

Difficult Issues - Part II

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Introduction: The closing decades of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century have brought about a seismic cultural shift in our country due to a massive influx of different cultures and religions. Whereas the majority of immigrants in the early years of our country's history came from Europe and were predominately Christian or Jewish, today we are seeing explosive growth among people from the East and Middle East who are bringing many "new" religions to our shores. We are now a *pluralistic* and *multi-cultural* nation. The Christian faith is not only no longer taken for granted but any insistence of salvation through Christ alone is deemed both an affront to our vaunted hospitality as well as downright offensive and *intolerant*! Yet salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone stands uniquely in contrast with all other religions, and ever since Jesus proclaimed, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the father except through me" (John 14:6), both an invitation was offered and a gauntlet of sorts was thrown down that would predictably offend many. While our culture's reactions to the exclusive claims of Christianity have seemingly become more vocal and sharp in the past few decades, such "outrage" is certainly not new. Indeed, much of the persecution the early church faced from the Roman Empire was not due to the Christians worshipping a *different* God but that they worshipped Jesus Christ *exclusively*. Rome was extremely tolerant of different faiths, so long as homage to the Emperor was included in the mix, and Christians refused to do this. So we, too, are called to take a stand for the particular truth that is found in Christ, despite those teachings of Scripture that are inherently offensive (e.g., hell) and the stigma we bear due to injustices done in the name of our faith. How do we answer the critics?

The Issue of God's "Fairness"

- The Exclusivity of the Gospel -

One of the most common charges leveled at Christians today in our pluralistic society is that of being "intolerant" of others' beliefs because of Christianity's claim of exclusivity, i.e., that faith in Christ is the only means of salvation. The word "tolerance," which is generally defined in most dictionaries as having an attitude of being willing to put up with something one strongly disagrees with, has taken on a new connotation of actually affirming different points of view and accepting them as equally valid. Hence it is often considered unkind and immoral to call someone else's viewpoint *wrong*, and the accusation of "intolerance" is frequently used to bully the believer into silence.

- To escape this charge, some Christian leaders have attempted to remake Christianity into a kinder, gentler religion by minimizing certain doctrines in hopes of making it more acceptable to the general populace and have sometimes gutted the gospel in the process. Others with a liberal bent have focused on the similarities of

religions while ignoring the glaring differences.

- Author and pastor Timothy Keller notes that such claims to superiority among the world's religions are, admittedly, barriers to world peace, and the response of many world and cultural leaders has been to outlaw, condemn, or at least attempt to privatize religion. (The Reason for God: Dutton, Published by Penguin Group, 2008, p. 5ff.) But, as we'll see later, stifling religion is *not* the answer to world peace, as atheistic regimes have demonstrated.
- The fact is, *every major religion tends toward exclusivity* and believes it has the upper handle on truth, and such statements as "All religions are basically the same" are born of ignorance and should be challenged. While there is apparent superficial overlap with regard to ethical teachings, at their core the various major religions differ drastically and have points of exclusivity that will not be compromised. Useful here would be the Law of Non-contradiction. For example, Buddhism is essentially agnostic and considers belief in God irrelevant and stands in stark opposition to the robust theism of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The Hindu law of karma cannot be reconciled with the effects of Christ's substitutionary death; reincarnation and resurrection are mutually exclusive, and the respective goals of Brahman and heaven are at different ends of the stadium.

Some have claimed that all religions are, basically, just about love. Apologist Greg Koukl responds, "*When you think about it, Islam is not about love, but submission. Christianity is not about love, but forgiveness. Buddhism is not about love, but escaping suffering. Hinduism is not about love, but escaping the illusion of the world. Love may be significant in each, but it's not the central message of each. Why think a modest similarity is more important than the massive differences?*" (Stand to Reason)

Is Christian "particularism" narrow-minded and mean-spirited?

Apologist William Lane Craig observes,

"This seems to be a textbook example of the logical fallacy known as "argument ad hominem," which tries to invalidate a position by attacking the character of those who hold to it. This is a fallacy because the truth of a position is independent of the moral character of those who believe it. . . even more fundamentally, this objection is a double-edged sword, for the pluralist also believes that his view is right and that all those adherents to particularistic religious traditions are wrong. Therefore, if holding to a view that many others disagree with means you're arrogant and immoral, then the pluralist himself would be convicted of arrogance and immorality." - William Lane Craig, On Guard (David C. Cook, 2010), p. 269-270.

Similarly, such oft-repeated phrases such as, "All (religious) paths lead to the same destination" or, "Christianity can't be the only true religion" merely betray a different set of personal beliefs that are not self-evident but are accepted on faith. Who 'sez? In fact, *a very large portion of the world would **not** agree with the idea that all religions are equally valid!*

- Palatable, politically correct or not, Christianity is undeniably particular. Note the unambiguous following statements of Scripture:
 - *There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven among men by which we must be saved.* (Acts 4:12)
 - *There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.* (1 Tim. 2:5)
- Jesus Christ himself professed a "narrow-minded," and "intolerant" religious viewpoint (at least from the critics' standpoint) when he proclaimed, "I am *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life; no one comes to the Father except by me." (John 14:6 - note the use of the definite article "the;" so, he was not merely "a" way). This personal assertion by our Lord has powerful implications. Unbelievers may (and often do) vehemently oppose such claims of exclusivity; they *may not* impugn the character of the believer *alone* for holding to such a "narrow" or "unloving" position. Why? Because the source of that assertion is Jesus Christ himself, and Jesus is held in high esteem by virtually all people, everywhere, of all religions, even critics of the Bible. We might, then, ask them, "Was Jesus narrow-minded, unloving and intolerant for making such a claim?"

Jesus also said, "*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life' whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*" (John 3:36)

- The Problem of Hell -

It's the "no win" question: "*So, do you believe that people who don't believe like you are going to hell?*" It is posed not for theological clarification but to disparage the believer, and the argument is often lost before it is begun since the Christian must either attempt to save face by compromising his or her beliefs or be tarred in the stereotype of an arrogant, "hateful fundamentalist." Yet Jesus Christ, who was incarnate love, spoke more about the subject of hell than he did about heaven!

- Often (such as here) it is best to follow the example of Jesus when the authorities tried to trap *him* with "no-win" questions (see Matt. 21:23ff; 22:15ff). Rather than answer directly, he would reply with a question of his own that forced them to face their own inconsistencies. In this case, we can assume that--although people generally do not like the idea of hell--they *do* believe in freewill and justice.
- Apologist Greg Koukl follows up this entrapping question with one of his own: "*Do you think people who commit*

moral crimes ought to be punished?" Most will agree, and when they admit that they, too, have committed moral transgressions and are deserving of some kind of punishment (and we should be honest enough to admit our guilt as well), then we can move from this "bad news" to the "good news" solution God offers: Jesus Christ (Gregory Koukl, Tactics, p. 74-75).

- Some might be tempted to think, "If only (the spiritually lost person) were given a 'second chance,' if only they had known, they might have believed!"* Are we to believe that creatures who resisted the grace of God and denied Jesus Christ would have a radical change of heart in the afterlife? In fact, they would be miserable in heaven as well amidst throngs of people who will find the greatest delight in beholding and worshipping God. Gary Habermas offers this perspective:

"Since God cannot force his love on people and coerce them to choose him, and since he cannot annihilate creatures with such a high intrinsic value, then the only option available is quarantine. And that is what hell is. . . it is a quarantine that respects the freedom and dignity of his image-bearers while separating hell from his special presence and the community of those who love him (heaven)." - Gary R. Habermas and J.P. Moreland, Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality (Wipf and Stock Publ., Eugene, OR, 1998) p. 296, 300.

Again, it should be noted that our beliefs do not spring from our own conceit and spitefulness but we are only conveying the words of Jesus himself (John 8:24)

- The Problem of the "Ignorant Heathen" -

Another issue that calls God's "fairness" into question is the subject of those people who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ: Could a just God condemn such as these? It must be acknowledged that God has not chosen to explain everything to our human satisfaction (Deut. 29:29, Isa. 55:8-9), and this is such an issue! The Bible is clear, however, on some points:

- God does not wish that anyone should perish (1 Tim. 2:3, 2 Pet. 3:9), but only those who come to God through Jesus Christ are saved (John 14:6, Acts 4:12). Yet, in *some* cases, coming to God through Christ may not require explicit knowledge of Jesus (e.g., Old Testament saints, the mentally handicapped, children who die).
- God *has* provided sufficient self-disclosure as to His existence through the creation via natural revelation

*Jesus himself answered this question in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19ff)

The concept of choice demands that we believe in hell. Without hell, there is no choice. Without choice, heaven would not be heaven; heaven would be hell. The righteous would inherit a counterfeit heaven, and the unrighteous would be incarcerated in heaven against their wills."
- Hank Hanegraaff

"But God has not told us what His arrangements about other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him. But in the meantime, if you are worried about the people on the outside, the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself." - C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: McMillan Co., 1967), p. 65.

(Rom. 1:18-20) and in human conscience via moral law (Rom.2:14-15) so that those who reject these witnesses are without excuse.

- For those who *do* respond to the initial "light" of natural revelation and conscience, God is able to provide additional revelation--whether by human means or by extraordinary means such as angels, dreams or visions--to bring people to sufficient *saving* knowledge (note the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 and Cornelius in Acts 10)

In any case, we have the assurance that god will judge each person justly (Gen. 18:25; Acts 17:31).

For a fascinating treatment of how God has revealed Himself to lost people by extraordinary means, you may purchase *Eternity In Their Hearts* by Don Richardson (Regal Books)

- The "Genocide" of the Canaanites -

In reading through the first several books of the Old Testament, one can be taken aback by the severity of God's judgment of civilizations that the migrating Israelites were commanded to displace, e.g., the total destruction of Amalekites and Canaanites including the women and children. This may seem entirely inconsistent with the merciful, compassionate God we profess, and invites accusations from critics of God being cruel and capricious. Although this constitutes a difficult and emotional subject that cannot be justifiably dealt with in so short a space, we should keep some things in mind:

- Ultimately, God is absolutely sovereign over all of His creation. He creates life and has the authority to take it whenever and however He wishes (we aren't; we don't).
- The nations in question were thoroughly evil and depraved, practicing such things as cultic prostitution, incest, bestiality, and child sacrifice. God had given them both warnings and several hundred years to repent (Gen. 15:16). He warned the Israelites that any remnant of these peoples left in the land would ultimately turn their hearts away from Him (sadly, this proved true). "But *children?!*" Like a cancer, even the potential for such corruption would need to be removed, which necessarily included *everyone*--even the children and infants.
- The killing of children and infants can also be seen as an act of God's mercy. The Bible indicates that, until a certain age of accountability, children are not held responsible for right and wrong and fall under the grace of God and are welcomed into heaven upon death (Isa. 7:16; 2 Sam. 12:22-23; Mark 10:14). God could have known that such children, left to grow up in these degenerate societies, would have otherwise fallen under

His judgment.

- The wicked people of these nations had sufficient warning about God's intentions (Josh. 2:8-11) and surely could have fled. Indeed, it is significant that an actual mention of women and children being killed is not evident in all the accounts. It is likely that only men (soldiers) remained to encounter the Israelite army.
- God is not capricious. His own people likewise fell under such judgment when they succumbed to the same sins in later years.

Inconsistencies of the Church

- Injustices Done In the Name of Religion -

Hypocrisy and inconsistencies among those who profess the name of Christ have perennially given the Christian faith a black eye. Of course, these do not prove that Christianity is not true any more than a few "quack" doctors nullify the entire field of medicine. Nor does Christianity stand on the fallible, imperfect saints of history but rather on the infallible, perfect person of Jesus Christ. Even so, there are those who often excuse their unbelief or attempt to discredit Christianity by pointing to such atrocities as were done by "Christians" during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, Salem witch trials, etc.

- It should be noted that this accusation, often voiced by atheists, is usually a smokescreen--an *ad hominem* argument--since the issue of God's existence or truth of Christianity per se is independent of the moral character of *some* who profess to be religious.
- As it turns out, disbelief in God is far more deadly than having faith. As reprehensible as the killings done during the Crusades, etc., were, and even factoring in other religious wars--they may have numbered in the tens of thousands or perhaps even the hundreds of thousands (with more primitive weapons)--they pale in significance to the *tens of millions* killed in the past century alone by men such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, and others who were expressing the ideologies of atheism (lack of a Higher Law, survival of fittest, etc.)
- It should also be noted that, whereas when these men committed their atrocities they were merely expressing a logical outworking of their belief (atheism), the *professing* Christians who carried out their killing were doing so in violation of the teachings and example of Jesus Christ!

God's primary intention was to *drive out* the wicked nations, not exterminate them.

The *Guinness Book of World Records* 1992 (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1991), p. 92 reported that over 66 *million* were wiped out under Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev; between 32 and 61 *million* Chinese were slaughtered under Communist regimes since 1949, and one-third of Khmers--2.7 million--were killed between 1975 and 1979 by the communist Khmer Rouge.

For interesting disclosure of how atheists and other critics of the Faith have grossly exaggerated the crimes and injustices done in the name of Christianity see Dinesh D'Souza's What's So Great About Christianity (Regnery Publ., 2007), p. 203ff