

Option One: All Paths Lead to the Same Destination

The Achilles' heel of the claim that all paths lead to the same destination is the problem of internal consistency. Each religious tradition makes truth-claims which contradict the truth-claims of other religious traditions. We will briefly examine three areas of disagreement.

1. The first area of contradiction regards the nature of the ultimate reality (such as God). One discovers there is a vast chasm between monotheistic religions (such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam), and pantheistic religions (such as Hinduism, Buddhism). Muslims claim that there is only one God, *Allah*, who created the universe from nothing. Some Hindus, on the other hand, believe not in a personal creator, but in *Brahman*, an impersonal absolute reality which permeates all things. Other Hindus believe that there are millions of deities (such as *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, and *Krishna*) which are manifestations of *Brahman*.

2. A second area of contradiction relates to the fate of individuals at death. According to Islam, each of us will die once and then face judgment by *Allah*. Depending on *Allah's* judgment we will spend eternity in heaven or hell. In contrast, many Hindus claim that we will live (and have already lived) many lives on earth. Hindus believe that the conditions of our past and future existence are determined by the cosmic laws of *karma*. Following death each of us is reincarnated into a different form (human, animal, etc.).

3. Each religious tradition also identifies a universal problem that afflicts humanity. This brings us to a third area of disagreement. Hindus, for example, claim that the universal problem is *samsara*. *Samsara* is an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth (reincarnation) in which every person is trapped. Only through knowledge of one's relationship to *Brahman* and religious devotion can this cycle be broken and *moksha* (release) experienced. Christianity, on the other hand, maintains that the universal problem facing every person is separation from the God. According to Christianity, each person has rebelled against God by violating his commands (what the Bible calls sin). Christianity insists that there is no human solution to this problem. Only through a relationship with Jesus Christ can this problem of separation from God be overcome. Christians believe that Jesus Christ paid our sin-penalty through his death on the cross in order that our relationship with God might be restored.

These conflicting claims about the nature of the Ultimate, the fate of individuals at death, as well as the universal problem facing humanity are only a few of the conflicting assertions made by different religious traditions. These conflicts render implausible the claim that "all paths lead to the same destination." Perhaps the following will help illustrate why this is the case.

Consider the following two statements:

- Northwestern University won the Big Ten championship in football in 1995.
- Northwestern University did not win the Big Ten championship in football in 1995.

It is obvious that both of these statements cannot be correct at the same time. This self-evident truth is often referred to as the principle of "non-contradiction." This principle has a significant implication for our investigation. Two contradictory assertions cannot both be correct. Thus, if two religions make truth-claims which contradict each other, they cannot both

be right. For example, when Hindus claim that there are many Gods and Jews claim that there is only one God, one of them must be wrong. In addition, when Muslims claim that each person lives only once and then faces judgment and Hindus claim that each person lives many lives determined by the law of Karma, one of them must be wrong.

One might agree, in principle, that religious traditions make conflicting claims yet still disagree with my conclusion regarding the significance of these conflicts. Instead, it might be argued that all this talk about conflicting "truth-claims" misunderstands the true nature of religious language. After all, religious language is highly symbolic. The Bible, for example, uses many anthropomorphisms to describe God (like King David's description of God as a shepherd who cares for his sheep). Thus, would it not be better to speak of differing metaphors rather than conflicting truth-claims?

Interpreting all religious language symbolically does avoid the problem of conflicting truth-claims, however, only at a very high price. Claiming that all religious language is symbolic in order to eliminate all conflict is like sawing off one's arm to stop a finger from bleeding. It stops the bleeding, but only by creating a bigger problem. In order to demonstrate why this is the case I will comment briefly on the nature of religious language.

Just as an orchestral composition utilizes a wide array of musical instruments, so religious language utilizes a rich variety of literary genres including poetry, myth, history, and straight-forward prose. Yet the reality that some religious language is highly symbolic, does not negate the fact that religions make truth-claims. Instead, it suggests that religious truths come packaged in a variety of forms and that proper interpretation of religious language requires careful attention to the particular literary genre one is reading.

The critical question is this: Does religious language intend to describe realities which exist independent of our perception, or are statements such as "God exists" merely statements of a person's subjective emotional state? If religious statements--regardless of their particular genre--intend to describe realities which objectively exist, then they are subject to contradiction. If, on the other hand, all religious language is symbolic in such a way that religious statements cannot contradict one another, then it would seem religious language *does not* refer to anything which exists independent of us. This makes religious language little more than a commentary on our subjective psychological states. Interestingly, this position is very similar to Sigmund Freud's view of religious language. In *Future of an Illusion* Freud wrote,

These [religious ideas], which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking; they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. . . . Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life. . . .¹

Freud believed that religious language was completely metaphorical. He claimed that statements--such as "God exists"--merely express certain psychological needs. The point is that one cannot consistently invoke the category of metaphor/symbolism to resolve the conflicting claims of different religions and maintain that Freud was wrong.

It will be helpful at this point to return to the parable of the three blind men and the elephant. Earlier we examined the possibility that religious traditions are like the three blind men who were attempting to describe the same elephant. Each of them described the same elephant differently. Are the religions of the world like the three blind men?

As appealing as this story is, it leaves one important question unanswered: How do we *know* the blind men were all describing the same elephant? What if the first blind man, while holding an oak tree said, "I think an elephant is like the trunk of a great tree." Imagine the second blind man, while holding a fire hose exclaimed, "No, you're wrong; an elephant is like a snake." What if the third blind man, while touching the side of the Sears Tower asserted, "I think you are both wrong; an elephant is like a great wall." The critical problem with this story is that it assumes the very thing it allegedly proves--that all the blind men are touching an elephant. Yet how do we know the blind men are touching an elephant? Only because the story assumes it.

To take it a step further, what if each of the blind men made assertions about an (alleged) elephant which were not merely different, but contradictory? Would it still be plausible to believe they are all describing the same elephant? How much contradiction would be required in their accounts before it would become obvious that they were not describing the same elephant? A similar question can be asked of the claim that all paths lead to the same destination. How do we know all paths lead to the same destination? In light of the conflicting truth-claims of various religions it does not seem rational to believe that all paths lead to the same destination.

Option Two: All Paths Do Not Lead to the Same Destination

This brings us to our second alternative--all paths do not lead to the same destination. At first glance, this position may seem unreasonable. Isn't this type of claim incredibly intolerant? Second, isn't the real issue the sincerity of one's belief? Finally, even if only one path is "valid," how could it ever be identified? Before discussing these questions it will be helpful to examine the arguments offered in support of this position.

One strength of this position is that it takes the truth-claims of religious traditions seriously. It attempts to understand the beliefs of Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Christians in their proper context. This is a critical point. Option one--the claim that all paths lead to the same destination--can be rendered plausible only by radically reinterpreting the teachings of the various religious traditions so they no longer conflict.

Yet, the founders of many religious traditions made claims which they *knew* contradicted the claims of other religions. The Buddha, for example, rejected Hindu belief regarding the cause of *samsara* (the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth). Moses, a key figure in Judaism, rejected the polytheism of the Canaanite nations that surrounded the nation of Israel and claimed that only one God, *Yahweh*, created the world and should be worshiped. In fact, certain portions of Moses' teaching in the *Pentateuch* are probably best understood as a polemic against the religious beliefs of the surrounding Canaanite nations. Muhammad, the founder of Islam, rejected the polytheism to which he was exposed in sixth century Arabia. Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, claimed, "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the

father but through me.” (John 14:6) In other words, these religious founders knew that certain claims they made contradicted the claims of other religions.

Our second option begins with the observation that every religion makes truth-claims about the nature of an ultimate reality (whether God, Brahman, Nirvana), the origin of humanity, the fate of humanity at death, and the path to salvation or liberation. The fact that religions make such claims has a significant entailment. As we have already seen, when two religions make claims which contradict each other, they cannot both be correct. The laws of logic necessitate this.

Not everyone, however, is persuaded, that religions make truth-claims.² To clarify this issue it will be helpful to examine a distinction philosopher Mortimer Adler makes in his book *Truth in Religion*. Adler distinguishes what he calls “matters of truth” and “matters of taste.”³ It will be easiest to illustrate Adler's distinction through the following statements:

- Carmen's has the best stuffed Pizza in the city of Chicago.
- Star Trek is my favorite television show.
- The Cubs are my favorite baseball team.

Adler would categorize these statements as matters of taste. Consider, however, the following statements:

- The University of Michigan is a member of the Big Ten conference.
- Bill Clinton is currently president of the United States.
- John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

Adler would describe these statements as matters of truth. Adler claims that matters of truth require us to make a decision anytime the “mass of evidence or weight of reasons point in one direction rather than another . . .”⁴ Adler's helpful distinction raises the following question: What kinds of claims do religious traditions make? Are the claims of religion merely matters of taste, or, are they *also* matters of truth? Consider the following claims of Christianity:

- Jesus Christ was a Jew who lived in Palestine during the early part of the first century.
- Jesus was executed by Roman soldiers on a cross about 30 A.D.
- Jesus rose from the dead, three days after his death, and appeared to over five-hundred witnesses.

While one might argue over truthfulness of these assertions, one cannot deny the fact that these claims fall in the *category* of matters of truth.

Several objections are typically raised against the claim that all paths do not lead to the same destination. First, it is argued that such a position is narrow and intolerant. Second, it is frequently suggested that truth is really not that important and that what really matters is the sincerity of one's belief. Third, even if one path is valid and others are not, it is argued that there is no way to know which path is “true,” that is there are no neutral criteria which can be used to evaluate religious traditions. I will examine each of these objections.

1. Tolerance is a buzz-word of the nineties. We are frequently reminded that we should be tolerant of those with whom we disagree. Who can argue with this? It is certainly preferable to

the other alternatives. World history is replete with the consequences of religious bigotry--holy wars, religious crusades, inquisitions, etc. Activities like these, carried out under the banner of religion, are morally reprehensible. Hence, it is important that we continue to work to create a world where there is greater religious freedom.

Nevertheless, it is important that tolerance not be confused with truthfulness. My alma mater, the University of Michigan, won the NCAA championship in basketball in 1989. Imagine a Duke fan, who heard me claim that Michigan won the championship in 1989, replied, "Well that is an incredibly intolerant thing to say!" This response is, at best, confusing and blurs an important distinction. Does this statement mean that my communication style is kindness impaired or that my assertion is false? Being a zealous Michigan fan it is possible I was obnoxious, however, the way in which I communicate a statement must be carefully distinguished from its truthfulness.

Similarly, when examining the claims of religious traditions we must be careful not to confuse tolerance and truthfulness. Claiming that it is intolerant to say that "all paths do not lead to the same destination" misses the point. The important issue is the truth or falsity of this assertion.

2. A second objection relates to the matter of sincerity. Someone may say, "What a person believes really is not that important. What really matters is the sincerity of their belief." Certainly sincerity is important. However, the sincerity with which one holds a particular belief must be carefully distinguished from its truthfulness. To illustrate this distinction, imagine that you are in a chemistry lab. Your professor announces that your first experiment will involve studying the properties of acids. She places a 500ml Pyrex beaker containing clear liquid on the lab table and says, "This is sulfuric acid." In response to her explanation, imagine that your lab partner, Jim, blurts out, "I don't believe that is sulfuric acid. It looks like water to me." Jim, you discover, is so sincere about his belief that the Pyrex beaker contains water, that he decides to drink it.

What will happen to Jim? Obviously, he will be lucky if he lives long enough to participate in next week's lab once the sulfuric acid finishes off his digestive track. Despite his sincerity, Jim's belief that the beaker contained water did not change the nature of its contents. He may believe with all of his heart that the beaker only contains water but the acid will still kill him. One's belief about an object (or state of affairs) must be carefully distinguished from the actual object or state of affairs. One may be sincere and yet sincerely wrong.

3. A third objection relates to the problem of objectivity. Even if one religion is true, and others are false, it is suggested there are no neutral criteria by which one can evaluate religious traditions. If, for example, you ask a Muslim why he rejects Hinduism he will say that it does not agree with the teachings of the Koran. Similarly, if a Buddhist is asked why he rejects Christianity, he will say that it does not square with the teachings of the Buddha.

While it is true that adherents of one tradition may reject the teachings of other religions because they fail to cohere with their own teachings, it does not follow from this that there are no criteria which can be used to evaluate religious traditions. I believe that there are at least five "tradition independent" criteria.⁵ These include (1) logical consistency, (2) adequate factual

support, (3) experiential relevance, (4) consistency with other fields of knowledge, and (5) moral factors.⁶ These criteria are relevant to the evaluation of any theory--whether it be historical, scientific or religious.

At the beginning of this essay I raised the question, "Do all paths lead to same destination?" Our brief examination of the truth-claims of religions traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism has produced no evidence to suggest that all paths lead to the same destination. On the contrary, the mutually exclusive truth-claims different religions suggests precisely the opposite. Hence, if I am to be intellectually honest, I believe the answer to the question I raised at the beginning of the essay is no--all paths do not lead to the same destination. Consequently it is our responsibility to examine the paths before us and make an informed choice.

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. W. D. Robson-Scott, rev. James Strachey (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 47-48.

² Oxford scholar Don Cupitt, for example, claims that the truth of religion is like the truth of art. See Don Cupitt, "The Death of Truth," *New Statesman*, April 5, 1991, 23-24.

³ Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth* (New York: MacMillan, 1990), 2-5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ . . . For a helpful discussion of issues related to providing warrant for truth-claims in religion see Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief*. New York: Seabury, 1973.

⁶ A discussion of these criteria is outside the scope of this article, however, others have discussed them in detail as they relate to the evaluation of religious traditions. See Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 151- 95.