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The Five Fallacies of Religious Pluralism

By Tal Davis

- "Live and let live."
- "You can believe anything so long as it doesn't intrude on someone else's beliefs."
- "Co-exist."
- "All religions teach essentially the same things."
- "All religions worship the same God, they just use different names for him."
- "Who are we to say we have a corner on the truth?"

These are fairly typical assertions by many, if not most, Americans today. It seems most people are reluctant to express, if not to absolutely oppose, the notion that there is only one true faith or one way of salvation. This mindset is called "religious pluralism."

The Ontario Consultants for Religious Tolerance website explains religious pluralism as endorsing one or more of the following five presuppositions.

1. Accepting the beliefs taught by religions other than your own as valid, but not necessarily true. "The belief that multiple religions or secular world views are legitimate and valid. Each is true when viewed from within its own culture."
2. All religions teach multiple truths – all valid. "The theory that there is more than one...[kind]...of ultimate reality and/or truth - and that therefore more than one religion can be said to have the truth (way to God, salvation, etcetera)." Anton Hein, Webmaster of Apologetics Index.
3. All religions are equally valid. "Pluralism is an affirmation of the validity of every religion, and the refusal to choose between them,

and the rejection of world evangelism...." John Stott, Anglican theologian.

4. All religions converge on a single truth. "Religious Pluralism is the view that all religions are equally valid as ways to God. Pluralists often refer to the fact that, just as there are many paths up Mt. Fuji, so there are many paths to God. Differences among the religions are superficial; they all lead to the same goal. This is the epitome of tolerance and relativism." Rick Rood.

5. All religious truths are relative. "Pluralism holds that distinct cultural beliefs are true for that culture – but not for cultures that operate out of a different 'paradigm.' Pluralists say that [religious] truth is a 'social construction.' It is created through social consensus and tradition, not discovered in reality that exists independently of our beliefs." Jim Leffel, Xenos Fellowship.

This philosophical and theological perspective was well explained and strongly advocated by Dean Scotty McLennan in a sermon delivered in May 2011 at the University Public Worship at Stanford University Memorial Church. He said:

"The theological claim is controversial, however. It's that there are many roads to the top of the spiritual mountain. There's not just one way through Jesus Christ. As a Christian pluralist, I personally affirm Jesus as my way, as my Lord and Savior, but I also believe that the exclusivist claim is wrong. I have no doubt that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father, at least figuratively speaking, but I believe that Moses, Muhammad, Krishna, the Buddha and Socrates do

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too, among others. They're all there at the top of the metaphorical spiritual mountain – they are all the way and the truth and the life – and no one comes to the Father except through a multitude of them, or by having walked in many footsteps, or by being in a large presence (whether one fully realizes that or not)."

So this is the issue. Is religious pluralism correct? Obviously many liberal Christian theologians, like Dean McLennan, and adherents of pluralistic faiths (Baha'i for instance) are convinced it is. Atheists, by the way, would say they are all equally false. In any case, I would like to present what I regard as the logical fallacies of the above listed presuppositions.

Fallacy One: Accepting the beliefs taught by religions other than your own as valid, but not necessarily true.

This statement is obviously self-contradictory. How can you accept something as "valid" if you don't believe it is true? The only way one can hold this principle is to suspend logical thinking and to deny that any real truth exists. For instance, Christianity teaches that Jesus Christ is God. However, Islam regards him as merely a prophet in a long line of prophets. Now either Jesus is God, or he is not. There is no middle ground. Denying his deity demolishes the core belief of Christianity. Affirming His deity is regarded as idolatry by Islam.

Fallacy Two: All religions teach multiple truths – all valid.

This statement is even more incoherent than the previous one. It asks a person actually to accept the beliefs of all religions as true, even though they disagree among themselves on key precepts. It may be that most religions teach some similar moral and ethical values, but

that does not mean all their differing beliefs are valid. In many cases they are logically incompatible.

For instance, both Judaism and Buddhism have high moral codes of conduct. Judaism follows the 10 Commandments and the Torah. Buddhism follows the Noble Eightfold Path (right views, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation). Yet the basic principles underlying those two systems are totally incompatible. Judaism has a Theistic worldview while Buddhism has the Far Eastern Thought worldview.

So, again, to hold this pluralistic principle requires someone to suspend logical thought.

Fallacy Three: All religions are equally valid.

The problem with this principle, when taken to its logical conclusion, is that, if all religions are equally valid, then no religion is actually valid. The whole concept of objective truth must be abandoned to hold this position. It ignores the incompatibility of the doctrines of the various faiths and their worldviews. If two propositions are in direct contradiction, then they cannot both be true. They may both be wrong, but they cannot both be right. Islam, for instance, believes absolutely in one unitary god. Hinduism, however, believes in millions of gods. They both cannot be correct. If one is valid, the other cannot be. That is the law of non-contradiction.

Fallacy Four: All religions converge on a single truth.

What single truth? For Christianity the one most important truth is that God was incarnated uniquely in Jesus Christ. It really doesn't go any deeper or higher than that. That is the summit of Mount Fuji. Other religions may have some place for Jesus in their systems (Islam says he was a proph-

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et) but, from the Christian point of view, that is a total denial of the ultimate truth. If all religions converged at the single truth of acknowledging Jesus as the one Lord, we perhaps could accept this principle. But the simple truth is that they do not, will not, and cannot. All religions are not climbing a spiritual mountain to the same ultimate summit. They are not even on the same mountain.

Fallacy Five: All religious truths are relative.

This concept simply says that all religions are the products of cultural conditioning. That is to say, no one faith is right for all people. They are relative to the culture and lifestyles of a people in a certain time and place. Again, this requires the observer to suspend the concept of real truth. If all religious beliefs are relative, then none can make the claim to be absolutely true.

If I say I believe Christianity is true for my place and time, but that Hinduism is true for people in India, I am denying the truth of both of them. The two religions are absolutely incompatible. They have entirely different worldviews. Christianity is based on the Theistic worldview and Hinduism, as we mentioned earlier, is based on the Far Eastern Thought worldview. And, as we have demonstrated many times on this website, they are mutually exclusive at their core. They cannot both be true.

Conclusion

So where does all this leave us? It means the above five presuppositions of religious pluralism are wrong. (Note: if I took the pluralist position I could not make that assertion – in fact, I couldn't say anything is essentially "wrong.")

Therefore...

1. We do not accept the beliefs taught by religions other than our own as valid.

2. Religions may teach multiple truths, but all are not valid.

3. All religions are not equally valid.

4. All religions do not converge on a single truth.

5. All religious truths are not relative.

I realize that many sensitive Christians find it difficult to deny the validity of another person's faith. They want to believe their non-Christian friends are just on a different path to the same destination. However, that position is based more on emotion than objective analysis. In many cases, it is more indicative of their skepticism about the truth of Christianity than acceptance of the truth of others (this is most liberal theologians). In any case, it is intellectually indolent to ignore the facts. Religious Pluralism, as emotionally appealing as it is, is based on a series of fallacious presuppositions.

Historic Christianity does make exclusive truth claims. We believe absolutely that Jesus Christ was God incarnate. He died on the cross as the substitutionary atonement for mankind's sins and rose from the dead bodily so that salvation is available only through faith in Him. To say anything less about Him invalidates His uniqueness and denies the core doctrine of Christianity.

On that point we cannot compromise, and those who do actually encourage idolatry and effectively nullify Jesus' command to "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28: 19-20 NIV). If religious pluralism is correct, if all religions are equal, and if all roads lead to heaven (or wherever), then we should quit doing evangelism and call all our missionaries home. But it isn't, they aren't and they don't. So we won't and we shouldn't.

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