

A REPLY TO PROFESSOR HICK

Peter van Inwagen

In my essay "Non Est Hick,"¹ I used a political analogy to show that there was nothing in principle more "arrogant" about being a Christian than there was about being a Burkean conservative, a Rawlsian liberal or a Marxist. Commenting on the use I made of this analogy, Professor Hick says

But has van Inwagen not here overlooked the crucial differences? The Church has traditionally claimed to be "the uniquely 'correct' one," in the sense of being the sole instrument of salvation. The Church's claim is not about the relative merits of different political systems but about the eternal fate of the entire human race.²

This is a true statement about the Church's claims,³ but I don't see its relevance to my attempt to disarm the charge of arrogance. I have to figure out which political beliefs to have ("none" and anarchism being among the options). I have to figure out which religious beliefs to have ("none" and atheism being among the options).⁴ In either case, if I do adopt a certain set of beliefs, I have to believe that I and those who agree with me are right and that the rest of the world is wrong. The argument that the "religious exclusivist" is arrogant rests on the premise that it is arrogant to believe that one and those few who agree with one are right and that most of the world is wrong (or at least that such a belief is arrogant if it is not about one of those matters concerning which the truth is more or less demonstrable—a belief, say, about the population of North Dakota or the age of the earth). But it follows from this premise—and a few well-known facts about the diversity of political opinion—that "political exclusivism" is arrogant. (By political exclusivism, I mean having a definite set of political beliefs not common to all or most of humanity—or that plus an adherence to the principle of non-contradiction.⁵) If, therefore, it is arrogant to be a religious exclusivist (to have a definite set of religious beliefs not common to all or most of humanity and to accept the principle of non-contradiction), it is arrogant to be a political exclusivist. What hangs on one's accepting a certain set of beliefs, or what fol-



lows from their truth, doesn't enter into the question whether it is arrogant to accept them.

It is, in any case, very hard to avoid being a religious exclusivist.⁶ Professor Hick is himself a religious exclusivist. My religious beliefs are inconsistent with Islam, but so are his (and with popular Hindu polytheism and with ancestor-worship and with . . . but practically everyone in the world believes something that is inconsistent with his Anglo-American academic religious pluralism). "Religious pluralism" is not the contradictory of religious exclusivism, but one more case of it.

As I read the passage I have quoted from Professor Hick's paper (and the larger passage from which I have excerpted it), it is not an argument for the conclusion that I am being arrogant in holding the beliefs I hold. It is rather an argument for the conclusion that those beliefs are false. He argues, on moral grounds, that a loving God would not establish a geographically limited Church that was the unique instrument of salvation. Hick is, of course, aware that in the essay he is criticizing, I attempted to reply to this very argument. My reply was not meant to be particularly original—it is, as Hick says, "standard." (He does not call what I say a reply. He calls it an evasion. I don't think that's right, for if the statements my reply comprises are true, they do answer the "moral" objection to God's having established a unique instrument of salvation that is geographically limited.) Hick's reasoning is essentially this: if, as I claim, I do not know what provision God has made for ("involuntary") non-Christians in His plan of salvation for humanity, I shouldn't claim to know that He has not established instruments of salvation outside the Church.

Why do I claim to know that there are no divinely ordained instruments of salvation (as opposed to things that arise in the world by chance and which God may use as instruments in securing the salvation of various individuals or classes of people) outside the Church? Let me lay aside the question of knowledge, and answer the question why I *believe* this. I believe it because it is a part of my religion, one of the articles of Christian faith. And not of my religion alone: it is a part of the religion of Paul and the Primitive Church and the Apostolic Fathers and the Fathers and the scholastics and Luther and Calvin and Cranmer and Trent and Wesley and Newman: it is "mere Christianity." I don't see how I could coherently give up this belief other than by ceasing to be a Christian.⁷ I also believe that nothing concerning the particulars of the fate of "involuntary" non-Christians is "mere Christianity." (Many Christians, of course, will dispute this. Some think that Universalism is implicit in the New Testament. Others think that the damnation of all non-Christians, even involuntary ones, is an essential element of the Christian faith. I think they're wrong. Well, this is an "in-house" dispute, a dispute about one of those many theological questions concerning which a Christian can do no more than try, with fear and trembling, to figure out what to believe.) I do have some beliefs about this, but they're tentative and not parts of my faith.⁸ What is a part of my faith is that God is a righteous Lord and a loving Father, and, therefore, whatever plans He has made for involuntary non-Christians, they will involve no injustice; and not only will they involve no injustice, but they will be

the work of a love that surpasses human comprehension. Does Professor Hick think that, if the Church is the sole instrument of salvation, there is *no* plan that a being of unlimited power and knowledge could devise for involuntary non-Christians that would be consistent with His being a just Lord and a loving Father? If so, I must once again deplore “the apriorism that is an endemic intellectual disease of philosophers and theologians.”

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NOTES

1. In T. Senor (ed.), *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 216-241. The analogy is presented on p. 238.

2. “The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 14 (1997): 277-286.

3. But Professor Hick’s syntax—his avoidance of a parallel construction where one was natural—makes the position of the Church and any given political party or system seem less alike than they are. This syntactical device could have been as easily deployed the other way round: “The Party’s claim is not about the relative merits of different theological systems but about the future of the entire human race.”

4. Or I might simply adopt the religious beliefs of my parents or my community without ever thinking about the matter. But the same is true of my political beliefs.

5. The qualification is perhaps not otiose. It was, I believe, Ronald Knox who identified the essence of Anglicanism as the belief that whenever two people accept mutually contradictory propositions, they’re both right.

6. No religious belief is common to all or most of humanity. The only way to avoid being a religious exclusivist (other than denying the principle of non-contradiction) is therefore to have no religious beliefs. And this is not easy. Atheists, of course, have religious beliefs: that God does not exist, if no other. And every agnostic with whom I have discussed religious belief has the following religious belief: that agnosticism is epistemically preferable to theism.

7. One might, of course, ask why I am a Christian “in the first place.” I do not propose to enter into this question in a brief note. The interested reader may consult my essay “Quam Dilecta” in Thomas V. Morris (ed.), *God and the Philosophers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 31-60.

8. Consider the story of Emeth, the young “Calormene” nobleman who is a minor character in C. S. Lewis’s “Narnia” book, *The Last Battle*. (‘Emeth’ is a word of biblical Hebrew sometimes translated ‘truth’; Lewis’s choice of this name for his character should be understood in the light of his discussion of the word in *Reflections on the Psalms*.) If, on another shore, in a greater light, it should transpire that (within its limitations; it occurs in a work of imaginative fiction written for children) this story had presented a correct image of the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of involuntary non-Christians, I shouldn’t be at all surprised. (The religion in which Emeth was brought up, the only religion he had ever known, was a religion in which evil things were worshiped. And that is the hard case; if one has admitted

that the Holy Spirit might work in the way Lewis's story represents Him as working in the hearts of men and women brought up to believe in a religion that was, in all essentials, devil-worship, one should see no difficulty in the thesis that He might work in parallel or analogous ways in the hearts of Muslims and Buddhists.)