
THE KING COMES ON A DONKEY

by
Stanley Bohn

Kenneth Samples asserted in the *Christian Research Journal* that the 20th century “brought forth unparalleled challenges to the historic Christian faith. During this century Christianity’s relevance and ultimate validity have been questioned as never before” (39).

This perception could be due to the shrines, temples, mosques and rituals that have appeared in the “Christian territory” of the Western nations where they have not been before. Western nations sent Christian missionaries throughout the world fully expecting the non-Christian religions to fade away when their “primitiveness” was exposed. The Western church was surprised to find, however, that rather than fading away these other faiths sent missionaries who were able to win Christians to their religions.

A Christian church was burned down in the south side of Chicago where I lived while in school. A few years later, a mosque was built at 47th and Woodlawn to serve that neighborhood. So the feeling that we are being invaded, that we are confronting a new threat from pluralism,¹ is understandable.

However, pluralism was a problem described by the Bible writers from the beginning. The serpent in Eden offered an alternative superior truth claim that would take humanity beyond knowing only finite truth. Like God, humans would know universal truth. Throughout the Bible the worship of other seemingly “better” gods and lapses into idol worship are described and condemned. Paul explained the need to be on guard against distortions of the truth, even when it comes from fellow church members (Acts 20: 28-31). The threat to the early church

Stanley Bohn (M.A., Ohio State University) is an ordained minister of the Mennonite Church, USA, and lecturer in philosophy and conflict management at Jamaica Theological Seminary, Kingston, Jamaica.
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¹The term “pluralism” is used in a variety of ways. As used here it stands for conflicting claims to truth of religions, ethical systems and cultures.

from other religions was often physically violent. So, historically, the threat of pluralism, or relativism, is not new.

Pluralism as a Challenge Rather Than A Threat

The Biblical approach, however, is different from the approach taken by many Christians today. The assumption of the Bible seems to be that pluralism is not something to overcome, but the way God created the world. Since his rule is non-coercive and must be freely chosen, pluralism is useful. When we have tried to eliminate pluralism and competing truth claims, we have gotten into spiritual trouble and have often unintentionally found ourselves in another idolatry.

For example, not only did the tree of knowledge temptation to deny our finiteness and gain universal truth lead us into trouble with God, but the tower of Babel can be seen as another attempt to get beyond finiteness and find security by one culture imposing its truths on the entire world. Diversity of languages was instituted by God to remind us of our finiteness, that we are not God, not able to do anything we want (Gen. 11:6).

Again when some early church fathers, such as Origen, Clement and others in Alexandria, claimed that Plato's philosophy contained universal truth that should be read into the Bible, Plato was discovered to be bound by time and culture. He was unable to state universal truth. In fact, Neo-platonist Christianity only removed us further from an inaccessible God who, in the thinking of these theologians, could not have been incarnated in human flesh.

When the church tried to stamp out pluralism in hermeneutics, we inherited the doctrine of papal infallibility, again distancing Christians further from relationship to God. The same distancing happened when the church tried to eliminate other truth claims by wars against barbarians, the Crusades, the Inquisition, church-state alliances that registered everyone as a baptized Christians whether they truly believed or not, the killing of aboriginal people in the colonies who refused to be baptized, and the persecution of minorities such as Waldensians, Anabaptists, Quakers and others. We even found that aspects of the inerrancy debate tempted us into claims about error-free copying and translating that involved us in battles to defend the Bible's authority, but distracted us from obeying its authoritative teachings.

These battles to eliminate pluralism could be seen from a Biblical point of view as misguided attempts to repair "mistakes" in God's creation. Pluralism can be seen as the built-in challenge God needed for a non-coerced response of loyalty.

Pluralism was a way to remind Israel not to take its covenant for granted and assume it meant special privileges. It was good for the Roman church to have to deal with Luther, just as it was good for the American car industry to have to deal with Volkswagen and Toyota. The real threat of pluralism was not in pluralism itself but in the reaction to it: the worship of security by trying to eliminate pluralism instead of serving God.

The prophets pointed out that the security of having a king who could impose standards and coerce others, like other nations, was not the way of a suffering-servant kind of Messiah. Jeremiah asked the exiles (Jer. 29) to renounce monolithic control and to pursue God's assignment in the midst of other truth claims. Restoring a Davidic kingdom of this world that could control history according to their design is not the same as a kingdom of martyr witnesses ruled by God in a world in which Satan is still powerful and deceptive.

The attempts to deal with pluralism by overcoming it have unintentionally landed us in the idolatry of security worship and are self-defeating. This paper explores three examples from the field of philosophy that seem to try to overcome the pluralism that is built into creation and then restates the New Testament way of proclaiming Christ as the truth in the midst of other truth claims.

Philosophical Efforts to Overcome Pluralism

There are respectable scholarly efforts to overcome the threat of pluralism/relativism. I have classified them into three types and focused on a representative of each type: the philosophical approach (Netland), the metaphysical approach (Hick) and the philosophy of religion approach (Barth).

Netland's Philosophical Defense Against Pluralism

A normal reaction to pluralism is the search for the secure ground of a universal truth or criteria that would be recognized by all rational people. Once these standards are stated, we can use them to show that Christianity is superior to other religions. We can also rely on them to protect us against the attacks of skeptics and agnostics. Thomas Aquinas, using Aristotelian philosophy, and the Scholastic tradition that later developed, showed Christianity was supported by natural law and theology. Philosophical proofs of God's existence were put forth showing that one necessarily had to believe in God if one were a logical person. (Later philosophers pointed out the weaknesses in the assumptions on which those proofs were based.)

The appeal of natural theology and natural law over New Testament truth is that it seems grounded in universal experience and therefore seems unchallengeable. It can stand alone, outside of, and preceding Christian truth. However, we live in a fallen world and natural law has been provincial and oppressive as the Reformation reaction to Scholasticism and natural theology indicated.

In our times Harold Netland's book, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*, is a careful and well thought out example of this defense against pluralism. Netland, a missionary in Japan and a teacher of religious studies at Tokyo Christian University, in *Dissonant Voices*, developed ten objective standards by which to measure the truth of any religion. He shows that Christianity is the only religion that satisfies the requirements (Netland 193).

Netland is well aware of the problem of a Christian choosing the standards that only his own religion can meet. So he relies on criteria acceptable in logic: claims must not contradict other claims of that religion, must be consistent with a unified world view, must be consistent with well established conclusions in other disciplines, must be compatible with widely accepted moral values and principles, and so on. (Knitter also does this, proposing standards by which to judge religions. His standards include usefulness to mental health, aid to intellectual growth and the depth and value of religious experience.)

The price one pays for this approach seems unacceptable for Christians. It makes our faith dependent on something outside of our relationship to God: philosophical proofs and arguments, a form of idolatry.

Of course, as a foundation for missionary efforts, reliance on such an approach could lead to the attempt to convince unbelievers by logical argument. That kind of evangelism, partly depending on debating skill and training in philosophy rather than the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the working of the Spirit, would create an unstable convert vulnerable to new philosophical discoveries and trends or to someone with wider knowledge and training. As Newbigin points out in *Foolishness to the Greeks*, what is needed is the courage to proclaim beliefs that cannot be proved to be true in terms of enlightenment standards (Newbigin 148).

Hick's Metaphysical Defense Against Pluralism

It may not be proper to see Hick's ideas as a defense against pluralism as he has a positive regard for other religions. However, his proposal ultimately would decrease the status of other religions and create a new

universal one. His solution is to create a metaphysics that can include all religions. He can draw support from Tillich's idea of the "God beyond God" in stating that many religions describe an ultimate mystery, the "numinous," an inexpressible reality that words can only point to but not describe adequately. He proposes that all religions are different cultural expressions of this one ineffable truth or reality. That is, the different religions are different paths up the same mountain toward a common reality or truth.

Some of the supporters of this approach, such as Stanley Samartha, suggest it would be helpful to redo Christian theology and construct a "theocentric Christology" instead of Christocentric one (79). Others such as Paul Knitter in his book, *No Other Name*, and Hick (16-36) suggest that theocentric or "realitycentric" or soteriocentric theologies are needed rather than a Christocentric one. Hick also suggests an "inspiration theology" (16-36). But as Pannenberg has pointed out, Christians can only know God through Jesus Christ (96-106)

Of course, in this view, Christian evangelism is inappropriate. Which religion one chooses doesn't matter as much as choosing one that is helpful and makes a constructive contribution. Self-fulfillment religions, New Age escapism, Marxism, and witchcraft could all make a case that they meet these criteria. One cannot deny any of them. Another weakness of this approach is that it has to overlook the tremendous differences between religions that do not fit a universal definition of religion, and that have almost opposite understandings of salvation. While the approach is less condemnatory and more accepting of the faith of other religions, it seems better at adding to the options of pluralism than in dealing with it.

Langdon Gilkey's criticism of Hick's proposal is that when we do the translations of the doctrines of various religions into metaphysical categories to see their common ground, the translations still turn out to be those of Western culture (37-50).

Finally, many in other religions are not ready to agree that their statements about God are only evocative, noncognitive expressions of the numinous that cannot be judged true or false, but rather believe such statements are informative and true.

Barth's Philosophy of Religion Defense Against Pluralism

Barth himself would see no need for philosophy of religion, but others who study what he has done, see in his proposal similarities to stances described in philosophy of religion. (Barth's approach could be seen in such categories as Foundationalism, Basic Statements, Fideism,

Wittgenstein's language game analogy, etc.) Barth has claimed that truth is known only through Jesus Christ and that no defense is appropriate or needed. That is, Netland's philosophical defense and Hick's metaphysical one are unnecessary. Christian truth does not need to be defended as universally true, only proclaimed. Others can accept it or not. Those who do accept what is revealed in Christ know that he is Lord, the Way, the Truth and the Life. Christian truth is self-validating, in this view. Barth's statements are "modest" in that he says the Christian religion is true as a faith statement, not as based on actual experience. The Christian religion is a corruption of revelation in Christ and is judged inadequate along with other religions.

This "exclusivist" position is attractive to many of us although it may make Christianity appear to be as arrogant and as imperialistic as the developed nations have been to third world nations (Panikkar's complaint). Some Roman Catholic writers such as Karl Rahner, in line with conclusions of Vatican II, have softened the doctrine that all those without Christ are condemned to hell in the next life. His concept of "anonymous Christians" allows that God can welcome nonbelievers into heaven if they fit certain criteria. Clark Pinnock speculates about a "second chance" for nonbelievers after death. Of course, those in other religions likely would not accept this description of themselves as secret or unconscious or potential Christians.

This softer view could make this position more gracious and less arrogant. But as Peter Berger has pointed out, Barth has not provided any grounds for rejecting the same kind of claims that God spoke more clearly in the *Koran* or the *Bhagavad Gita* or *Das Kapital* (Newbigin 11). It is a defense against pluralism that seems to ignore it. There is also the danger that Christian faith is regarded as separated from reality. Christian faith would no longer have cosmic implications, but is separated from "other worlds."

Other Problems With Philosophical Attempts to Overcome Pluralism

1) One of the reasons why philosophy fails to overcome pluralism with some universal truth is that it accepts that all truth claims employ circular reasoning. We have to choose some assumptions we cannot prove in order to describe reality. So the claim to universal truth is undermined by showing it makes assumptions characteristic of a particular culture - assumptions that are not assumed in another culture. For example, the foundational truth for us is that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Many cultures, including our own, cannot begin there.

I would agree with Arthur Holmes' statement: "There are universal moral principles which ought to be regarded as exceptionless in every culture. Yet that does not exist. Our own culture is most creative in dreaming up exceptions" (Holmes 21). Saying this slightly differently Newbigin wrote: "All truth (including scientific truth) is a venture of faith" (Newbigin 149).

2. Not only are the propositions not accepted universally but there is no agreement on the principles of logic to be used. There are religions, including our own, where it is not a question of either/or, true or false. Jesus is both human and divine, crucified but risen, defeated but victorious.

In other words, humans have not been able to dialogue about truth in a way that all others recognize as logical. Paul knew this from his experience at Athens. Resurrection was not a concept within the logical system of his philosophically minded audience.

3. Even if different cultures had the same logic, for example, the logic of the Greek philosophical tradition, we could not overcome pluralism/relativism. A large proportion of believers hold that while the Christian faith is *expressed* in propositional truths, it is not *based* on propositional truth. It is based on special revelation events. As mentioned in the criticism of Barth, other religions can claim the same kind of special revelation as their authority that we do when we say there is no other salvation than in Jesus Christ.

4. In addition, we have to cope with the fact that the Enlightenment caused many "Christians" to abandon revelation as a source of truth even for themselves. Many have turned to Freud, Adam Smith, Durkheim or Dewey and others to explain religious truth merely as created by human needs for a father figure or for an ethical system to control behavior. Skepticism about not only religious truth but also about any absolute truth is part of the mind set of our era.

This is not a defeat. It doesn't mean that pluralism/relativism "won." Skepticism and relativism, of course, cannot propose alternative truths or ask for commitments since they are self-undermining or self-refuting. Such philosophical approaches can tempt people to avoid particular commitments, but when these approaches are pursued further they cannot offer another truth. Yet there is another way besides trying to overcome pluralism by denying it, or discovering some universal-truth defense or explanation.

The New Testament Approach to Pluralism and Other Truth Claims

Rather than some overpowering truth which evidence shows *must* be accepted, God's truth came in a non-universal form: a particular Aramaic speaking Jewish teacher. Instead of teaching us to be *defenders* of truth claims, he taught us to be *witnesses*, or martyrs, to the truth even though the witness is often rejected. God even let himself be crucified to demonstrate the kind of non-coercive love He is.

So rather than asking how to defeat pluralism, we would be more productive if we asked how God uses pluralism/relativism.

John Howard Yoder, to whom I am indebted for much of this approach, has gathered together valuable accounts of how the early church met the pluralism challenge (ch. 2). He cites several examples of how the "provincialism" of the early church encountered Greek philosophy, the Artemis cult (Acts 19:23-41), the mystery religions of Apollo, Neptune, and Aphrodite, the Egyptian and Roman gods accompanied by temples, priests and teachings on how to live and deal with daily problems. David Gill's work on local religions of the Roman Empire gives a more detailed account of the pluralistic religious situation confronted by the early church (85-100).

How could early Christians meet with this pluralism that sometimes reacted with angry resistance (Acts 19)? John 1: 1-14 is an example of the gospel addressed to Gnostic and Neo-platonist minded audiences "in which a long ladder of mediating entities stretched from God to earth" (Yoder 50). John accepts the language of that cosmology, but does not make Jesus one of the mediating entities between the pure, indescribable divinity at the top of the ladder and flawed earthlings at the bottom. If this were charted there could be a box in the "chart" in which to place Jesus but John does not accept that. Rather, he writes, Jesus is both the Logos who is equal with God at the top of the ladder, and the Logos who became flesh at the bottom of the ladder. Both! In other words, in the encounter with this kind of Greek philosophy, John listened to the language and then used it to describe Jesus. Jesus is the one who overcomes the darkness and gets rid of the ladder, making us children of God.

In that encounter a deeper vision of Christ emerged, the preexistent Christ that was at Creation. The understanding of Christ's preexistence may not have emerged at that time without the encounter with the truth claims of Gnosticism.

In four more of the apostolic writings, Hebrews, Colossians, Revelation and Philipians, Yoder shows the writers using the

worldview language of priestly mediators, principalities and powers, apocalyptic thought, and human achievement to proclaim Christ as both priest and sacrificial victim, Lord over all powers, the slaughtered Lamb able to open the seal no one could open, and the self-emptying one who was crucified but is now Lord of all (Yoder 51f). Each time, the writer uses the language of another truth system and, instead of fitting Jesus into the "box" that could accommodate Jesus, proclaims that Jesus is above that system or world and is in charge of it. Christ is Lord of all. Each time the understanding increases of the kind of Lord that Jesus is. As Thorsten Moritz puts it, Paul did not attack the beliefs of the Artemis cult but "takes them up and glosses them" (Clarke and Winter 103). Surprising to the audiences. Jesus is shown as Lord even though he was rejected and suffered. His weakness is accreditation for Lordship! His followers are not to take over the world but are to follow the way of Jesus' self-emptying death and resurrection.

We see now what these writers did: They did not throw out their Hebrew history or Judaism as being insufficiently universal (as did the Hellenists in Alexandria) but claimed it had widened to include everyone. That is, they did not fit their faith into the categories of the current philosophy or religion, but used those categories to express Christ's lordship. Newbigin points out that this lordship of Christ even judges the church when the church claims possession of all truth and supreme power (D'Costa 145).

In a similar way, we do not accept the "box" that John Hick would give to Christianity as one cultural expression of the inexpressible. Rather, we claim that Christ is at the "top of the mountain" that other religions might be climbing. Yet, Christ is also talking to the Samaritan woman, the Roman centurion, and Pontius Pilate at the *bottom* of the mountain. In those encounters, people learned that Jesus was more than a Messiah for Jews. They learned more about his lordship than they knew before.

Taking Netland's criteria for measuring the truth of all religions, we might say Jesus Christ is the criterion by which all truths, logics and rating systems are judged. Yet, he is a non-coercive truth that asks for a decision. As Yoder states, "The development of a high Christology is a natural cultural ricochet of a missionary ecclesiology when it collides, as it must, with whatever cosmology explains and governs the world it invades" (Yoder 54).

There are other ways God uses pluralism besides deepening our understanding of Christ. Keeping us humble would be one. As the prophets pointed out to Israel, God can use nonbelievers as correctives.

We also know that younger churches challenge the certainties of older churches, exposing the syncretism and opiate Christianity that has developed in North America and Europe. Newbigin feels we cannot witness to our own culture without the help of Christians from other cultures (124-150).

Christians in India, a tiny minority in a pluralistic environment, have already helped us understand that the gospel as shared by a minority church, is more clear than in cultures in which we felt it was a matter of time before our version of Christianity would impose controls on our communities. Pluralism reminds us that our knowledge is imperfect, that we know in part and see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).

Yoder mentions two ways that pluralism could be seen as a threat. First, it is a threat to the tower of Babel builders, or to those wanting control of others, or to any state imposed religion. Second, it is a threat to those trying to get security in something other than the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The secure position turns out to be finite and non-universal. Pluralism might have been God's way of placing before his people, throughout the Bible, the choice between security and faithfulness.

When we choose security, we use political power to impose our view, as in the Inquisition and Crusades. We take away the choice to be a disciple. The battle for control takes us away from obedience to Christ's rule. The position of the New Testament writers that Yoder describes is evangelical in that it is non-coercive. It describes witnessing to Christ not as a proven truth that cannot be denied, but as the truth we can either accept or reject. Without attacks on others, it tells of the good news of liberation that lights up the darkness and asks for a response, much as Paul did before Agrippa (Acts 26).

Similar thoughts are expressed by mission theologians such as Gerald Anderson and D.T. Niles, who state that it is not our prerogative to judge whether other religions are true or false. Our "business is only to invite others to acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Savior" (Carman and Dawe 110).

Conclusion

For Christians dealing with pluralism, the question is not whether to be in academia's relativistic atmosphere or in a Muslim culture, but *how* to be there. We are there because God made creation that way. The question is how to proclaim Christ's lordship in that culture. There is no universal truth accepted in all cultures and thought systems, yet we seek ways to share Jesus Christ in other cultures.

We do have some historical facts with which to begin a dialogue with those of other religions or faiths: that the revelation in Jesus happened in a particular time, place and thought world; his followers lived in those other thought worlds, and described the decision that is before us.

Our call is to relate to people in whatever religion and listen well enough to share, in terms they understand, the truth that transforms. This witness does not transform by overpowering arguments or explanations or proofs that coerce belief, but by a strange and powerful Spirit, seen in a king on a donkey, in a Messiah that is crucified.

Proclaiming Christ as Lord without a secure, unassailable philosophical proof, or a unifying metaphysical explanation, or a philosophy of religion defense means we are as vulnerable as Paul in Athens or Jesus before the Sanhedrin or Bishop Romero in El Salvador. Christian truth should not expect to be universally accepted. Truth should expect to be seen as subversive, prophetic and counter-cultural, rather than as supportive of the status quo. Even non-Christians, such as Socrates, recognize this (Yoder 41).

We are sufficiently influenced by this world to see the strangeness of a king who does not come in an armour plated convoy surrounded by security personnel. It has often bothered Christians that Christian truth looks so weak, provincial and insecure; unable to overpower a few less informed opponents; ridiculed by more influential religions. This vulnerability places priority on faithfulness to Christ over the security that is really no security. Unlike the proven truths that can overpower the opposition, the king on a donkey, rather than overpowering, transforms.

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