

Orwellian Religion

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After September 11, you may remember, our staunchly secular culture became suddenly religious. Religion was dusted off and allowed to make a brief appearance in the public square; faith was no longer subject to postmodern taboos; God, for once, seemed important.

If we were nonplused at this, we puzzled no more when the character of this religiosity became a little clearer. Shortly after the attack, for instance, many American leaders attended an “inter-faith” service at the Washington National Cathedral held in the name of “God the Father, Mohammed, and Jesus Christ.” And several weeks later a “Prayer for America” service for “all faiths” took place in Yankee Stadium. This service featured Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhists, and was officiated by such noted religious personages as Oprah Winfrey and James Earl Jones. Just like human rebellion, we might have said, to turn to religion after a tragedy—and pick false religion.

The participants in these inter-faith gatherings, in fact, not only represent false religions (Islam, Buddhism, or heterodox forms of Christianity, to name a few) but a false view of religion itself: indifferentism. Indifferentism holds that all religions are basically equal—there are many paths up the same mountain; no one Way is superior to any other Way. This view can be summed up by one advocate’s comment that “what different faiths offer is not so much competing truths as different ways of understanding a single overarching truth, that Jesus taught us to be less concerned with theological particulars than with our love for God and humanity, and that people from diverse traditions can learn much from one another about the nature of God.”¹ All religions are really saying the same thing.

But two basic problems arise when this view is examined carefully. The first is that if we identify the various religions with the propositions they assert—“God is sovereign,” “People are reincarnated,” “Westerners must die in jihad,” etc.—it would be difficult to see how all religions could be equal. It would be difficult because elementary logic tells us that a proposition and its negation (or its contrary) cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. If Islam asserts monotheism and Hinduism asserts polytheism, then one or both must be false. So while we might say that all religions are equally *false*—which wouldn’t appear to be a satisfactory solution to the crowds in the Bronx—we can say nothing more. So long as propositions are our guide, all religions are *not* equal.

Well, says the syncretist, then we must not identify religion with propositions at all. The definition of religion must lie in some other factor, a factor more important than mere intellectual bits of dogma. It must involve something moral, or emotional, or the unification of character. And that is why all religions are equal: they may assert different dogmas, but the underlying religious attitude they all share is what really matters. They are all concerned with loving God and humanity, as the author quoted above puts it. One is also reminded of Kierkegaard’s famous illustration about the Lutheran and the Hindu: the Lutheran prayed with an orthodox conception of God but without passion, while the Hindu prayed to an idol but with infinite passion; hence the Hindu and not the Lutheran was really worshipping God. The *How* and not the *What* is what matters.

Yet this does little to avoid the difficulty. The objection forgets that not all adherents of these faiths agree with the disparagement of doctrine. Osama Bin Laden would certainly take issue with the notion that Judaism and Islam are really the same, and John Calvin would quickly point out that both Islam and Judaism teach a false gospel. By what right, then, do the indifferentists rule out the views of Calvin or Bin Laden? Why is doctrine unimportant? How do they know?

The answer, of course, may swing from mysticism to empiricism and insist that the psychology of religion has determined, by observation of the common elements in all faiths, that emotions and not the intellect are the heart of religion. In this case the reply will be that this

method is logically circular. Gordon Clark has noted that in order to discover what “religion” is by examining the common element of all religions, we would first have to isolate certain views so that we could examine them for this element. Yet this isolation requires that we *already know* what “religion” is:

Suppose the problem were to find the common element in all snarks in order to form a definition of *snark* in general. The empirical method would require an examination of snarks; but this examination could proceed only if it were first known what a snark was. If the Bellman or the Barrister could recognize a Snark when he saw one, he might seek it with thimbles and care, and upon examination determine whether the characteristics of Boojums are essential to all Snarks. But an ordinary mortal would not know enough to use a thimble, and with all his care would not know a snark if he met one. That is, the empirical examination can take place only after the definition is accepted.²

In other words, there is no empirical basis for the indifferentists’ claims. And if they can’t define religion apart from their own prejudices, then they surely can’t provide a solid basis for discounting Bin Laden. They are in the same boat as the dogmatists they hate.

This point ties in directly with the second main flaw of indifferentism—namely, that the imagined escape from religious exclusivism is no escape at all. The view that all religions are good in their own way, that there are many paths up the same mountain, or whatnot, is itself an exclusive, dogmatic assertion. It assumes certain theological points that in turn assume the absolute truth of indifferentism and the falsity of all opposing views. When the indifferentist says that many roads lead to heaven, he assumes that Christ was wrong when He said that He was the way, truth, and life, and that no man comes to the Father but by Him (John 14:6). When the syncretist says that religions should be mixed, he assumes that Paul was wrong when he said, “Come out from among them” (2 Corinthians 6:17). When the tolerant postmodern says that religion must not be exclusive, he assumes that Bin Laden ought not to blow up Americans in the name of Allah or that Muslim guerrillas are wrong to toss grenades into Christian churches.³ In short, by its affirmation of equality, indifferentism excludes certain worldviews as *false* because they deny this assumption. The result is that the theory shoots itself in the philosophical foot: if indifferentism is true, then it’s false. All religions are equal, but some are more equal than others.

Surely it’s not worth compromising the basic, necessary antithesis between Christianity and all false worldviews for such a contradiction. God has indeed made foolish the wisdom of the world (1 Corinthians 1:20), but sometimes it simply stultifies itself.

¹ Bruce Bawer, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1997), p. 174.

² Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Hobbs, NM: Trinity Foundation, 3rd edition, 1998), pp. 166-167. See also *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, (Trinity, 2nd ed., 1995), chapter 1.

³ If the indifferentist replies by telling Bin Laden that indifferentism is consistent in affirming the equality of all religions because Bin Laden's Islam is not really a religion, Bin Laden could simply ask, as Clark did just above, "Why not? How have you discovered what is and is not a religion?"