

The Problem of Other Religions

Some basic Christian ideas

Christian theology is typically committed to the following claims:

1. There is only one objectively real divine being, called “God” in what follows.
2. God is the almighty creator of the universe and everything depends on God for its existence. God knows all about what is going on, and what will happen. God is also gracious and loving toward all people, desiring to have a good relationship with everyone.
3. All people are sinful – i.e., alienated from God – and this is a very bad thing which does them great harm.
4. Because God is gracious and loving, and knows of people’s sin, God provides a fix for the problem – a way out – through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
5. The story of Jesus’ life, suffering, death, and resurrection are *unique* in terms of their significance for overcoming the sinful state of human beings – no other story in human history has the same role to play in restoring people to a good relationship with God.
6. In order for a people to overcome sin, they must in some sense *ally* themselves with Jesus. (Various phrases are used to indicate that alliance: “have faith in Jesus,” “believe in Jesus,” “accept Jesus,” etc.) Some people don’t do this, and so they remain alienated from God.

Some problems arising from the above claims

What issues come up when we take a rational, philosophical look at this collection of six statements? First, there is the well-known philosophical problem that statements (2) and (3) don’t appear to be consistent with each other: Why, if God is so powerful and yet so loving, does God allow people to become alienated from God, when God knows that this is very bad for them, and God does not want it to happen? Statement (4) provides some of the Christian answer to that question, and goes some way towards solving the problem, but it is only a partial answer, since one may still reasonably ask why God allowed the problem to develop in the first place. (This is the “problem of evil”.)

Perhaps, though, that problem would not bother us so much if it were not for (6). (6) implies that the “fix” God set up for the problem actually works only sometimes. So, now we have a new question. Given that the loving God allowed people to become alienated, God set up a way to fix the problem, but God did this in a way that often doesn’t work. Why didn’t God fix the problem more effectively? That is, we now see that (2) and (3) pose a natural question (Why did God allow people to become alienated?) that Christianity mutes with (4), but then (6) comes along and causes us to wonder about a new, related question (If

God wanted to fix things up, why isn't the fix more effective?) It may seem that a competent God would have done a better job at all this. So, is God loving but incompetent?

One standard Christian response to this new question is to point out that overcoming alienation between God and man requires an honest, genuine, quality relationship with people, and that kind of relationship can't be forced onto someone. If the whole point is to produce a love of God, then God can't force people against their will to accept Jesus. Genuine love must develop in a natural way, and cannot be forced. So, the alliance with Jesus that God offers cannot be expected to always work. It seems to me that this Christian response does make a certain amount of sense. However, the original question now becomes more urgent again: given that we now see that even God cannot ensure that a breakdown between God and people will get fixed, once it occurs, why does God allow that breakdown to occur in the first place? This again raises the question of God's competence, now with a new angle.

What if we just suppose that God had some good reason for allowing people to become alienated in the first place – perhaps a reason we will never understand? (So the question of competence just raised above has some sort of answer.) The important thing, probably most Christians would say, is not that we figure out God's reason, but rather that we get right with God. But this new focus on the practical, urgent problem of overcoming the alienation between man and God immediately raises a new question, once we accept the following factual claim, and add it to the theological claims (1)- (6):

(F) (Factual claim:)

Many people throughout history never had any real chance to understand the significance of Jesus as described above in (4) and (5). Many of these same people have been spiritually sensitive and ethically concerned individuals, following the best path to God they are aware of, arising out of their own culture or background.

Here is the new question: What becomes of the people described in the factual claim? Do they remain alienated from God? How does (6) apply to them? In this way we get to the question of the relationship between Christianity and other religions.

There have been various responses to this new question, given by various Christian theologians. Below, I will try to connect these various responses to the question with the six numbered theological statements from the beginning of this handout.

Exclusivist position

The exclusivist basically wants to keep all six theological claims, and the factual claim (F). The exclusivist develops claim (6) so as to make it clear that (6) implies that allying yourself with Jesus in the appropriate way requires you to actually hear the Jesus story, to

understand (4) at least roughly, and to consciously accept the Jesus in the story as your way of overcoming the problem of sin. This implies that a great many people never had a real chance of being put into harmony with God. In traditional terms, they are all damned.

The exclusivist's philosophical problem then becomes the very difficult one of explaining away the apparent contradictions involved in taking that position. Why would a loving creator God set things up so that so many people have no chance to be reconciled to God? It seems totally inconsistent with (2). How can (4) be true when the "fix" isn't available to everyone?

Rahner's position

An influential 20th Century Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner (1904-1984), proposed an interesting solution: Keep all six theological claims (1) - (6), plus the factual claim (F), but give a nonexclusivist interpretation to claim (6). As I understand Rahner, it is possible to ally with Jesus in the appropriate way without ever having heard the story of Jesus' life and work. One who takes this position needs to explain how one allies oneself with Jesus without explicitly knowing about Jesus. What does it take to ally oneself with Jesus in the appropriate way? How can someone ally themselves with someone they have never heard of? These questions, though, seem to me to possibly have easier answers than the questions facing the exclusivist. (Think about how one might, for example, be allied with Martin Luther King without having ever heard anything about King.)

As Rahner himself points out, this view means that salvation comes only through Jesus. As Rahner puts it, those who are reconciled to God without ever having heard about Jesus are "anonymous Christians".

The dialogical position

I find it much harder to pin down the so-called *dialogical* position on these matters. It appears to me that when all is said and done, the dialogical position might imply that theological claim (6) should be given up, but the other theological claims and the factual claim (F) can be kept. If a Christian gives up (6), probably some other claim will be substituted for (6), something like this:

- 6a. In order for a people to overcome sin *through Jesus*, they must in some sense ally themselves with Jesus. Some people refuse to do this after hearing the Jesus story and understanding it. They remain alienated from God. However, in order for people to overcome sin (and thus achieve salvation—i.e., a restored relationship with God) in some other way, they must?????

Presumably there will be different ways to try to finish the sentence. Hans Küng (another

influential 20th Century Roman Catholic theologian) seems to want to finish the sentence with something like this: “follow the best lights they have available in their culture for understanding how to get right with the gods”.

The dialogical position will also want to add some other claims to the above list of (1) - (5). In addition to claim (5), the dialogical theologian will want to allow for other forms of divine disclosure or revelation, outside the Christian tradition, so that even though Jesus is seen as unique (i.e., not exactly repeated anywhere else in human history), the divine revelation in Jesus is not complete, and other revelations in other religious traditions are possible or even likely. These other revelations will still be revelations of the same God, but may emphasize other features of that God. By putting these other revelations together with the Christian view, all views can be enhanced, and the errors and misapprehensions of all views have a better chance of being corrected.

The transcendental position

The transcendental position seems to me to reject (6), and to give (4) a nonliteral reading, interpreting the Jesus story symbolically. Here is a hint about how all this might go: The Jesus story might be seen largely in terms of what it symbolizes about the relationship between God and man. It symbolizes the great and terrible significance of evil in the world (in Jesus’ suffering and death—the symbolic suffering and death of God), and the eventual overcoming of that evil (in Jesus’ resurrection). The story invites us to identify with the divine Jesus figure in the story, and thus distance ourselves from evil while embracing all that is creative and good, recognizing that at least in popularly accepted terms such an identification may appear to be crazy. In some ways then it doesn’t matter whether Jesus was an actual historical figure, or whether all the stories about him are historically accurate.

Assuming Jesus really was an actual historical figure, Jesus might be unique in the sense that perhaps no man other than Jesus has ever been so close to God emotionally and spiritually. So (5) might be kept, but it will remain under suspicion. Perhaps Jesus really does reveal God to us more clearly than any other spiritual leader ever has. But Jesus was just a man – he wasn’t literally divine. God’s spirit was especially strong in Jesus, stronger than in most anyone else. But Jesus was the same kind of being as the rest of us humans. We should not have faith in Jesus, but rather have faith in the God that Jesus reveals to us in an especially powerful way. Jesus can still be our “savior”, because it is in the meaning of his life and death and resurrection that we find God.

The transcendental advocate can then point out that the world’s major “religions” may have similar figures or underlying themes of reconciliation between God and man. Worked out in detail, the position tries to make good on the idea that in some underlying sense there are a great many commonalities between the ideas found in the “great world religions” and in some sense salvation then may be found through all of them. So, adherents to other

religions might have other saviors, because the whole point is to overcome the alienation between God and man, and whatever works to do that brings salvation.

So, this position in the end seems similar to the dialogical position, except that it seems to start from a much less assertive stance with regard to the claims of Christianity, giving up the idea that Jesus was literally the *only* Son of God. (At least this is the way John Hick develops the position. He is one of this position's chief advocates.)

All religions are alike

Hans Küng describes this view as “leveling down” all religious traditions. In other words, ignore all the significant differences between religious viewpoints and all the logically incompatible truth claims made by the various religions about how one is saved. Or, alternatively, claim that these differences are only superficial and that once one probes deeply enough, it will turn out that the different traditions are all saying the same thing in different words.

This point of view does avoid the problems generated by combining (1) - (6) with (F), because it does not commit to the truth of any of statements (1) through (6) as these are normally understood. It cannot commit to the truth of any of these statements, since there are non-Christian religious traditions that deny each of them. The only way that (1) through (6) can be maintained is by saying that they don't really mean what they say. Since it does not commit to the truth of any of these statements as normally understood, it is hard to call this position a Christian position. So, one might say that this position solves the problem by taking a stance outside of Christianity and denying that the problem is real.

Because of that last point, this position is not normally listed by Christian theologians as one of the options open to Christian theology to deal with the issue.

There are two closely related serious *philosophical* objections to this viewpoint: a) It is unlikely that the seemingly conflicting ideas that are found in the world's religions can be found to be in harmony if one just digs deeply enough. b) The motivation for taking this position is to produce harmony by respecting all religions, but by denying the truth claims made by all religions (as normally understood), this position appears to disrespect all religions. It does not take seriously what unique contributions any given religious tradition may have to offer, including Christianity, and so is out of sync with its own motives.