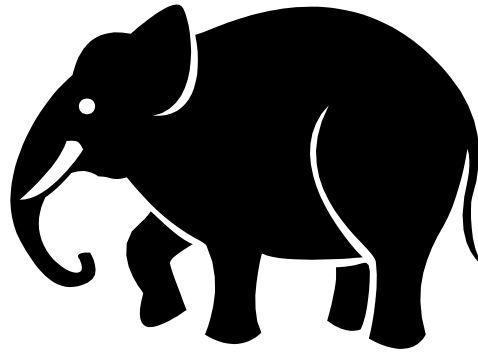


The Elephant In The Room



**all religions
cannot be
equally true**

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last revised 10/23/2018

*I am not writing on behalf of any organization.
All views expressed here are my own (and, hopefully, God's).*

I was flipping through the hotel channels when a cartoon caught my eye. This kids' program told a story you've probably heard before. Here's the gist:

A wise king invited five blind men to his audience chamber. In the room was an elephant.

The first blind man grabbed the elephant's tail. "It's a rope," he announced.

The second blind man grabbed the elephant's leg. "No, I feel the trunk of a tree."

The third blind man grabbed the elephant's ear. "You are both wrong: this is clearly a large fan."

The fourth blind man bumped into the elephant's tusk. "Ouch! I just felt the tip of a spear!"

The final blind man grabbed the elephant's trunk, and as it twisted in his hands he became convinced that he was holding a snake.

The five blind men began to argue, each contending that he alone was correct and each refusing to go and consider the others' evidence.

And the wise king turned to his advisors and said, "So it is in religion. We are all blind men grasping part of the truth and insisting on our own correctness."

That was not the first time I heard that story, nor was it the last. It suggests that since we're all blind as we fumble for the truth about God, we shouldn't claim that our religious perspective is the right one. We each have part of the truth.

The story seems profound, but that is only because the medium of print masks the absurdity of the scenario. If you were to watch a play about it you wouldn't be in the audience congratulating blind man number two for his keen insight. You'd be thinking "Really? Elephants stink! Can't you smell something? I can smell that beast all the way from the fifth row! You can't hear it breathing? You can't feel its warmth?" We like this story because it makes us feel as though everyone is right, but the story really means that everyone is mostly wrong.

Even more significantly, the story only makes sense because the king can see what's really going on. The blind men do not each have part of the truth nor are they able to apprehend the whole by working together: the blind men have all of the falsehood and only the king has true understanding. Upon reflection, the real moral of the story is that there is a true perspective which we should adopt.

The Real Elephant In The Room

There is an elephant in the room: pluralism.

Pluralism comes in two forms: the fact and the philosophy. The fact of pluralism is undeniable – there are many religions in the world and they all must get along somehow. But there is also the philosophy of pluralism which teaches that the various religions are all paths to ultimate reality.

This sounds appealing, but the arguments for philosophical pluralism wind up resembling the story of the blind men and the king. They (of necessity) assert some superior perspective on reality and so do the

very thing they condemn traditional religions for doing. Philosophical pluralism is a self-refuting religious claim that religious claims cannot be trusted.

More importantly, philosophical pluralism is demonstrably false.

This is so obvious and yet so rarely thought about that some evidence is called for. Let us consider the four major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Between them they account for around 80% of the global population. Other faiths are much, much smaller. For example, although Judaism is of massive historical significance and contemporary global relevance, it accounts for less than 1% of the world's population.

Philosophical pluralists often profess confidence in whatever truths all the religions hold in common. It can be disconcerting, therefore, to discover that one of the truths the four major religions hold in common is that not all religions are correct.

We will first examine Christianity and Islam in comparison to each other. It turns out to be quite straightforward: the rejection of other religions as legitimate paths is explicitly stated in their sacred scriptures.

- In the Bible, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). And two of Jesus’ followers explained it this way shortly afterwards, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).
- In the Qu’ran we read, “Whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall be one of the losers” (Surah 3:85). And in Surah 9:30 we see the specific rejection of both Judaism and Christianity: “And the Jews say: Uzair [Ezra] is the son of Allah; and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah; these are the words of their mouths; they imitate the saying of those who disbelieved before; may Allah destroy them; how they are turned away!”

More passages could be adduced from both the Bible and the Qu’ran to reinforce the point, but these are sufficient to establish that Christianity excludes all paths to God except Jesus and that Islam rejects all other religions.

But maybe the monotheistic faiths are the problem – perhaps the far Eastern religions have a more harmonious stance on things. We will look at them in a moment, but realize the implication of that perspective: Christianity and Islam between them account for more than half of the world's population. Excluding them destroys the notion that all religions are fundamentally correct – philosophical pluralism could at most be the suggestion that “the world's religions are mostly correct with the unfortunate exception of the ones that most people believe.”

That aside, Buddhism and Hinduism deserve consideration. We must first acknowledge that these faiths are harder to analyze, because although they do have important texts they do not place the same emphasis on them as Christianity and Islam. So rather than quoting from the *Dhammapada* or the *Baghavad Gita* we will consider these faiths historically.

Buddhism, it surprises many Westerners to realize, was founded upon the rejection of central tenets of Hinduism by Siddhartha Gautama (now known as the Buddha). A moment's reflection demonstrates that it must have been so: Siddhartha was born a Hindu and went on to found his own religion. These are not

the actions of a man who believed Hinduism was right. One specific aspect of Hinduism he rejected was the caste system.

And so we see that Buddhism, like Christianity and Islam, is built upon the foundation that not all religions are correct. Buddhism could not exist as a separate religion otherwise.

This leaves only Hinduism to consider. Hinduism is, of the four faiths we are examining, the one most difficult to summarize fairly. Hinduism is not really a religion in the way most Westerners think of religion. It's more like a framework for several subreligions. As such, it is inclusivistic and teaches that there are many paths to God. This seems much like the philosophical pluralism we are discussing, but in practice it turns out not to be. Hindu devotees tend to say things like "Everyone is a Hindu" and "Hinduism is the only religion – other faiths are merely forms of Hinduism."

Hinduism, more than any other faith, suffers from the elephant in the room syndrome. Hindus think of themselves as the king and the rest of us as the blind men. In other words, Hinduism, too, claims to have the exclusive truth – other religions are just immature or incomplete realizations of Hinduism. Basically, Hindus claim to treat the prophets of each religion as wise sages but then proceed to disagree with them. They regard them as teachers of truth except when they say something that contradicts what the great Hindu sages have taught.

In other words, Hinduism's embrace of other faiths is illusory since Hindus don't actually accept other faiths but only the parts of them they approve.

And so each of the four major faiths denies at least one of the other major faiths.

- Christianity insists that Jesus is the only means of salvation.
- Islam specifically condemns Christians and Jews.
- Buddhism was founded as a rejection of Hinduism.
- Hinduism reinterprets other faiths into a form of Hinduism

Philosophical pluralism is a non-starter – it simply does not comport with reality.

Why Most People Are Pluralists Anyway

But for most people this isn't compelling. And it's not compelling to them because they didn't adopt pluralism for philosophical reasons. They became pluralists for three reasons:

- 1) A suspicion that although religions disagree about many things, the religions are really teaching the same thing at the core.
- 2) A suspicion that the various religions have the same vaguely positive effects on their followers.
- 3) A suspicion that there's no way to know who's right.

Considering these three, some sort of pluralism seems very appealing. So let's examine each suspicion in turn.

Suspicion #1: Religions Are Essentially The Same

This suspicion might be stated thus: "Sure, religions disagree about stuff like what day to worship on and the exact words that God spoke to people. But they agree on the essential stuff like love and faith and peace. Take all that other stuff away and the core is the same."

The observation that all religions have something in common seems profound until we realize what we have done. We have said, “Take away all the stuff that is different and examine what remains. It’s all the same!”

Well, of course. No other outcome is possible. We could repeat the process with anything: hamsters and snakes (both living organisms of superclass Gnathostomata), cubes and spheres (both platonic solids), or stars and nightlights (both light sources). When we take away their differences we are left only with their similarities.

While what things have in common with one another is interesting it is what distinguishes them that establishes their identity. Things are defined, in part, by their differences from other things.

In the realm of religion, this is summed up well by Steve Turner in a stanza from his poem “Creed”

*We believe that all religions are basically the same—
at least the one that we read was.
They all believe in love and goodness.
They only differ on matters of creation,
sin, heaven, hell, God, and salvation.*

There have been many attempts to identify what it is that binds all the faiths together under the title “religion” – the one that seems most plausible to me is that each of the world religions advocates some perspective on reality that includes the claim that something is fundamentally wrong and prescribes a remedy. Unfortunately for pluralism, they disagree about what is wrong and therefore also disagree about how to fix it.

Let us consider each question with respect to the four world religions.

1) What is wrong with the world? Buddhism teaches that the root of suffering is desire; whereas Hinduism teaches that the reason for suffering is evil done in a previous lifetime. Islam teaches that people are capable of true righteousness but are weak and sometimes fumble; whereas Christianity teaches that people are dead in their sins and incapable of achieving righteousness.

2) And how can what is wrong be made right? Clearly it depends upon what is wrong. Buddhism teaches that we should stop wanting things. Hinduism, on the other hand, teaches that we should want the right things in the right way. Islam teaches that we should submit to Allah and try harder. Christianity teaches that we need to repent of our sins and receive God’s grace. These are not trivial differences.

But, an observer might object, don’t the religions agree on behavioral stuff like the need to love people?

Not really – even when religions use the same words (such as “love”) they usually infuse them with different meaning. Hinduism teaches that you should love people, sure, but Hinduism defines love in a caste-based system. Buddhists teach that, while you should be compassionate towards all life, love is one of the desires you need to grow out of. Islam does teach the obligation to love – but it does not command Muslims to love their enemies. Christianity teaches that true love requires that Christians love their enemies like they love themselves. So yes, each religion commands love but every religion describes love differently.

Examples could be multiplied, but the point is clear. From a distance, all the religions seem quite similar. Then again, from a distance a wolf looks like a dog. Details matter.

Suspicion #2: Religions Have Similar Practical Impacts

This suspicion might be worded like this: “From what I can tell, devout Buddhists and Christians and Hindus and Muslims all seem to act pretty much the same when it comes to the common virtues. Christians aren’t more honest than Buddhists. Hindus aren’t more likely to pitch in to help someone move than Muslims. Despite their theoretical differences, the religions are interchangeable in real life.”

This is an empirical question, but there has been surprisingly little research done on it. Most sociologists simply study “religiosity” without examining the particularity of an individual’s faith. I’m not aware of any study showing whether devout Buddhists are more or less likely to cheat on their taxes than devout Muslims.

But we can look at the practical teachings of each religion and reflect on how they would affect our lives. Each faith advocates the sorts of things that all cultures that wish to survive must advocate (honesty in most situations, nonviolence in routine interactions, respect for property of others, etc), but they differ on several practical matters. Let’s pick two: what you can put in your body and what you can do with your sexual organs.

<i>presented in alphabetical order</i>	Dietary Regulations	Sexual Regulations
Buddhism	Many Buddhists are vegetarians, but this is not obligatory.	The ideal is to not desire sex, but that is reserved for professionals. Others have “lawful” sex while striving not to be attached to the pleasure that comes from it. Marriage is optional but customary.
Christianity	No drunkenness	No sex outside of marriage. Marriage is monogamous and heterosexual.
Hinduism	No meat (true for almost all Hindus).	There are a variety of teachings on sex depending on which strain of Hinduism is being examined.
Islam	No pork or alcohol	No sex outside of marriage. Marriage is polygamous and heterosexual.

These are differences that make a difference in daily life. And they are only the tip of the iceberg. Who can you marry? Under what circumstances can you deceive someone? How much money should you give to charitable causes? How should you worship? How should you pray?

Saying that the religions all teach a common core of morality misses the point. A devout Hindu will not live like a devout Christian. In fact, this is so true that it shapes the course of whole societies.

Robert Woodberry makes this point convincingly in his article “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy” in *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 106, No. 2 (May 2012), pp. 244-274. Woodberry demonstrates that a particular sort of Christianity is uniquely and causally associated with the growth of stable liberal democracies. In his words, “Statistically, the historic prevalence of Protestant missionaries explains about half the variation in democracy in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania and removes the impact of most variables that dominate current statistical research about

democracy. The association between Protestant missions and democracy is consistent in different continents and subsamples, and it is robust to more than 50 controls and to instrumental variable analyses.”

That’s very scholarly, so consider a simple example of how religion shapes culture: India’s caste system. The caste system (and the karmic worldview that underlies it) is not a small part of Hinduism – it is one of the only unifying elements in the entire Hindu structure.

Caste has consequences. There are some tremendously poor people in India, and their poverty and suffering is a direct byproduct of living in a culture whose sense of morality flows from a karmic worldview. Karma teaches that every person has earned the suffering they receive, and in some cases to try to improve their life is to interfere with their destiny and to hinder their journey towards perfection.

In response, the Indian convert to Buddhism B.R. Ambedkar wrote *Buddhism Will Make You Free* as a guide for the members of the lowest caste in India and his followers have built a reform movement, because the suffering of the lowest caste is incompatible with their Buddhist ethic of compassion. Upon converting to the form of Buddhism he practiced, the former Hindus are required to profess, “I renounce Hinduism, which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.” And “I firmly believe the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.”

Likewise, when the Christian Mother Theresa saw the suffering of the poorest of the poor in India she was moved to acts of compassion which mobilized a whole arsenal of funds and services to these poor people. Within a Christian worldview the logic runs like this: “They are suffering because the world isn’t the way it’s supposed to be: humanity has sinned and brought suffering on the whole world. Each person in that slum bears the image of God and was made with loving care by their heavenly Father. I must show them love and meet their needs in practical ways.”

And so we see that these three religions have three different responses to the same situation, and that these societally significant responses are rooted in their fundamental beliefs.

Do some more research on this issue. The intersection of culture and religion is complex territory, but it is nonetheless possible to form broad impressions of the differences between religions through a study of history. Each of the religions we are considering has had the chance to shape more than one culture. Buddhism, for example, has shaped Thailand and Cambodia. Hinduism has shaped India and Nepal. You are probably able to form your own list of countries influenced by Islam and Christianity. In your judgment, what are the differences between them and which differences seem traceable to religious influences? It will soon become clear to you that different religions do not have the same impact. Not only are they theoretically different, they are practically different.

Suspicion #3: There’s No Way To Know Who’s Right

Now we come to what seems to be the fundamental reason many people are pluralists – it’s a way of expressing confusion or incomprehension. For many people, saying “all religions are equally true” is really an imprecise way of saying “I can’t tell which religion is true.”

But thinking about religion is not actually that complicated. You figure out what to think about religion the same way you figure out who to vote for, who to marry, and which neighborhood to move into. You gather evidence and render your best judgment.

How can you gather evidence? By reading books and talking to people. It's not as hard as we sometimes think.

Do you have to consider every religion before you make your decision? No more than you have to date every eligible person in the world before you select a spouse. You stop once you find the right one.

I suggest you consider the religions in descending order of size, which would mean that you examine Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism in turn. You can choose a different order if that makes more sense to you, but ordering them by size seems as reasonable an approach as any.

I will leave the other religions to speak for themselves, but I offer this advice for Christianity: Jesus said: "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own" (John 7:17, NIV). And so I urge you to read the New Testament of the Bible, particularly the gospels about Jesus, and set yourself to do God's will by doing whatever you see Jesus commanding or modeling. Then you will learn whether Christianity is from God.

I have written a short introduction to Christianity called "Why Jesus" (which also discusses atheism, something absent from this essay) and a companion piece called "The Jesus FAQ" – you can download them from my website glenandpaula.com (click on "read Glen's essays"). They expand on the two paragraphs above and will serve as a helpful guide as you consider the Christian message. There you can also find a short follow-up to this article especially for Christians called "Following Jesus in a Pluralistic Society" that focuses on more practical considerations than this essay.