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Apologetics
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“It doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as it’s meaningful to you.”

“People should be free to believe whatever makes them feel fulfilled or happy.”

“Who are you to say what religion is right or that someone else’s beliefs are wrong?”

Do any of these thoughts sound familiar to you? Maybe one of them, if not all of them? As someone who has spent the last decade of my life talking to college students about life, faith, religion, and worldviews, I can tell you I’ve heard people express these types of ideas to me countless times. Essentially what I have found in my non-scientific research is that the average college age student sees no reason to embrace or reject the claims of one religious belief system over any of the others. This is what is called “religious pluralism” in academia. The idea that all religions are equally valid and that no religion has any sort of corner on truth about God, life, afterlife, purpose, morals or anything else.

Now, before I discuss my concerns about religious pluralism, let me start by saying I completely understand and in some ways even identify with some of this thinking. I’ve even spent the better part of my life believing and repeating these exact ideas. Wouldn’t it be nice to think that all people, no matter their beliefs, are right, or at least that no matter their beliefs, they will benefit from believing something? Wouldn’t it be nice if God loved people equally, no matter how we approached him, or her, or them? Wouldn’t it be nice if each religion could simply be

a benefit to its followers and there was no bothering with “right” and “wrong”?
Wouldn't that all be so nice? Or, would it?

Implicit in all of these statements are some underlying, foundational “truth” claims I find to be concerning, and I want to discuss one of these implicit truth claims in particular for the rest of this article. Then I want to briefly discuss “why” I believe many college students, particularly college students in the United States, have adopted this view of religious pluralism. Finally, I will close with a challenge to rethink the way we currently think about faith, religion, belief and ultimate reality.

The issue I see underlying the embrace of religious pluralism is a rejection of absolute truth. Essentially, the belief that there is no truth, especially not religious truth, instead it's all a matter of “opinion”. Many people see religion in much the same way they see ice cream, yoga, or chiropractors. “If it works for you, if it's what you're in to, if it makes you a better person, then have at it.” There is no right or wrong. There is only opinion, bad science and subjective experience to evaluate the validity of one's particular choice of beliefs. This is probably the most prevalent underlying belief that drives religious pluralism.

The problem with this “religion as opinion” belief and my objection to it is at least threefold. First, it is self-contradicting. Second, it actually doesn't hold up logically to a simple test. Third, it is offensive to most of the world's population. Let me address the self-contradictory nature of religious pluralism first. To say, “All religions are equally valid” is a truth claim. What you are saying is that when it comes to religion there is one truth, “All religions are equally valid.” To borrow from a popular analogy used by religious pluralists, religious belief is like blind men

feeling an elephant, describing different parts of the elephant, and concluding they are all dealing with something different, when in actuality they are all touching different parts of the same elephant. The problem with this analogy is exactly what I have pointed out. There must be someone, who is not blind, making the claim that religious belief is simply all religions working together to form one whole truth, in this case, an elephant. For this reason, it is self-contradictory to say all religions are equally valid because it is itself an absolute religious truth claim, one which most other religions would not agree with.

My next objection to the “religion as opinion” belief, which so many subscribe to, is that it does not stand up to a simple philosophical test, and here’s the test. Does God exist? Yes or no? In philosophy there is a basic rule of logic which states that you cannot have “X” and “not X” simultaneously. It’s called the Law of non-contradiction. Think about it for a moment and I trust you will agree. You cannot both have a phone in your right hand and not have a phone in your right hand at the same time and in the same way. It is a logical impossibility. Similarly, God cannot exist and not exist at the same time and in the same way. From the Christian viewpoint, there cannot be both an eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present, loving, merciful God who made the heavens and the earth and no god at all. You cannot have both; it is a logical impossibility. Therefore, the existence of God is not simply a matter of opinion. And it follows that religion is not a matter of opinion based on this one simple test, seeing that the existence of God, or the lack thereof, is a central tenant to many religious belief systems.

My last objection to the “religion as opinion” belief is that it is veiled in respect for every religion when in actuality it is extremely offensive and disrespectful. To use an extreme example, it is analogous to telling the Nazis and the Jews at the height of WWII that they’re “all good people who are doing the right thing”. Now, every analogy breaks down eventually, and this one breaks down quite quickly, but it effectively illustrates the point that when one group of people has a set of “beliefs” which radically differs from that of another, it is not respectful to say they’re both right. This might be an easy way to discount the significant issues and move on but it does no real justice to the issue at hand. There are approximately 1.6 billion Muslims in the world and I can assure you that the overwhelming majority would be extremely offended and even feel disrespected by the claim that Judaism and Islam are equally valid belief systems. The same is true for Christians and Buddhists, Hindus and Shintos, Mormons and Wickans, Atheists and Theists, Evolutionary Biologists and Young Earth Creationists. The point to be made here is that it is not respectful and open-minded to “validate” all belief systems. On the contrary it is offensive and it is, again, a belief system which contradicts the belief systems of most, if not all, the others.

Now, I want to briefly discuss why I believe religious pluralism thrives amongst college students, particularly in the United States. Democracy, freedom, and the “American Dream”. These are values which run deep in our country, and I am sure they’ve been a source of much good in the lives of many. I’m not debating their merits. But, I’m concerned these values have been improperly applied to and have naturally carried over into religious belief. As Americans, we have adopted this

idea that religion is something I have the freedom to apply to my life in whatever way I see fit as an autonomous person. It's a free country and I can do whatever I want. I definitely don't have to believe anything because someone told me it was true or right unless I agree and can clearly see how I will personally benefit from it. Is this not how many college age people think about religion? Has it not become something we choose to embrace if and when it works for us and reject when it doesn't? I believe it is quite clear that this is true. My question though is this, "Is it wise to apply these values to religious belief?" Does it make sense to treat religion the way we treat politics and pizza? I do not believe it is.

I will close with a warning and an encouragement. I opened this article with a list of some of the weightier concerns of religion. What do you believe about God? What's the purpose of life? What happens after death? Where do we ground our moral convictions? What is ultimate reality? The list could go on. And my question is this; if the answers to these questions are not a matter of opinion, but of fact, as I have argued, have you given them appropriate consideration? This is a warning because I believe the answers are weighty and significant for your life and they cannot be neglected. But, it is also an encouragement. I believe the answers to these questions can be found, and if that is true, it would be the most important pursuit of your life to find them. I warn you, do not neglect the pursuit of religious truth for the fear of finding there truly are answers and it's actually not a matter of opinion which we are all free to choose as we please. There is religious truth to be discovered and I for one believe in a God who would be pleased to reveal Himself to

all who would seek Him. A God who is the ultimate reality. A God who does not exist because I believe He exists, but because He has always existed, no matter my opinion.

If any of this raises questions, thoughts, or concerns for you, I would encourage you to pursue answers based on reason, logic and evidence which satisfy your mind and your soul.