four Noble Truths — suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering.

The background to these verses is a story in which there was a house-priest, a Brahmin named Aggidatta, teaching his disciples a certain way to “find release from suffering.”³⁵ Buddha, upon hearing about it very explicitly said that he was “urging upon the multitude a course of action *other than the right one*”³⁶ and sent a messenger to “Go and admonish them.”³⁷ His messenger fails to convince the man of his error, so eventually the Buddha shows up personally to ask the house-priest how he was teaching his disciples to find the end to suffering and when he heard his methodology he said to the house-priest, “No indeed, Aggidatta, he who seeks refuge in these *does not obtain release from suffering*. But he who seeks refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, he obtains release from the round of suffering.”³⁸ At this that man, as well as all of his followers, became monks and followers of Buddha.

This passage, and its alleged backstory, captures some important elements of the exclusive nature of Buddhism in its most original form. It is well known that Gautama rejected many core teachings of Hinduism, and here we see some of that. Aggidatta was a *Brahmin*, thus

³⁵ Ibid., 617.

³⁶ Ibid. Emphasis Added

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. Emphasis Added

of the highest caste in Hinduism, teaching the Hindu way to overcome suffering. Gautama clearly challenges this way, calling it “a course of action other than the right one” and sent to correct the situation. When his messenger is unsuccessful, Buddha feels the need to go himself and make sure the “right” teaching is given. When expounding on this right teaching he speaks of the essence of his personal discovery and teaching; “The Four Noble Truths & The Noble Path & The Refuge That Ends All Suffering,”³⁹ implying that these were the *only* secure refuge and way to eliminate suffering. Note that Gautama does not say these other ways are *inferior*, but, altogether *ineffective* as ways to overcome suffering; that is, they are no way at all. The only way is that articulated by him, the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path. The Ven. Weragoda Sarada Maha Thero states, “A Buddhist seeks refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha as the Teacher, the Teaching and the Taught in order to gain his deliverance from the ills of life. The Buddha is *the supreme teacher* who shows the way to deliverance. The Dhamma is *the unique way*.”⁴⁰

Another very telling passage in the Dhammapada is found in Chapter 20, entitled “The Way.” Verses 274-275 have Buddha saying,

Of all the paths the Eightfold Path is the best; of all the truths the Four Noble Truths are the best; of all things passionlessness is the best: of men the Seeing One (the Buddha) is the best. *This is the only path; there is none other* for the purification of insight. Tread this path, and you will bewilder Mara. Walking upon this path you will make an end of suffering. Having discovered how to pull out the thorn of lust (desire, craving), I make known the path.

The way that Ven. Weragoda Sarada Maha Thero summarizes the chapter; “Eight-Fold Path Is The Best & Only Path To Purity & Path To End Suffering & Buddha Only Shows The Way”⁴¹ actually says it all. There is no room for any other “way” to find release from sufferings.

³⁹ Ibid. 616.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 623. Emphasis Added

⁴¹ Ibid. 853.

It should be noted by the reader that for those who claim that “all religions basically teach the same thing” Buddha himself did not hold this position. An important thing that follows from this is that if Buddhism is right, Hinduism is not, at least some of its major and distinguishing teachings. Some will gladly say that both Buddhism and Hinduism, in fact all the major religions are equally right, but if Buddhism is right, then Hinduism is wrong, because Buddhism itself was established after Siddhartha broke away from his own Hindu upbringing, rejecting core Hindu concepts, and teaching that he on his own, and he alone in the history of the world, had found the way, and that is what everyone else must do; find their way on their own. Later Buddhists in the *Mahayana* school have developed a system of *bodhisattvas* that assist mortals in achieving *nirvana* when the original teaching of Buddha was that you were entirely on your own resources to save yourself from suffering. No one is in this world to help you, you must save yourself, and the way to do it is through the *Dhamma* (The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path) as taught by the Buddha. The *Sangha*, or community of fellow disciples aspiring to achieve Buddhahood, only help the individual seeker to focus on the Buddha and the *Dhamma*. It should also be very evident here, that if Buddhism is correct, as originally established by Gautama, then not only is Hinduism patently wrong, Christianity is as well. These are three different and contradictory ways to achieve deliverance or salvation, all of which claim to be the only and ultimate right way. It defies logic to conclude that they are all right in their teachings, and it is inane to claim they are essentially teaching the same thing. It is in their very essential teachings that they radically contradict each other.

Earlier, the Dalai Lama was quoted as saying “the essential message of all the religions is very much the same,”⁴² and “all the different religious faiths, despite their philosophical

⁴² Ibid.

differences . . . ha[ve] more or less the same viewpoint.”⁴³ But as pluralistic as he comes across in these quotes, as well as in the public and his best-selling books, he has also gone on record as saying, “Liberation . . . is a state that *only* Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of *moksha* or *nirvana* is *only* explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved *only* through Buddhist practice.”⁴⁴ But if the essential message of all religions is basically the same, then what is the point of this exclusivist talk? You cannot have it both ways; this is blatant irrationality.

It seems clear from these two passages that Siddhartha Gautama left absolutely no room for any other “way.” Thus the Buddha was as exclusive as Christ who pronounced that “no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6), and that people who did not believe in Him would “die in their sins.” (John 8:24). This exclusivism was coherently promoted by His apostles who declared “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:121). It is true that Christianity is exclusivist in its teaching on the way of salvation, but is unjustifiable to treat Christianity as though it were the only religion, at least in comparison to Hinduism and Buddhism, that makes strong exclusivist claims. I want to suggest that what Christianity has been is historically consistent with its foundations, unlike Buddhism and Hinduism.⁴⁵ Yet the tides are turning to this feel good, fuzzy and subjective spirituality of religious pluralism. But there are several reasons why pluralism fails. We now turn to an examination of this.

Evaluating Religious Pluralism

⁴³ The Dalai Lama, cited by Harold Netland in *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 216.

⁴⁴ The Dalai Lama, cited by Harold Netland in *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 218.

⁴⁵ Harold Netland does an excellent job pointing out that as tolerant and pluralistic as contemporary Hindu and Buddhist teachers such as Radhakrishnan and the Dalai Lama respectively come across, they, in the end, believe that theirs is the only way, and even their tolerance of other faiths is interpreted completely through their own system which they hold to be the ultimate truth. Netland calls their approaches “pseudopluralisms” *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 213-218.

The marked differences in how strategies prescribe obtaining a relationship with the divine has led religious pluralists, like Professor John Hick, to conclude that all of the religions must somehow be experiencing the same ultimate reality, just in different ways.⁴⁶ This entails seeing in each of the great religions embodiments of different perceptions and experiences of the same ultimate reality, although these are not direct experiences; instead they are incomplete experiences of “the unexperienceable reality that underlies that realm.”⁴⁷ Hick identifies this as “the Real,” so as not to privilege any given religious tradition over another. This explains the diversity. The incompatibilities between the different faith systems are factual, admits Hick, being culturally conditioned responses that should be expected. This does not, however, mean anything ontologically with regard to the Real itself. The Real is what it is, and in the end it is ineffable, “the ultimate Mystery”⁴⁸ about which no single system can definitively say or know anything. No substantial attributes can be known about it, and the attributes observed in the phenomenological and cultural expression of people in the various religions as God, Brahman, Allah, Vishnu, etc., do not give us any actual information about the Real. Consequently, it cannot be said to be “one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating.”⁴⁹ Hick’s model is one of the most sophisticated as far as an attempt to explain the diversity without privileging one religious tradition over the others, while at the same time maintaining their core distinctions. It is saying that there is an absolute Reality, but it is experienced in culturally conditioned, and thus indirect, imperfect and limited ways, all of which, although incompatible, are legitimate.

⁴⁶ The following discussion on Hick derives largely from Harold J. Netland’s *Encountering Religious Pluralism, The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IVP) 218-246. Netland was a former student of Hick’s, and now teaches at Trinity International University and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

⁴⁷ John Hick. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 350.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 246-247.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 350.

Hick speaks of the different conceptions and cultural expressions of the Real as neither literally true nor false, since the Real cannot be objectively or directly experienced. Yet some religions can be judged to be in touch with the Real and others not. Whether a given religion is or is not in touch with ultimate Reality cannot be judged in terms of whether or not they correspond to truth – there is no room in Hick for universally authoritative Scriptures or Revelation to teach us anything about it – but whether it is effective. A religion is judged by the effect that it has on its adherents as individuals and communities. That is, they cannot be considered true in any objective sense, but rather a pragmatic sense. This takes into account that not all religions can be considered to be legitimate responses to the Real. Netland explains that Hick’s methodology involved the development of a “criterion for discriminating between responses to the Real that are legitimate and those that are not. No one supposes that all religious leaders or teachings are valid or equally in touch with the Real.”⁵⁰

The greatest criterion by which this pragmatic truthfulness can be evaluated is whether the religion is in touch with “a common source of salvific transformation.”⁵¹ So Hick, although rejecting much of the “perennial philosophy” as unrealistic, still seeks a “common source” from which all valid religions derive. Hick assumes that “the different world religions are referring, through their specific concepts of the Gods and Absolutes, to the same Ultimate reality.”⁵² What brings him to this conclusion is “the striking similarity of the transformed human state described

⁵⁰ Netland, *Encountering*, 227. Although people will quickly say that all religions are equally valid or right or good, most, especially in the West, will not accept religions or cults that teach reprehensible moral practices such as human/child sacrifice, cannibalism, torture, unbridled promiscuity etc. in the name of its god/goddesses or ultimate reality. Hick knows this, and does not accept any and all religions as valid. There have been some horrific things done in the name of religion. Hick, thus, is confident that he has come up with a somewhat objective criterion for determining which religions can be judged as in touch with the Real, even though they all, in some way are.

⁵¹ John Hick. *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*. (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press 1995), 69.

⁵² *Ibid.*

within the different traditions.”⁵³ Hick means by this “the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness”⁵⁴ which we “see in the saints of all traditions.”⁵⁵ He writes, “One valid criterion by which to identify a religious tradition as a salvific human response to the Real” is whether or not it has produced “saints.”⁵⁶ A saint is one who, having assimilated the teachings of his or her faith system, is transformed into a person characterized by “moral goodness,” which is manifest in one’s “serving his or her fellows either in works of mercy or, characteristically in our modern sociologically-conscious age, political activity as well, seeking to change the structures within which human life is lived.”⁵⁷ The transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, thus, is the hallmark of the various conceptions of salvation/liberation/enlightenment/redemption/awakening, which are merely different names for legitimate experiences of the Real. There are several glaring difficulties with Hick’s model as well as the pluralist vision in general.

First, he claims that none of the major religious traditions represent direct experiences of the Real. This is an unwarranted reinterpretation and distortion of the systems themselves with which the practitioners of these various religions would not agree. In fact, it is of the nature of any truth claim to be exclusive. As we have already considered, Hinduism and Buddhism both are at least as exclusivist as Christianity in their ultimate claim for how one obtains “salvation.” This should be expected if anyone is going to take their own religion seriously. All of us should respect and take seriously the claims of other religions, which means that we understand them as truth claims that are subject to analysis and appraisal in open dialogue, with a realization that we cannot all be right when we claim contradictories. What pluralists, like Hick, do not seem to be

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 36.

⁵⁵ John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 87.

⁵⁶ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 307.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 309.

respectful of is that every true devotee of the various religious systems would claim to be in direct, not indirect, touch with Ultimate Reality and that the other religions are lacking; otherwise, why take them seriously? Hick's thesis reinterprets and distorts main tenets of the different religious faiths insofar as he considers them indirect experiences of the Real, which cannot be experienced. Hick, and all pluralists for that matter, says things about other religions that are simply unacceptable to the practitioners of those faiths.

The following passage from the pluralistic project *World Scripture* is intriguing.

All religions are *connected to the same Ultimate Reality and lead people toward a common goal*. This is true even though the various religions make exclusive claims about themselves, sometimes asserting the uniqueness and incomparability of their God or ultimate principle. Nevertheless, in affirming the existence of Ultimate Reality or an ultimate principle, we assume that it can be only one, regardless of the various beliefs which people hold about it--be it described as one or many, impersonal or personal, absolute emptiness or absolute Being, and regardless of the name by which it is called.⁵⁸

It is correct to say that there is only one, ultimate reality; reason demands it, but to brush off all the religious traditions as being wrong about it, is to disrespect them. While trying to honor all religions, pluralists are actually insulting them, because they are not taking their claims seriously, particular their exclusivist claims. By saying that all the religions are equally right when they agree, but wrong when they do not, and that the adherents themselves do not know this, the pluralists assume a corrective posture of omniscience; a greater knowledge, in fact, than all the religions combined.

Second, Hick and other pluralists are being inconsistent when claiming that the Real cannot be known, yet we *can* know that a given religious tradition is in touch somehow with the Real when it fulfills the minimal criterion of "salvific transformation" and the "production of

⁵⁸ The World Scripture "Prologue: Many Paths to One Goal." Available from <http://www.unification.net/ws/wsprolog.htm>. In their "Synopsis" the makers of this site state "*World Scripture* contains over 4000 scriptural passages from 268 sacred texts and 55 oral traditions. It is organized in terms of 164 different themes common to all traditions. [It] is the result of a five-year project involving the collaboration of an international team of 40 recognized scholars representing all the major religions of the world." Available From <http://www.unification.net/ws/wssynop.htm>

saints.” This moral framework for evaluation raises important questions. If the Real cannot be known, and neither personal nor non-personal, good nor evil can be predicated about it, then how can one know that the Real is behind the salvific transformation of any given faith? How is it that being appropriately related to this unknowable and ineffable Real somehow produces people characterized by moral characteristics to which the Real itself may be (most likely is) indifferent? If “salvific transformation” is seen in “the transition from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness” as Hick suggests, but the Real cannot be known, how can one know he or she truly is reality-centered, or even that being such is a worthwhile endeavor?

Again, the proponents of the *World Scripture* project claim, “Regardless of religious belief, people who have realized such a goal [commensurate with Hick’s “salvific transformation”] inevitably impress others by their personal virtue. Ultimately, these goals converge and become one, inasmuch as they express the best of our common humanity.”⁵⁹ Now this statement raises important questions, the first being; by whose judgment? The claim that they express the “best” of our common humanity begs the question of the criterion for determining “best.” No doubt that while the qualities of “love, compassion, wisdom, purity, courage, patience, righteousness, strength of character, calmness of mind, and inner joy”⁶⁰ are seen throughout humanity, our “common humanity” also entails much in the way of pride, selfishness, ambition and lust as well, and some religions are based on these as “virtues,” so who is to say that they are not to be included? Why reject these universal aspects of humanity; simply because we do not like them? Without an objective standard for understanding what is true “moral goodness” we are left up to our own devices to subjectively decide that we like kindness better than cruelty, when both are universal aspects of human nature and experience.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Finally, moral capacity is part of the very essence of what it means to be a person. Morality is concerned with persons, and it presupposes that persons matter. But ultimately, persons do *not* matter to the Real, or at least there is no way of knowing whether they do or not. If salvific transformation produces moral goodness, compassion and justice, it would seem that the Real was concerned about these virtues. But to be *concerned* and *prefer* one form of behavior over another are *personal* attributes. Hick's ineffable Real actually reduces morality to a purely human convention, and provides no basis for suggesting that some behaviors (e.g. relieving injustice, compassion on the poor) are indeed to be morally preferred over others (e.g. luring followers into mass suicide, mass homicide through crashing planes into buildings).

If we look exclusively to the idea of morality as a chief criterion for discerning any given religion as "true," as pluralists tend to do, it is immediately clear that most religious viewpoints do in fact share much wisdom. For example, most have in their ethical instruction a version of what has come to be known as the "Golden Rule;" "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This idea did not originate with the Bible or with Jesus. The Dalai Lama has opined, "all the different religious faiths, despite their philosophical differences, have a similar objective. Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, respect for others, sharing other people's suffering. On these lines, every religion has more or less the same viewpoint."⁶¹ This proposition rings true – somewhat, because admittedly, as discussed above, there are some religions, past and present that do not necessarily hold these as values. But given this basic unanimity in morality within religion, how should the validity of religious systems be assessed?

Morality has to do with our relationships with one another. In a theistic framework it would seem sensible to expect a consensus on moral wisdom not only among the "great" world religions but also among pagans, atheists and secularists as well. In fact, biblical/Christian

⁶¹ The Dalai Lama, cited by Netland in *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 216.

theism posits that the human “heart” (seat of moral and intellectual, as well as emotional experience) is divinely created (Psalm 33:15) and that the moral law is written on it ensuring that all humans have a conscience and common moral sense by which they judge themselves and each other (Romans 2:14-15). In a theistic universe in which God takes continued interest in preserving His human creation, one would expect as a matter of course something, minimally, to keep them from destroying each other; so that humankind cannot only survive, but thrive.⁶²

So what do we do with morality? Morality is a common concern, and we see similar principles in every faith and philosophy we examine, because we have an intuitive sense that human life has intrinsic worth and value. We establish our moral rules to preserve this value or “dignity.” It is almost instinctual, and inevitable, thus so common that it would be foolish to place much stock in the moral sense as a means to achieving a meaningful relationship with Ultimate Reality. Morality should be understood as a personal God’s means of preserving his human creation by protecting them from each other, and giving them an impetus to care for each other.

But if our focus is on morality, we soon realize that morality is not necessarily our friend, but our foe, for sincerely focusing upon the moral law only results in the painful awareness of our failure to uphold it and thus an awareness of our need for something more. When we come

⁶² Atheism provides no ultimate framework for morality. Ethics operates on the assumption that human life is important and worth preserving, and Atheism provides no convincing or certain basis for affirming human dignity or intrinsic value. This, however, is the very root of ethics since ethics has to do, largely, with how we *ought* to treat one another. If belief in a personal God or being religious were prerequisite for any kind of ethical outlook on life, the “human” experiment would probably have been a very short one. The theistic view understands God as the source of human dignity. Biblical theism, in fact, holds to the unique position that humans are created equally as male and female in the image and likeness of God. This view provides a fixed basis for affirming the intrinsic value of human life. The notion of intrinsic value, however, is not logically consistent with a view of origins that claims that humans are either simply matter in motion, as Western materialism asserts, or *Maya*, a temporary illusion, as is generally held by most Eastern monistic philosophies and religions. I am indebted to Francis A. Schaeffer with regard to this significant observation regarding the distinction and yet similarity of Western and Eastern thought. His ideas concerning this matter are most clearly set forth in *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, Volume 5, *A Christian View of the West* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), pp. 367-373.

to realize what is expected of us, and strive to be *that* good, it dawns on us quickly how very short we fall from the standard. We realize that a relationship with the divine, or God, is somehow interrelated to our morality, and that our failure to keep the moral law is the root of our estrangement from this God; thus the emphasis in most religions on morality and doing good. In fact, one might say that religions exist in such abundance because there is this deep sense of estrangement from what we humans know we are supposed to be doing and experiencing. It is also in the concept of the “solution” to our estrangement that we see much contradiction among the religions. In Buddhism it is relinquishing all desire, in Islam it is careful observance of Allah’s will as revealed in the *Quran*, in the New Age it is discovering and embracing a cosmic consciousness, and in Christianity it is being saved from your sin. As we have been saying, these cannot all be the right answer.

This is where Hick’s moral ideas should lead us. The nearly universal nature of human morality leaves us not with a means or awareness of some nebulous “salvific transformation,” but a means of recognizing our need for it. And this is where the religions radically part ways, and cannot all be right.

Conclusion

If Gautama were standing here, based on what we saw above, he would say the same thing, the pluralistic and contradictory statements of the Dalai Lama and others notwithstanding. He would correct them all. Given the truth claims of Jesus Christ, and the Apostles, that there is salvation in no other name, Gautama would have to agree that these biblical claims made logical sense, even if you end up rejecting them as true, which he probably would. Nevertheless, the truth claims have to be evaluated, at least partially, on the basis of the current status of the founder or chief leaders of the various religions. Gautama died, never to be seen again. Krishna

never existed except in the mythical literature and imaginations of the Indian mind. Jesus Christ has been raised from death. For the apostles, this was foundational to their proclamation and what justified them in proclaiming Christ as the only way in their own pluralistic context. Paul the apostle, in s message he preached to Greek philosophers in Athens, is convinced that the truth of Jesus being our only hope and savior rests in His resurrection. He is unequivocal on this point when he proclaims, “God . . . commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed: and of this he has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).⁶³

Huston Smith’s mountain analogy is useful, but we need to modify it significantly. Instead of saying there is one mountain and many paths to its summit that all converge in the end, we should be telling people there are many mountains and you can only climb one at a time. They do not all lead to the same end, and only one of them gets you to eternal bliss. The Jesus mountain is the one and here is why.

⁶³ It is outside the scope of this essay to deal with the matter of Jesus’ Resurrection as the most solid historical evidence validating Jesus’ truth claims, including the unequivocal claim to be the only way for humans to find salvation and a right relationship with God. The reader is referred to the numerous bodies of works done on this particular point. Suffice it to say here that even John Hick cannot deny the necessary conclusion that if God, in Christ, really visited this earth and told humanity that He was the way, and then, after death rose again, the debate is over. He writes, “If Jesus was literally God incarnate, the second person of the holy Trinity, living a human life, so that the Christian religion was founded by God-on-earth in person, it is very hard to escape . . . that all mankind must be converted to the Christian religion.” Also, he states, “It follows from this [the incarnation of God in Christ, if true] that Christianity and Christianity alone, was founded by God in person . . . [and] has a unique status as the way of salvation founded and appointed by God himself.” John Hick, *God Has Many Names*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 19, 26.

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