

REDEEMER

R E P O R T

APRIL 2001

NOBODY KNOWS WHOSE RELIGION IS RIGHT

BY TIM KELLER

Probably the simplest, most common objection to the classical Christian faith goes like this: "If there is a God then Christianity is only one among many valid ways to find him. You should not try to convert others or insist that your beliefs are true and others are not." This view has been called "Religious Pluralism" and has scholarly proponents, but it is now so widespread among people as to almost be considered 'common sense.' This means that people will often be extremely impatient if you question it. Therefore, you should do so only with humility and care.

However, we must have some manner of addressing this com-

monly held belief. If someone says, "There are many ways to God; Christianity can't be the only one," it would be best to ask him or her why they believe that. Why couldn't one religion be the best or only true way to God? If they give an answer, it will probably be along one of the following lines.

"All religions are basically the same"

Many people say: "All religions teach basically the same thing. And it is not doctrine that matters so much as that a religion give its adherents inner peace and leads them to serve others." Before embarking on any kind of rational or theological answer, it is always

crucial to acknowledge the personal issues behind the theoretical. Many people have been raised in Christian environments where other world religions were demonized or treated shallowly. Later, when they found riches in these other faiths, it cast doubt on the motives for Christianity to claim superiority.

A Christian's response to this objection should be to agree without quibbling that there is much that is true and virtuous about the other world religions. This is of course a big subject, and if you can't truly grant this, you may want to read C.S. Lewis's little

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WHAT EXACTLY IS THE DIACONATE?

BY HELEN KIM, DEACONESS

The terms "deacon, deaconess, and diaconate" may be unfamiliar to many of you. To those of us serving on the Diaconate, they were once just as foreign! On April 22, the Diaconate is hosting an informational gathering where you may learn more about this ministry. Perhaps upon your discoveries, you will find yourself investigating how to become part of our Auxiliary Team (a group that assists the Diaconate), or nominating others onto the Diaconate, or imagining yourself in the role of deacon/deaconess!

Generally, the Diaconate is a mercy ministry that responds to congregational needs. As you may

know, Redeemer's goal is to construct a community of Christ that reflects His grace accurately enough so that our greater New York City community would have to at least ask themselves: What is this Jesus that has caused all these people to be so merciful, confident, free, humble, loving, unusually generous, kind, and joyful in struggles? The Diaconate is unique in the manner that it represents that goal.

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EASTER SUNDAY SERVICES

9:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.
Hunter College Auditorium

6:00 p.m.
Hunter College Auditorium

7:00 p.m.
Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew
86th and West End Avenue.

INSIDE:

- FELLOWSHIP GROUP TRAINING
- MAUNDY THURSDAY
- MOUNTAIN GETAWAY MAY 18
- EASTER OFFERING

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WHOSE RELIGION IS RIGHT?

book *The Abolition of Man* (See the appendix where he shows that the ethical teaching of most of the world religions is nearly identical. Since the ethical teaching of Christianity is not its heart, it takes no courage to admit this).

But it is disingenuous to claim that all religions are alike and doctrine doesn't matter, when it is rather obvious that some religions and cults are destructive. Do we really want to say that the Branch Davidians or Aum Shin Rikyo cult (of Japan) are equally authentic experiences of the Ultimate? And if the pluralist says: "No, they are 'cults,' because they don't bring you out of self-centeredness into compassion," then we must ask "Isn't that a doctrine? And who gives you the right (on your own terms) to choose *that* as a standard by which to judge all religions?"

The fact is that the pluralist position actually does evaluate the world religions as better or worse according to a doctrinal standard which it chooses but does not often acknowledge. It usually says that religions who do not 'proselytize' and try to convert others are 'more mature' than others. To maintain its position, it imperiously insists that some Christian doctrines are important (like the doctrine of God's love) while others are less so.

So ironically, this most liberal sounding statement is one of the most illiberal possible positions. The pluralist position ironically refuses to admit the diversity of world religions (often in the name of diversity!) It insists on papering over enormous the enormous differences between faiths, each of which has sharply different views of reality and each of which be-

lieves that those beliefs are non-negotiable. It refuses to let religions actually speak with their own voices and name themselves. So the person saying "all religions are alike" is not so much tolerating all beliefs as insisting on a new religion that essentially demands that every other faith re-make itself.

*"Truth-claims will
always attract arrogance
and religions
with moral absolutes
will always attract
moralists."*

"It is arrogant to think you have the truth"

Many people say: "It is arrogant to insist that your view of spiritual reality is the best one when there are so many equally intelligent and good people that disagree with you." Again it is important to acknowledge the personal problem behind the intellectual objection. The terrible fact is that the Christian church has never lacked for truly arrogant people. Truth-claims will always attract arrogance and religions with moral absolutes will always attract moralists. And it is very possible that the person saying that "efforts to convert others to your religion are arrogant" has been the object of a truly arrogant would-be converter. So be willing to admit the arrogance that the church has often shown to outsiders. Distinguish between the personal and

the theoretical.

However, the objector needs to distinguish between the theoretical and the personal as well. Imagine that a research scientist claims she has discovered the cure to some rare disease. Imagine that she immediately publishes articles and gives lectures about it that are arrogant in tone. She says: "I found the cure, and the rest of you stupid doctors and research scientists did not! Ha! Ha! Ha! You fools! I'm going to make so much money! I'm going to get a tenured position at a major university. And you're not!" Now surely it is true that her arrogance will move many people in medicine and research to try desperately to prove her wrong. But does her arrogance prove that she is wrong about what she says? Of course not.

But most damaging at all to the 'arrogance objection' is how it boomerangs on the user. Why? Because you are intellectually obliged to apply it to any assertions about religious or spiritual reality, not just those that are "institutionally" or "formally" religious. The arrogance objection is also a religious belief, and it is being put forward for adoption over traditional religious beliefs, and most people in the world don't believe it, and plenty of those people are good and intelligent. Why isn't it arrogant and 'immoral' for the pluralist to hold his or her beliefs? The person who says, "It is arrogant to persuade others to your religious position—stop it!" is actually doing the very thing he is forbidding—at the moment he is forbidding it.

"Nobody knows whose religion is

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REDEEMER REPORT

Kathy Keller

Buddy Mungo

Dave Jacobs

The Redeemer Report is a publication of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church.
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HUNTER COLLEGE AUDITORIUM
EAST 69TH BETWEEN PARK AND LEXINGTON
services at 10:30 • 6:00

CHURCH OF ST. PAUL AND ST. ANDREW
86TH AND WEST END AVENUE
services at 7:00

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DIACONATE

We provide a first place for attenders to turn for guidance and help. We give spiritual and financial support, become involved with individuals' struggles, find resources to address specific problems, and so forth. We get to meet people oftentimes vastly different from ourselves whom we would

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otherwise have never met. We are privileged to encourage them in Christ, and serve them freely by His love. It is nothing beyond what all Christians are called to do, but the Diaconate does this purposefully, officially, and with great resources provided by the congregation.

There are so many wonderful testimonies our deacons/deaconess's can provide, because we have seen the Lord work in people's lives through this ministry. He speaks to our hearts intimately through our experiences, and we happen to benefit by partaking in His glorification.

Again, please join members of the Diaconate on Sunday, April 22, after the morning service to learn more about the Diaconate Ministry. Announcements will be made during the service and in the Sunday bulletin. Come munch on a snack item and mingle with us!

MAUNDY THURSDAY SERVICE

Thursday April 12th.
7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

All Souls Church
(80th & Lexington)

Please come and join the rest of the Redeemer community in a celebration of Maundy Thursday. There will be a worship service with the Lord's Supper, foot washing and a communal meal (\$ 5 at the door). Childcare, up to age four, will be provided.

The Maundy Thursday service is a traditional part of the Christian Church's preparation for the celebration of Easter. It commemorates Christ's last supper with his disciples on the night before he was betrayed. The English word maundy is derived from the Latin phrase *novo mandatum*, which means, new command. This remembers Christ's "Love command" to his disciples in John 13:34, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

To reinforce his command Christ washed his disciples' feet during the meal, a task that would have been considered beneath the dignity of even a slave in that culture. It is for this reason that Maundy Thursday services have always included foot washing, typically the feet of church members by the Church's leadership.

MOUNTAIN GETAWAY MAY 18-20

Here's your chance to take relaxing walks by a sun-drenched mountain lake. Or play some late-night volleyball and tennis under the gym lights. And plenty more in between!

We're heading to the beautiful Tamiment Resort on May 18-20 for a Mountain Getaway for all ages. Registration, photos and details are at www.RedeemerChurch-Life.com.

This modern hotel in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania has a full array of indoor and outdoor sports facilities, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a 20-person hot tub and horseback riding.

The weekend includes three worship services, with the Rev. Tim Pettit, director of church life, teaching on "Being Authentic at Work and in Relationships."

Even if you're new to Redeemer, this Getaway will be a powerful way to make many new friends.

If you don't have Internet access, you can call Tim Pettit, 212-808-4460 x141, for more information.



FELLOWSHIP GROUP LEADER'S TRAINING SEMINAR

The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. Are you ready for the adventure of fellowship group leadership? Participating in this training is the first step. Please join us for a one-day training seminar on Saturday, May 5. The training will be held at the Williams Club, located on 39th Street between Park & Madison, from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. RSVP by April 27th to Jerry Dienes, jerry@redeemer.com or 808.4460 x110. (Attending the seminar does not obligate you to become a leader.)

NOBODY KNOWS WHOSE RELIGION IS RIGHT

right”

The strongest form of this objection we have left until last. If you call into question the first two assertions—of sameness and arrogance—you will often arrive here anyway. Many say: “Well, certainly it is not arrogant for a scientist to claim she has found the cure to a disease. But religion is different. There is no way to prove who is right. So we need to be accepting of all.”

The main problem with this objection, however, is that it is a massive claim to religious knowledge itself—though it is hidden beneath a veneer of humility. It says, “no one can know about these spiritual things,” but that statement presumes a rather astonishing amount of spiritual knowledge.

Lesslie Newbigin says in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*: “In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant, so often quoted in the interests of religious agnosticism, the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of [someone] who is not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of the truth. The story is constantly told to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them [can know]. But...the story is told by one who claims to see [and know] the full truth which all the world’s religions are groping after....There is an appearance of humility in the protestation that the truth is much greater than any one of us can grasp, but if this is used to invalidate all claims to discern the truth it is in fact an arrogant claim to a kind of knowledge which is superior to [all others]...We have to ask: “What is the vantage ground from which you

claim to be able to relativize all the absolute claims which these different scriptures make?”

This is perhaps the ultimate problem with the pluralist’s position. You can’t know all the religions are ‘blind men’ with only ‘part of the truth’ unless you claim to see the whole elephant that no one else can see. You can’t ‘rela-

*“...the pluralist approach
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tivize’ world religions unless you ‘absolutize’ your own spiritual knowledge. If you say, “I don’t know which religion is true” that can be a statement of humility. If you say, “Nobody knows” or “Nobody can know which religion is right” you are making a very dogmatic assertion and presuming the very religious knowledge and certainty you just doubted that anyone had. The inconsistency is rather rank.

“But how can we live in peace with one another?”

Underneath most of the intellectual objections is an extremely practical and very valid concern. It is the issue of human unity. Once we show how incoherent the pluralist theory is, the person we are talking with may protest: “But how will we be able to live in peace with one another in an increasingly ‘small’ and multi-cultural world? Won’t traditional claims lead to more strife?” Here we have finally gotten down to the main problem. How do we respond to this concern?

First, we must point out that the pluralist approach does not promote unity between faiths and cul-

tures. As we’ve seen, when you say, “you can’t proselytize” what you really mean is, “you can’t try to persuade people of your views of spiritual reality but we can try to persuade people of ours!” “Efforts to craft a public square from which religious conversation is absent, no matter how thoughtfully worked out, will always in the end say to the religionists that they alone, unlike everybody else, must enter public dialogue only after leaving behind that part of themselves that they may consider most vital.” (Stephen Carter, *Dis - sent of the Governed*)

But, secondly, here is the the way to ‘prove’ in a post-modern, pluralist society the uniqueness of Christianity. We should show in our actions and attitudes how the gospel makes us less haughty and more respectful of people with whom we differ deeply. The fact is that anyone’s main identity-factor—that which gives them a sense of significance—can be a basis for exclusion and oppression. Overt absolutists say: “What makes me special is that I have the truth.” But this leads rather naturally to feeling superior to and to acting exclusively toward people who don’t have your truth. Covert absolutists say: “What makes me special is that I know that there is no absolute truth and everyone is free to be who they choose to be.” But this leads rather naturally to feeling superior to and to acting exclusively toward people who think there is truth!

But in contradistinction to everyone else is the “gospel absolutist” who says: “I have the truth—but the truth I have is a suffering God, a Lamb that was slain, the one who died for his enemies, the one who came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many.” The fact we are

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THE EASTER SACRIFICIAL OFFERING: MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Making the invisible visible: what does that mean? It means that our individual acts of mercy and justice have the effect of making our beliefs real —tangible, visible, powerful— to people all around us. Putting our faith to work in the world as we work for mercy and justice, we make the Gospel a powerful, living presence that touches thousands of lives in our communities. Quite literally, we build a city of the spirit.

Mercy and justice are not options for Christians. They are as basic as DNA and as necessary as oxygen.

At the Easter season, we see the invisible becoming visible everywhere we look. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, bringing his Kingdom power into our broken world. We see the stirrings of new

life that are the outward signs of springtime. When you join in the work of Hope For New York, you join in the power and energy of that season.

For this reason, we urge all of you to consider how you want to respond to the opportunity of the Easter Sacrificial offering, which will be received at all services on Easter Sunday. This is an historic tradition of the church, going back thousands of years, as well as a tradition at Redeemer. As we celebrate Christ's resurrection to new life, we also celebrate our own renewed lives, and give in the confidence that others will, as a result of our gifts, be brought to new life as well.

Your financial contribution to Hope For New York is especially important this year. Among our goals for the coming year are:

working with the Redeemer Urban church Planting Center, delivering new services to contextualize mercy and justice principles within each new church plant; the creation of a new skilled-volunteer program; and the development of a fellowship group curriculum.

Last year your volunteer hours increased over 45%. In that spirit, we are asking you to consider a 30% increase in your financial contributions. Please join us. Please help us to give hope.

Please pray about your involvement in the Easter Sacrificial offering. You may make your checks payable to Hope for New York; 271 Madison Avenue; Suite 1600; New York, NY 10016; or, for other donation options, please contact our office 212-808-4460 x122; or visit our website.

HOPE FOR NEW YORK

Last year Hope For New York supported many affiliates and many projects. Here are just a few examples of the ways in which your generous contributions were used.

Urban Youth Alliance: programs targeting high-risk youth; funding of study to assess the role of faith in delivery of services.

Operation Exodus: after-school/summer tutoring and enrichment programs.

Russian Community Life Center: ESL/Bible program for Russian immigrants in Brooklyn.

Midtown Pregnancy Support Center: implementation of new Web/print marketing strategies.

New York City Rescue Mission: new aftercare program to support adults after graduation from transitional/recovery programs.

Habitat for Humanity NYC: renovation of housing in Harlem community.

Last Year's Direct Cash Grant Spending:

45% to child and youth programs
22% to target populations, including AIDS, elderly and single parents
17% to adult recovery;
12% to community and housing
4% to one-time events

Organizational Expense Efficiency:

Program	76%
Fund Development	13%
Management	11%
Total	100%

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saved by grace rather than works leads us to expect that many non-Christians will be more wise, good, and noble than many Christians. It is only when skeptics see communities of Christians in which power-relationships are shaped by this gospel that they will begin to drop their personal objections.

“What is the vantage ground from which you claim to be able to relativize all the absolute claims which these different [religions] make?’ When the answer is, ‘We want the unity of humankind so that we may be saved from disaster,’ the answer must be, ‘we also want that unity, and therefore seek the truth by which alone humankind can become one.’ That truth is not a doctrine or a worldview or even a religious experience; it is certainly not to be found by repeating abstract nouns like justice and love; it is the man Jesus Christ in whom God was reconciling the world. The truth is personal, concrete, historical.” (Lesslie



We (the pastors & staff of Redeemer) invite you to a unique event in the Hunter Auditorium on April 22, from 12:00 - 1:00 p.m. in place of SOCC classes and Q&A. Tim will lead us in a time of prayer and reflection on the status of our West Side Site Service. This will include a time of prayer, strategy and discussion. Our purpose is to focus on building West Side community, so we hope all members and regular attenders who live on the West Side will make plans to attend (though non-West Siders are welcome to come, of course!)

This has been a key part of Redeemer's vision for the past five years: four sites around Central Park. We are persuaded that this is an essential component of God's vision for renewing the culture of New York City. We want to bring you up to date, hear your thoughts and invite you to pray with us.