

Is Christian Exclusivism Repressive or Otherwise Morally Reprehensible?

It is often claimed that when Christians believe and affirm that Christ is the only way to God, they commit acts of repression or otherwise morally reprehensible acts vis-à-vis adherents of other religions. This claim is issued, among others, by such theologians as Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, John Cobb, and Paul Knitter. In this talk I analyze what is required, in general, for someone to qualify as ‘an exclusivist concerning X’, and argue that not even the staunchest critics of exclusivism can escape fulfilling these requirements—so that even the critics of exclusivism will be exclusivists. Finally I argue that Christian exclusivism is morally unobjectionable.

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- I. Exclusivism: the thesis that if “Jesus is the only way to God” is true, then the denial must be false. It is claimed that Christians are arrogant, or otherwise morally reprehensible when they believe that Jesus is the only way to God, and that those who believe otherwise are wrong.
- II. Hick: “The ultimate divine reality is infinite and as such transcends the grasp of the human mind. God ... is infinite. He is not a thing, not a part of the universe, existing alongside other things; nor is he a being falling under a certain kind. And therefore he cannot be defined or encompassed by human thought. We cannot draw boundaries around his nature and say the he is this and no more.”
 - a. Buddha’s elephant parallel
 - b. Hick’s conclusion: no statement about God is really true, because none of our concepts apply to God.
 - c. What is it for our ‘concepts to apply’ to something? It is this: for someone to apply a concept to something, is for that person to grasp a property of that thing.
 - d. If none of our concepts applies to God, then God has no properties that we have concepts of. Not even the properties of existence, self-identity.
 - e. Strange consequences: “has at least one property” is a concept that we have. But if none of our concepts apply to God, then that concept doesn’t apply to God, which means that God has no properties. Also, “has no properties” doesn’t apply to God, which means that God has properties!
 - f. Hick’s argument: (a) God is the Ultimate, hence (b) None of our concepts apply to God.

- g. However: (a) says that God has a property! So the argument cannot be coherently proposed!
- h. Moreover, (b) is self-referentially incoherent. For if what (b) says is true, it must be false. If none of our concepts apply to God, then the concept “none of our concepts apply to God” must apply to God—which is to say that (b) is false.

III. Cantwell Smith: “...except at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent human beings: ‘we believe that we know God and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong’.”

- a. The objection is often stated in terms of ‘arrogance’ and ‘suppression’.
- b. First note that the claim of Christian exclusivism is distinct from other claims—such as that (i) Christians are better persons than non-Christians, (ii) Christianity has only brought peace and happiness in the world, (iii) Christianity is ‘absolute’, (iv) that the Christian church has the exclusive claim to truth, (v) Christians know the whole truth, and non-Christians nothing of it. No, Christian exclusivism is not a claim about Christians, nor about Christianity, nor about the Christian church, but about Christ, viz. that Christ is God’s ultimate revelation, and the way to God.
- c. Is Christian exclusivism arrogant and suppressive—aren’t these the inevitable concomitants of what Christians believe? No!
- d. More can be said. If a person S is to be an exclusivist with respect to belief in P, the following conditions need to be satisfied:
 - 1. S believes that P is true, and also that what contradicts P, is false;
 - 2. P cannot be proved;
 - 3. S is fully aware of the fact that others don’t believe or even disbelieve P and that he can’t convince them of P.
- e. If you accuse an exclusivist that he is arrogant, you yourself must be arrogant as well. Some who accuses a Christian exclusivist of arrogance, hand out a tar baby: he can only make that accusation by accusing himself of arrogance as well.
- f. Suppose I believe what the Creed says, and am accused of being arrogant by that very token. Then what are my options?
 - 1. Continue believing what the Creed says
 - 2. Become agnostic
 - 3. Start believing the denials of the Creed
- g. But none of these options will prevent my being arrogant—for in all three scenarios I remain an exclusivist.

IV. Analogy that makes clear that there simply is no internal connection between exclusivism and arrogance. Suppose I can make a fortune by telling a small lie about a colleague of mine, but after reflection I conclude that this would be wrong. So I believe that it would be wrong to tell that lie. But none of the people I speak about this agree with me—they all think that it isn't wrong. I cannot convince them of their wrongness, however. In that case the three conditions for being an exclusivist are satisfied; but it would be utterly wrong to say that I am therefore arrogant.

Suggested Readings:

- i. Alvin Plantinga, "A Defence of Religious Exclusivism". In Louis Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion. An Anthology*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1999.
- j. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*. London: Macmillan, 1973.