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ARE ALL RELIGIONS THE SAME AT THEIR CORE?

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Have you ever attempted to take an eleventh step down a ten-step stairway? Your entire body tries to descend another six inches, your knees buckle, and it is all you can do to remain upright, while your dignity is severely compromised in the sight of all who might be present. I have, and I have also experienced a similar sinking feeling in an evangelistic conversation. Here I am, all set to present my best arguments for the truth of Christianity, and the person I am talking to dismisses it all cavalierly. "Sure, Christianity is true," he concedes, "but then again, all religions ultimately teach the same truth."

"All Are One," Not "All Are True." Now, before even beginning to address this point, it is important to distinguish it from contemporary postmodernism or relativism. Many people today claim that truth really does not matter. As long as what you believe "works" for you, it is true for you, and mutually exclusive beliefs can be equally true in this subjective sense. The point of view I want to address here, however, presupposes objective truth. It does not say that contradictory religions can be true; rather, claims that when we look past apparent contradictions and get at the essence of all religions, we find a common truth. This position is often called *pluralism*, but this can be a slippery term, so let us just make things easy on ourselves and call this the *sameness doctrine*.

My first response to the sameness doctrine is to say that, obviously, all religions do not teach the same things (but this may not take me very far). Christianity holds that we are born sinful, that Christ, who is the Son of God, died for our sins, and that if we have faith in Him, we will go to heaven. Islam teaches that we are born sinless and that we may go to heaven if we try our best to obey Allah. Islam even specifies that Christ is not the Son of God, and that He did not die for our sins. Hinduism says that trying to get to heaven is a waste of time; even if we were to spend some time in heaven, we would eventually be reborn on earth, because we are trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of reincarnation. Salvation, according to Hinduism, consists of escaping this cycle altogether. It thus seems pretty clear that each of these three religions advances very different teachings, and one might be tempted to ask why we are even discussing this.

Ultimate Reality. Things are not so simple, however. There is widespread opinion today that these differences are purely external, occurring only on a shallow, superficial level, and that, ultimately, they are irrelevant. If one were to take a closer look at all religions, some say, one would find that underneath their broader trappings, they all share a common core. This core can be described according to the following pattern (roughly based on the terminology of the contemporary scholar John Hick):

There is a spiritual Reality that goes beyond common human experience. Human beings are finite and often do not live up to their full potential, and they may even do evil things. All religions serve to help humans to make contact with this spiritual Reality and thereby to lead better lives. In the process, religions will issue some of the same moral commandments, such as encouraging people to tell the truth, not to steal, not to murder, to work for peace in the world, and to be tolerant of others.

According to the sameness doctrine, the more you study other religions, the more you realize that they all teach this core.

Now we are looking at a double challenge. On the one hand, we have the intellectual question of whether the sameness doctrine is true; but even if we say that it is not, a further challenge is how to convey that fact in a supportive evangelistic conversation.

The intellectual side of this issue can be solved only by studying other religions. Since the assertion is a universal one referring to all religions, all it takes to show that it is false is a single counter-example. Do all religions really fit this pattern? Surely not. Such a claim could be easily falsified by pointing to, say, Zen Buddhism, as a religion that does not advocate the existence of a spiritual Reality. Such a strategy may be overzealous, however, in an actual conversation. Here is a good place to apply the golden rule, to treat others as you expect to be treated yourself, and to cut your conversation partner some slack. When people say that all religions teach the same basic core values, chances are that they have not studied all religions that human beings are currently holding or have held in the past (and neither have you or I), and that when they say “all,” they don’t necessarily mean “all,” but only “most” or maybe “all important ones.” Feel free to concede that point so that you do not suffocate the conversation prematurely.

Specific Beliefs. Is it the case, then, that *most* religions teach the same core? Not only is the answer to this question negative, it is a radical *no*. The truth is that *no* religion teaches the core as we have outlined it. No religion advocates some vague “spiritual Reality,” rather, each one directs people to some specific reality such as God, gods, Allah, or Brahman. Religions do not teach ways to “make contact with [some transcendent] spiritual Reality”; rather, they teach about faith, submission, meditation, realization, and so forth. No matter where you look, religions are always about specific ideas and beliefs.

Might I be just playing word games? After all, isn’t it still just as true that, regardless of what specific term one uses, whether *God* for Christians, *Allah* for Muslims, or *Brahman* for Hindus, the same ultimate Reality is being discussed? Once again, the answer is decidedly and unequivocally *no*. Any other answer would just make light of what the religions themselves teach. When Christians talk about God as the highest being, they think of God as Trinity (three Persons in one nature), and surely this description is incompatible with what Muslims believe when they explicitly reject the Trinity. Furthermore, many Hindus believe that Brahman, their highest being, is far above any personal conception of God, and so Christians, Muslims, and Hindus cannot possibly be talking about the same reality. Similarly, Christianity teaches that the specific requirement for salvation is explicit faith in the unique person and work of Jesus Christ, while Muslims state that faith in Christ is of little avail, but that what counts for your salvation is the punctilious observance of God’s commandments. Many Hindus, not only understand salvation completely differently (escape from reincarnation), but their way to achieve salvation (the *dharma*) has little in common with what Christians and Muslims practice. The one thing that Hindus do have in common with Christians and Muslims is that they reject any generic idea, such as making “contact with...spiritual Reality,” insisting rather that *their* way, under *their* vocabulary, is essential: you find salvation within the specific context of the religion or you don’t find it at all. Finally, although most religions enjoin similar ethical practices such as telling the truth and respecting other people’s property, frequently those values just come along with the religion, and even then what is meant by, say, “truth” is going to be heavily colored by the religious context.

Just a Generalization. What we see in the sameness doctrine, therefore, is really an intellectual strong-arm tactic of imposing a preconceived general idea on the specific beliefs of the world’s religions. Of course, it is possible, sometimes even helpful, to talk about religions in abstract terms. In a very rough-and-ready way, it makes sense to say that many religions refer to what they consider to be ultimate spiritual Reality. As long as one knows that this statement is just generalization, it is true, though not profound. The sameness doctrine does not content itself with asserting abstract generalities, however; it takes those general statements and says that they are the actual core of all (or most) religions, which is just plain not true. Ultimately, the sameness doctrine is the result of wishful thinking by people who are committed to the idea that all religions are the same at their core; but this idea does not do justice to the religions themselves.

Some Specific Suggestions. Still, knowing this and presenting it are two different things. As we return to the scenario of some actual conversations, here are some specific suggestions.

1. Acknowledge that many religions teach similar things, but stress the fact that this does not mean that they teach the same things. God and Allah may be similar, but they are not identical.

2. Along the same line, explain that similarity in *function* does not imply sameness in *nature*. Two things may fulfill the same purpose, but they may still be different. You may play the French horn, while I play the banjo, and we may get similar satisfaction out of making music on our respective instruments, but that does not mean that we are both playing the same instrument or even two versions of one fundamental instrument.
3. Try to learn as much as you can about other religions. The contemporary mantra is that the more you learn about what other people believe, the more you will recognize that we all believe the same things. This is patently false, but you need to know what other religions believe before you can make that judgment with credibility.
4. Avoid going out on a limb with what you say about other religions. Stick to those items of which you are certain, so that the conversation will not get side-tracked unnecessarily.
5. Keep in mind that the question of whether all religions teach the same things is different from the question of whether Christianity is uniquely true. In other words, to show that other religions are different from Christianity, you don't have to show that other religions are false. The exclusive truth of Christianity is another important issue, but a different one.

— Winfried Corduan