

Sermon 20: Pluralism, Secularism and the Problem of Exclusivity

OUTLINE

Pluralism doesn't fit the facts
Pluralism and Secularism falls by its own critique
The alternative of Christian tolerance

INTRODUCTION

John 14:6, 'Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" How do people respond today to the statement that Jesus is the only way to heaven? Here is an excerpt from the Phil Donahue Show, where he is interviewing conservative Evangelical scholar, and principal of the Southern Baptist Seminary, Albert Mohler, along with Rabbi Shmuley Boteach,

"DONAHUE: Well, Dr. Mohler, sir, nice to see you again. You're how many strong these days, the southern Baptists?

REV. ALBERT MOHLER, SOUTHERN BAPTIST MINISTER: About 16 million members, Phil, and about 40,000 churches. It's good to be with you tonight.

DONAHUE: Thank you. Do these 16 million people believe Jews can go to heaven?

MOHLER: Southern Baptists, with other Christians, believe that all persons can go to heaven who come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And there is no discrimination on the basis of ethnic or racial or national issues, related to who will go to the Scriptures. It's those who are in Christ. The defining issue is faith in Christ.

DONAHUE: So a good Jew is not going to heaven.

MOHLER: Well, all persons are sinners in need of a savior. Jesus Christ is the sole mediator. And the gospel, we are told by the Apostle Paul, comes first to the Jews and then to the gentiles. And salvation is found in his name, and in his name alone, through faith in Christ.

DONAHUE: So if a Nazi killed a Jew, a good Jew, practicing Jew, the Jew goes to hell, but the Nazi still has a chance to get to heaven. That would be the consequence of your position.

MOHLER: Well, the gospel is not just for the worst of us. The gospel is for all of us. And the scripture tells us the hard truth, that all have sinned. And that Nazi guard is going to be punished for his sin, and it will be judged as sin. His only hope would be the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. And the profound truth of the gospel is that the salvation that can come to any person who comes to faith in Christ-can come to that Jew who was killed and to that guard who does the killing. That's the radical nature of the gospel.

DONAHUE: Well, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach is with us. You're author of "Judaism For Everyone." You know, Reverend Mohler, this is such a vast organization. You have so many wonderful members. This just breeds anti-Semitism. I am sorry. You cannot possibly look a person in the eye and say, if you don't come to Jesus, if you don't change your faith, you're not going to heaven. Reeks of prejudice, and also stirs the soul to evil behavior, in my opinion.

MOHLER: Well, if the church had just come up with this in the 20th century as a novel idea, perhaps it should be subjected to such a critique. But this is the gospel that has been received from the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who said he came, first of all, for the people and children of Israel, and then also for the gentiles. And he himself declared that he is the way, the truth and the light, and no man comes to the Father but through him. He spoke as a man born of the

Jewish race, but who was also the son of God.

DONAHUE: Well, three cheers for the Catholic bishops. And it's been a while since anybody has given them cheers. Well, Rabbi, it took us long enough, but we are no longer calling upon our faithful, Catholic faithful, to evangelize and convert the Jews. Praise the lord for that, whichever lord may be your favorite. RABBI SHMULEY BOTEACH, AUTHOR, "JUDAISM FOR EVERYONE": Amen. John Paul II is one of the great friends of the Jewish people. Christians are our brothers and sisters, but they have to finally acknowledge that there is a 2,000-year repulsive, malignant history of the church, of trying to spiritually annihilate Jews by removing every last Jew on the face of the earth and converting them to Christianity and Jesus. And Reverend Mohler, however intelligent of a scholar he may be, he is a spiritual Neanderthal with repulsive, revolting views. Because we know in history that Christian, anti-Judaism has always led to racial anti-Semitism. This is the modern equivalent, Phil, of spiritual terrorism." (Quoted from John Hendryx, Is there only one way to God? www.monergism.com).

Here we see that it is considered, 'spiritual terrorism'; 'anti-Semitic'; 'repulsive', 'revolting' and the view of a 'spiritual neanderthal'. The teaching that Jesus is the only way to God is not popular or politically correct. Today this is one of the biggest objections to Christianity, its exclusive claims. Globalization has introduced us to millions of others who believe differently to the way we do, are we willing to say that everyone of them is wrong and I am right? Pluralism and secularism have arisen to deal with the problem of exclusive religions. Pluralism says that all roads lead to Rome, or at least all truth claims have to be treated as equally valid. Secularism says that religion is destructive and should be taken out of the public arena and made private. On the one hand we face the danger of being made to be like everyone else—pluralism; and on the other we face the danger of being marginalized—secularism. Today we want to make our response to pluralism showing that its basic assumption that all religions are the same is incorrect. Secondly, we want to take on Pluralism which insists that all religion is the same and secularism which seeks to remove religion from the public square and show how it cannot survive its own critique, and then we will close looking at the alternative of Christian tolerance.

Pluralism doesn't fit the facts

There is a well-known story of the blind men and the elephant. Several blind men stumble across an elephant and are describing it to each other. One has the trunk and says it is like a snake, another has a leg and says it is like a tree, another is touching the torso and says it is like a wall, and so on. This little story is used to say that all the different religions of the world are like these blind men who are all touching the same, engaging with the same reality from differing perspectives. The differences are merely differences of perspective not differences in reality. In modern teachings on world religions or comparative religion, there is a great attempt to show how all religions are alike, how all religions offer hope, teach a power over us that is benevolent and guiding our lives, and that gives us a moral code, a sense of identity and purpose, etc. Given the political realities of so many people in the world having differing beliefs; in light of philosophical developments which insist that we are all so subjective that the truth is often unobtainable, and in the wake of religious terrorism, there is a general call for humility, tolerance, and a greater willingness to believe that all religions are equal. The trouble this, this does not square with the facts. Just take for example the simple question who is Jesus? And limit your answer to the

three major religions that are based on the Bible in some way, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Christianity says that He is God and ought to be worshipped, Islam says that he is a prophet who teaches Islam, and Judaism says he was merely a teacher. They can't all be right. To insist that all religions are the same is a gloss that refuses to face the facts.

Apologist Douglas Groothuis does a comparison between Christianity, Non-dualistic Hinduism and Buddhism. Here are some of the differences: He begins looking at the claims about the ultimate reality/God. Already you will see the difficulty in trying to group them because Buddhism does not believe in a personal God and so you have to find categories that are so broad that they become meaningless.

In Christianity the Bible teaches us that God is the self-existent Creator who is distinct from all that He creates. He is tripersonal. There is clear distinction between Creator and creation. He is eternal, creation is created. In Non-dualistic Hinduism/pantheistic monism all reality is one, there is no Creator-creature distinction. All distinctions are illusion/maya due to ignorance. The ultimate reality which is everything is called Brahman. This monistic view of reality is in direct opposition to monotheism. Worship of a personal God is a low form of theology that is allowed to accommodate the ignorant. Buddhism does not have a personal God the goal is Nirvana, this is a state of nothingness. It is not a person or a place but a condition free from desire, free from continual reincarnation, cessation.

Secondly consider their views on what is humanity? Christianity teaches that we are not God or gods, but that we are made in the image of God to serve Him and glorify Him. We made to be in a relationship with Him. Hinduism teaches that we are part of Brahman. The self/Atman is Brahman. Separation from Brahman is not because Brahman is holy and we have sinned, separation is because of ignorance. Sin in this system is not accepting your own deity. Buddhism lacks deep theological concepts, Buddha looked down on too much speculation. The teaching is focused on the alleviation of suffering but there is no view of the soul or afterlife.

Thirdly, let us look at their three views on liberation/salvation. Christianity says that we are lost sinners who cannot save ourselves, but the God of love comes down in the person of Christ and pays for our sins by dying on the cross. We cannot earn our salvation or save ourselves, we need God to do it and so salvation is by grace through faith in Christ no works. Hinduism teaches that we become God through yoga and self-realization. Once we have come to realise the truth that we are God then we will be freed from the constant wheel of reincarnation and ascend into the One. Buddhism through the 8fold path of peace teaches us to let go of desire and find detachment. Through wisdom, ethical conduct and discipline you ascend the cycle of reincarnation and reach Nirvana.

A quick comparison shows that these religions cannot be the same. The law of non-contradiction helps us to see that God cannot be both personal and non-personal; man cannot be both God and not God; and salvation cannot be both by human effort and not by human effort.

John Hick has made an attempt to escape these contradictions by creating such large and vacuous categories that can hold these contradictions together that they end up asserting next to nothing. But this aside, no matter how much you try and make all religions aside, Jesus refuses to be boxed in with other religions. He makes the claim that He is the only way to the Father and the only One who reveals God. He will not allow you to make Him agree with everyone else, He makes exclusive claims, what will you do with Christ? You have to deny He said these things, or deny your pluralism and say He is wrong. Either way your plan to include is ruined.

It should also be pointed out that the majority of other religions reject this synthesis. It has been pointed out that this pluralising tendency is a Liberal Western Post-Christian project and Islam, Judaism, even Eastern religions don't agree. Some have tried to say that the East is all inclusive but this is not the case, I was speaking to a Sikh about Jesus, what he did was he told me that he would add Jesus to the many gods he prayed to. This sounds inclusive but it is destructive to the distinct things that Jesus teaches about Himself and His teaching about putting away all idols. The appearance of being inclusive without true engagement with Christianity's distinct beliefs is just another form of exclusivism that refuses to believe the Christian faith.

Pluralism and Secularism falls by its own critique

In the West in our Post-Christian environment, pluralism and secularism have won the publicity war and the 'wisdom' of these views has trickled down as slogans that we hear regularly, which have been adopted uncritically and mindlessly repeated. We want to show now how these slogans are self-defeating.¹

'All major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing.' We have shown how foolish and ignorant this view is. It should be highlighted that its apparent charity is shown to be false when we see how they force similarity on things that are obviously not similar. All religions are seen to be valid only if they agree to the pluralist view that all religions teach the same thing otherwise they are intolerant and not valid.

'Each religion sees part of the truth but no religion sees the whole truth.' Here we have again the problem of the blind men and the elephant. What is wrong with this analogy? Well this analogy assumes that the person telling the story can see the whole elephant. In other words, is the opinion that everyone only has part of the truth, also only partially true? Isn't it hypocritical and a proud and dogmatic claim that no one has a complete picture but the pluralist?

'Religion is too culturally and historically conditioned to be the truth.' The question we need to ask this view is: is this view the result of cultural conditioning? We have to say it is. When you go outside the West they do not believe the truth is inaccessible and cluttered with culture and history. It is those who have inherited the intellectual baggage of the West who hold to such an opinion. This view too falls on its own sword.

You have probably heard someone say, 'Muslims follow Islam because they are born into Islamic families, and Christians are Christian because of their parents

¹ See Keller's The Reason For God, p5-18

and culture.' We can then retort and say, 'You are a relativist because that is what your culture teaches.'

'It is arrogant to insist that your religion is right and to convert people to it.' The claim here is that it is arrogant or ethnocentric to seek to convert someone to your point of view. Is there hypocrisy here? Is the Pluralist not arrogantly insisting that I am wrong and putting pressure upon me to come around to their way of thinking?

What we see in all these instances is an ironic lack of self-awareness, relativism cannot be relativistic all the way down otherwise it cuts its own legs off.

There are others who feel that religion is destructive and inhibiting and so should be kept out of schools and politics. They insist on the need for all public spaces to be secular, to be empty of religious ideology of any religion. Is there any problem with this view?

Yes there is! Once again those who espouse a secular viewpoint think that they are excluded from their own critique, but the trouble is that the secular view is a very 'religious' perspective. Religions have views on God, man, our identity and purpose, the earth, our rights, moral judgements on the basis of these beliefs, etc. Secular viewpoints, like religious viewpoints are worldviews which do things in light of strongly held convictions. And they act upon belief just as we do. Secular views are implicitly religious in that they are ethical determinations made on the basis of how one views the facts of how things are. They have an ontology, an epistemology and an ethic just like religions do. More than that decisions about gender, how children should be educated, meeting poverty needs, abortion, and many other things are all influenced by your greater view of things. What is the basis for human rights for example is a question that must be answered from a perspective that takes judgements on religious matters into account. Do we have an inherent God given dignity or are we only here by evolutionary chance with no innate value? We can't pretend to leave the larger parts of our worldview out of the practical matters that we want to handle in politics.

So then, what is the result when public spaces are secularised? It is the forcing out of one religious perspective for another, the imposition of an ideology, the very thing they claimed they were not doing.

The alternative of Christian tolerance

It is true that there have been many so called Christians who have given Christianity a bad name. We can think of Westboro Baptist Church or Steven Anderson who are belligerent and who are some very extreme examples who have pulled down the name of Christ. But we believe that God has equipped us to live in a hostile world in truth and love. We believe that all people are made in God's image even if they are unbelievers. We believe that all people are equally sinners who need to be saved by grace. We do not believe that Christians are superior to other people and that Christianity is a religion for winners. We come in humility as beggars who have found bread to others encouraging them in love to eat their fill for free. We know that God has given each one liberty of conscience, not to serve themselves but to serve Him. For this reason religion can never be forced, we must insist on the freedom of religion, within the bounds of natural law, i.e. not allowing for extreme and destructive forms of religion like

suicide bombing, the Branch Davidians, etc. Any showing of Christianity as a political view that imposes Christianity on the masses is denying the Bible's description of the church's mission.

We would say that it is other religions not Christianity that runs the risk of superiority and arrogance. We do not believe that we are good, we do not believe that we can save ourselves by our works, we believe that we are needy sinners who need Christ as our sin bearer and that there is no hope without Hope. Other religions stress their good works as the way to please God, they think of themselves as capable and run the risk of genuine pride. Any Christian who truly believes the gospel will not be proud nor forceful but humble and full of entreaty.

More than this our Saviour who sets our example is a suffering servant. Jesus welcomes sinners, Jesus loves those who are His enemies, praying for their forgiveness upon the cross. Even though Jesus had major differences with the religious establishment He prays for their forgiveness as a pattern for the believer.

So we conclude. Pluralism and secularism are views that die on their own swords, that do not stand up to the test of the evidence, and Christ has given us a way of tolerance and love that shows Christianity, as the Bible teaches it is not a threat but a better way.