

INVITED COMMENTARY

Can There Be Only One True Religion?

JOHN HICK

It might seem obvious that there can only be one true—or at least fully true—religion, since on a number of very important matters the teachings of the religions are not only different but mutually incompatible, so that if one is true it would seem that the others must be false. This assumption pervades most discussions of the relation between religions. It's an assumption that is common to people of almost all traditions, the only obvious exceptions being the Bahá'is and the Jains, plus of course some individuals within each of the other traditions. Let us refer to this assumption as the only-one-true-religion thesis. It is strongly held by a large majority within my own tradition, which is Christianity. I believe, however, that it is due for reconsideration.

The first thing to note about the only-one-true-religion thesis is that it is bad news for us all. It does not of course follow from this that it is false. Bad news can, alas, be true. But let us notice at this point just how bad the situation is if the only-one-true-religion thesis is true. And let us also note, as aggravated badness, that even if it is false, if people nevertheless believe it and act on it, it is still very harmful.

If there can be only one true religion, the big question becomes: which of the world's religions is the true one? On this view each claims to be the one and only Truth, so that they are all in competition with one another, each regarding the others as either false or, at best, less true.

One consequence of this has been that conflicts between nations or peoples of different religions have been heightened and intensified by each side's conviction that it is either defending, or conquering, in the name of the Truth. This in spite of the fact that the original cause of the conflict has not usually been religious, but ethnic, political and/or economic. But religion has been exploited to validate the opposing causes; and if you believe that your side alone has the Truth, this can justify whatever actions may seem necessary. As Pascal said, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." And so young men have been motivated by their religion to be ready both to kill and to be killed for their faith. Chaplains provided by the churches or mosques or synagogues have assured them that the cause for which they are fighting is righteous and just. And not only have innumerable young lives been lost as a result, but also vast numbers of civilians on all sides have been slaughtered or oppressed, discriminated against or exploited in the name of God.

In our own century major examples are the mutual Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh massacres in the Punjab after the partition of India in 1947; the violent repression of the black population of South Africa by white Calvinist Christians, who justified apartheid from the Bible; the generations of Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland; the Orthodox Christian Serbian ethnic cleansing of Bosnia and Kosovo; the Jewish-Arab

conflicts in Israel, Palestine and Lebanon—and here I would quote the chilling use of the Hebrew Bible by Yigal Amir, the young Jewish man who assassinated Yitzak Rabin, the peace-making Prime Minister of Israel, in 1995. At his trial Yigal Amir said that he would have no problem killing babies and children as it is written in the Book of Joshua, in the name of conquering the land for Israel. In short, religion, with its aura of holiness, is exploited in every conflict and made to play a truly demonic role in world affairs.

That is one very negative consequence of the only-one-true-religion thesis. Another negative consequence, of a different kind, occurs in inter-faith dialogue. Suppose that, let us say, a Christian and a Muslim are engaging in religious discussion, and let us suppose that each is being personally courteous and friendly. But let us also suppose that each believes that there can only be one true religion which is—naturally—his or her own. Each is then speaking, he or she believes, from a religiously superior position—the position of one who has the full truth to one who has only a lesser truth. Each will politely refrain from saying this, but nevertheless that is the reality as each sees it. This is not, then, for either of them a discussion between equals. For each stands, in their own eyes, on a higher level than the other. That, to my mind, is a negative consequence of the only-one-true-religion thesis.

Now let us step back to take a world-wide and history-long view. Looking at the world as a whole we can see that there are different ways of being human, which we call the great cultures of the earth. The Chinese way of being human is different from the African way of being human, which is different from the Mediterranean way, and the Atlantic (or European-North American) way, and the Slavic way, and so on. Today these different cultures are overlapping more and more and merging towards a global culture. But this was not the case at the time when the great world religions began. That is why you cannot imagine, say, Jesus preaching his strongly Semitic and apocalyptic message in the China of Confucius's time, or Confucius teaching as he did in the Palestine of Jesus's time, or the Buddha teaching as he did in the Russia of his time. The whole ethos and the presuppositions of Jesus's teaching are Jewish. The whole ethos and the presuppositions of the Buddha's teaching are Indian. The whole ethos and the presuppositions of Muhammad's teaching are Arabic. For these great spiritual figures arose within particular cultures, and their outlook inevitably reflected those different cultures. And as the great traditions which they founded developed through the centuries, religion and culture have formed great organic wholes in which the religion pervades the culture and the culture infiltrates, and almost inevitably corrupts, the religion.

But now notice something that is very obvious when you think of it, but which greatly complicates matters. This is that the religion to which a person adheres, and which seems to him or her to be so obviously true, depends in perhaps 99% of cases on where they happen to have been born. Someone born into a Catholic family in Spain or Ireland is very likely to be Catholic Christian. Someone born into a Muslim family in Pakistan or Turkey is very likely to be a Muslim. Someone born into a Buddhist family in Thailand or Sri Lanka is very likely to be a Buddhist, and so on. It is of course true that there are individual conversions in all directions, to and from each of the religions. We probably all know, say, Muslims who have become Christians and Christians who have become Muslims, Sikhs who have become Christians and Christians who have become Sikhs, Jews who have become Buddhists, Buddhists who have become Hindus,

and so on. But these individual conversions, although very important to the individuals concerned, are statistically insignificant in comparison with the massive transmission of each faith from generation to generation within the same tradition.

So given that the religion to which people adhere, or against which they rebel, depends in the vast majority of cases on where they happen to have been born, what difference does this make? Is it a very significant fact, or something that we can properly ignore? Some will say that “No, it is not significant. It’s just that we happen to be the fortunate ones to whom God has revealed His truth, and so we have the responsibility of proclaiming it to the rest of the world.” This is the traditional missionary view. And it is an internally coherent position. But is it not a little troubling to notice that people within the other religions are saying, or thinking, exactly the same from the point of view of their own faith? An observer from outer space, visiting this planet, would see a number of religious communities, each believing that they are the chosen people to whom the Truth has been revealed, and each believing that the rest of the human race are in varying degrees of error. And that observer might well conclude that they are all thinking in much too small and restricted a way.

Now if there is only one true religion, which is my own, then must I as a Christian believe that there is an important spiritual advantage in being born into Christianity, and a corresponding spiritual disadvantage in being born into Judaism, or Islam, or Sikhism, or Hinduism, or Buddhism, or the Bahá’í Faith, and so on? How do I square this with the belief in a God who loves all God’s human children with an equal and limitless love? On the other hand, if there is no such spiritual plus in being a Christian, and no such spiritual minus in following one of the other great world faiths, then what becomes of those Christian doctrines which imply the contrary? For the doctrine that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate (i.e. the second person of a divine Trinity incarnate) entails that Christianity is the only religion to have been founded by God in person, so that it is God’s own religion, and must be uniquely superior to all the others. How could that fail to constitute a very significant spiritual plus?

However, at this point some Christians might simply say, “So what? We know that we are right, and that’s that.” This was the position of Karl Barth, who was probably the most influential Christian theologian of the twentieth century, when he said that “the Christian religion is true, because it has pleased God, who alone can be the judge in this matter, to affirm it to be the true religion... And it alone has the commission and the authority to be a missionary religion, i.e., to confront the world of religions as the one true religion, with absolute self-confidence to invite and challenge it to abandon its ways and to start on the Christian way.”¹ But others of us today, and indeed I think a growing number of us, find this an extremely uncomfortable stance to take. Indeed not only uncomfortable, but implausible. For we know that there have been and there are Muslim and Jewish and Hindu and other Karl Barths, in the sense of Muslim, Jewish and Hindu and other religious thinkers who make the same exclusive claim for their own religion. And having realised this, the fact that I was born into Christianity, rather than into Islam or Judaism or Hinduism or Buddhism or Sikhism, and so on, does not, when looked at objectively, seem a good enough reason to hold that everyone born elsewhere is in error.

Incidentally, it is of interest that, unlike Karl Barth, his contemporary, Paul Tillich,

¹ *Church Dogmatics* 1/2:350, 357.

took the trouble, fairly late in his career, to spend time in Japan in dialogue with Buddhist thinkers; and as a result he said in one of his last public lectures that if he could do his work over again he would do it on a multi-faith basis.

Now let us return to the only-one-true-religion thesis. I suggest that by a true religion we mean one that teaches truths and that is also an effective channel or context of salvation. For salvation, redemption, re-creation is really what the religions are all about. They are not primarily sets of doctrines, or philosophies, but ways or paths of salvation—salvation being our Christian term for a radical change from a profoundly wrong to a profoundly right and fulfilling relationship to the divine or the ultimate, issuing in a transformed life.

Let me at this point invoke a New Testament text. This is Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46, which is in effect summarised in another saying of Jesus's: "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."² For our present purpose I want to equate saying Lord, Lord, with regarding Jesus as God incarnate, although (as modern new Testament studies have shown) this clearly cannot be what the historical Jesus himself meant. But nevertheless let us for the moment apply his saying to the church's incarnation doctrine. And, more securely, I shall equate doing the will of the heavenly Father with the sort of things of which Jesus spoke—feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, serving the sick and the prisoners, and so on, all of which I take to be simply instances of loving your neighbour in the concrete realities of life. And according to Jesus in this parable, it is this latter that matters in the long run, rather than the affirmation of any doctrine about himself.

This side of Jesus's teaching suggests to me that Christians should not equate salvation with, in the familiar evangelical phrase, taking Jesus as your lord and saviour, and but rather with doing God's will on earth. So let us consider the possibility of seeing salvation, not as the juridical event of being justified by the atoning death of Christ, but as an actual transformation of human beings, usually gradually, from natural self-centeredness to a new orientation centred in the divine, the ultimate, the eternally real, and expressing itself in love of one's neighbours—who are anyone and everyone. If salvation is thus something concrete that shows in varying degrees in people's lives, we can look about us to see where it is occurring. And when we do, do we find that it is taking place only within Christianity, or more effectively in Christianity than in other religions? I don't think that anyone who has got to know people of other religions could ever think that.

In Birmingham, where I live, about 10% of the population are Muslims, and there are large communities of Hindus and Sikhs, as well as a small but long-established Jewish community and a new and growing Buddhist presence, smaller Taoist and Bahá'í groups, all surrounded by the large majority Christian community. And so we are accustomed to having to do with people of other faiths in every walk of life. It is a common experience to have colleagues at work, or fellow parents of children in the same school, or neighbours in the same street, or shop keepers, dentists, doctors, solicitors, civil servants, taxi drivers and so on with whom we interact, who practice a different faith. There are of course good and bad individuals within every community, but

² Matt. 7:21.

observation suggests that the mixture is much the same within them all, including the Christian population. Our fellow citizens of other faiths do not seem to be, in general, either better or worse human beings than our Christian fellow citizens in general. They do not seem to be less kindly and thoughtful for others, less honest, less law abiding, less good citizens, less devoted to the practice of their faith, less concerned for the education and welfare of their children, than the Christian majority. In short, they do not seem to be either better or worse human beings.

Another kind of observation is less common, because it depends on having travelled in the heartlands of other religions and having been lucky enough to encounter some of their saintly individuals. By saints I do not mean perfect men and women, for there are none, but people who are manifestly much more advanced than most of us in the salvific transformation. I have had the good fortune to get to know several such people, and whilst they include Christians they also include people of other faiths. And I do not find it possible to maintain that as a Christian I must be closer to God than them, because I am well aware that this is not the case.

But, we have to ask, is this what we would expect if the traditional Christian belief-system is literally and straight-forwardly true? Should not the fruits of the Spirit—which St Paul listed as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—be more evident in the lives of Christians than in the lives of the rest of the world? And yet I do not think that they are. So it seems that either the special Christian relationship with God does not make any concrete difference, or that an equally close relationship to God is possible within the other world religions. And what follows from this? We have heard it in broad terms from some of the most respected spiritual leaders of this century. Thus Mahatma Gandhi said, “Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis, Jews, are convenient labels. But when I tear them down, I do not know which is which. We are all children of the same God.”³ And the present Dalai Lama has said, “I maintain that every religion of the world—Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism—has similar ideas of love, the same goal of benefiting humanity through spiritual practices, and the same effects of making their followers into better human beings. Differences of dogma may be ascribed to differences of time and circumstances as well as cultural influences.”⁴ To very many people today this kind of pluralistic outlook seems much more realistic and believable than the dogma of the unique superiority of one’s own religion, whichever that may be.

But now what about the conflicting truth-claims of the different religions? I want to suggest that in fact they do not conflict because they are claims about different manifestations of God within our human thought and experience. The kind of picture that seems to me most promising affirms an ultimate transcendent divine reality which is being differently conceived, and hence differently experienced, and hence differently responded to in life, within the different religions. It then follows that the incompatible belief systems of the different traditions refer to different manifestations to humanity of the one ultimate reality. As such, they do not conflict. That Christians are aware of the Ultimate as thought and experienced in terms of Christian concepts is not incompatible

³ M. K. Gandhi, *What Jesus Means to Me*, ed. R. K. Prabhu (Abmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1959) 31.

⁴ The Dalai Lama, *A Human Approach to World Peace* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1984) 13.

with the fact that Muslims are aware of the Ultimate as thought and experienced in terms of Islamic concepts, and Buddhists in terms of Buddhist concepts, and so on.

For an immensely important epistemological truth applies to religious as well as to non-religious awareness. This is that the inner shape of our own minds, formed by the conceptual system in terms of which we think, always affects the way in which we become aware of anything. The basic principle was brilliantly stated by Thomas Aquinas when he said that “Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”⁵ He did not go on to apply this principle to religious plurality, where the mode of the knower is differently formed within the different traditions. But we find the same idea in the Muslim Sufi writer al-Junayd, who said, “The colour of the water is that of its container,” which Ibn al-Arabi explicitly applied to the religions when he said, “If [one] knew Junayd’s saying, ‘The water takes its colour from the vessel containing it,’ he would not interfere with other men’s beliefs, but would perceive God in every form of belief.”⁶

Considered as pictures of reality, the different religious belief-systems are somewhat like maps of the world drawn in different projections. Because the earth is a three-dimensional globe, any representation of it on the two-dimensional surface of a map has to distort it, and the various projections are different ways of doing this systematically. But that one map, drawn in one projection, is correct does not entail that another, drawn in a different projection, is incorrect. They may be equally correct, in spite of the fact that they are both systematic distortions. The test is whether they enable us to move successfully from A to B. And it may be that any representation of the infinite divine reality in our limited human terms is bound to be radically inadequate, and yet that a number of different such human representations may be equally successful in guiding us on our path through life.

But, finally, it is important to add, speaking as a Christian, that although Christianity is not, I’m suggesting, the one and only authentic context of salvation, there is nevertheless a sense in which, for Christians, Christianity is central, unique, normative; for they have been formed by it. Christianity has, so to speak, created them in its own image, so that it fits them, and they fit it, as no other religion can. So it should be lived to the full—that is the practical outcome of the pluralist view—but it should also be born in mind that exactly the same applies to our neighbours in this small world who have been formed by Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, the Bahá’í Faith, etc. For we must all rise to the realisation that objectively no religion is the one and only true religion, and that we must all become able to interact with people of other faiths on that basis.

⁵ *Summae Theologiae*, II/II, Q. 1, art 2.

⁶ Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963) 88.