

## AD HICK

Alvin Plantinga

John Hick notes that I affirm Christian exclusivism: I accept classical Christianity (or C. S. Lewis's "mere Christianity") and, naturally enough, reject as false any proposition incompatible with it. Now in the paper Hick criticizes, I argued that none of the moral and epistemic objections commonly urged against exclusivism is at all successful; they all fail. Hick seems to agree that these objections are not in fact compelling (although he points out that it is perfectly possible to accept Christian belief in an arrogant fashion, just as it is possible to be an arrogant pluralist). He claims, however, that I have altogether missed the central issue here: "The scale of philosophical argumentation leading to this conclusion suggests that Plantinga supposes himself to be addressing the central issue between religious exclusivism and religious pluralism. But in fact his argument has not even come within sight of the central issue." Well, I had thought that *was* the central issue here, or at any rate *a* central issue: many pluralists argue that there is something morally or epistemically wrong with Christian exclusivism—it is unjustified, or arbitrary, or irrational or arrogant or *something*—and I was trying to answer their criticisms. If there is nothing either morally or epistemically wrong with exclusivism, what's supposed to be the problem?

Hick doesn't say in the present piece what this central problem is, so I wrote him a letter and asked him. He graciously replied that the central problem, for the exclusivist, is "how to make sense of the fact that there are other great world religions, belief in whose tenets is as epistemologically well based as belief in the Christian doctrinal system, and whose moral and spiritual fruits in human lives seem to be as valuable as those of Christian faith." But then given that these beliefs incompatible with Christianity *are* "as epistemologically well based" as Christian belief, it is *arbitrary* to insist, as I do, that Christian belief is true and beliefs incompatible with it are false; it is to treat relevantly similar things differently. He adds that "The arbitrariness of this position is underlined by the consideration that in the vast majority of cases the religion to which a person adheres depends upon the accidents of birth." The basic problem, then, is this: the fundamental tenets of the other great world religions are "epistemologically as well based" as is Christian belief; but the



exclusivist nevertheless accepts just one of these sets of beliefs, rejecting the others; and that is arbitrary.

But if *this* is supposed to be the problem for the exclusivist, then I *did* deal with it in the paper Hick refers to (pp. 000). I argued that the exclusivist is not in fact being merely arbitrary, because she doesn't believe that views incompatible with hers *are* "as epistemologically well based" as her Christian beliefs. She may agree that the views of others seem just as true to them as hers do to her; they have all the same internal markers as her own. She may agree further that these others are *justified*, flouting no epistemic duty, in believing as they do. She may agree still further that she doesn't know of any arguments that would convince them that they are wrong and she is right. Nevertheless she thinks her own position is not only true, and thus alethically superior to views incompatible with her, but superior from an epistemic point of view as well: how then does she fall into arbitrariness?

Let me briefly look into this matter from a slightly different angle. First, it's not quite clear what Hick is claiming here. Is he claiming that the fact is there *isn't* any relevant epistemic difference between Christian belief and these other beliefs (whether the exclusivist knows this or not) and *therefore* the exclusivist's stance is arbitrary? Or is he claiming that the exclusivist *himself* agrees that there is no relevant epistemic difference between his views and those of the dissenters, but accepts his own anyway, thus falling into arbitrariness? If the first, then presumably Hick would need some *reason* or *argument* for the claim that in fact the exclusivist's beliefs are not epistemically superior to views incompatible with hers. The exclusivist is likely to think that he has been epistemically favored in some way; he believes what he does on the basis of something like Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*; or perhaps the Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit; or perhaps he thinks the Holy Spirit preserves the Christian church from serious error, at least with respect to the fundamentals of Christian belief; or perhaps he thinks that he has been converted by divine grace, so that he now sees what before was obscure to him—a blessing not so far bestowed upon the dissenters. If any of these beliefs is true, then Christian belief is not epistemically on a par with these other beliefs. And if Hick is to claim that Christian belief really *is* no better based, epistemically, than these other beliefs, he presumably owes us an argument for the conclusion that those claims of epistemic privilege are in fact false. Still further, it is very probable that if Christian belief is true, then Christians *are* in a better position, epistemically speaking, than those who reject Christian belief; so what Hick really owes us is a good argument with respect to whose conclusion it is very unlikely that Christian belief is true. I don't see how he could offer such an argument, and I'll bet he doesn't either.

Well, perhaps Hick means to embrace the other disjunct; his idea is that the exclusivist himself recognizes that views incompatible with his are "as epistemologically well based" as his own, but accepts them anyway. But that is unfair to the exclusivist. If he did agree that these other views are as epistemically well based as his own, then perhaps he would indeed be arbitrary. But of course he doesn't. In the paper I considered

the analogy with moral beliefs. I believe that it is dead wrong to discriminate against people on the basis of their race or to advance my career by lying about my colleagues; I realize that there are those who disagree with me; I am prepared to concede that their views have for them the same internal marks mine have for me (they have that quality of seeming to be *true*); I am also prepared to concede that they are *justified* in holding these beliefs, in the sense that in holding them they are not flouting any epistemic duties. Do I therefore think their moral views are epistemologically as well based as my own?

Certainly not. Even though I grant that those beliefs are on an epistemic par with mine with respect to the properties just mentioned, I don't believe they are with respect to *other* epistemic properties. I think perhaps the racist is the victim of a bad upbringing that in some way blinds him to what he would otherwise see; or perhaps he suffers from a certain cognitive glitch that prevents him from seeing the truth here. I think the same goes for the person who thinks it proper to lie about his colleagues to advance his career: he too was brought up badly, or has been blinded by ambition, or doesn't have friends and confidants of the right sort, or suffers from a congenital moral blind spot. In either case I claim that they are not as well placed, epistemically speaking, as I; hence their contrary views are not as well based, epistemologically speaking, as mine. And because I think these things, I am not arbitrarily holding on to views I see are no better based, epistemically speaking than others inconsistent with them. I am perhaps *mistaken*, but not arbitrary.

The same goes with respect to religious positions incompatible with my own. I believe (sometimes in fear and trembling) that they are not as well based, epistemically speaking, as my beliefs. (Something similar holds for philosophical views different from my own; I also believe—again, with fear and trembling, since those who disagree with me are sometimes philosophically more accomplished than I—that some blind spot or some other epistemic impediment prevents them from seeing the truth.) I believe that Christians are epistemically fortunate in a way in which those who disagree with them are not. But then of course I am not in the clearly arbitrary position of thinking non-Christian views are epistemologically just as well based as Christian beliefs, but self-indulgently prefer the latter anyway.

And I suppose something of the same must be true for Hick. He differs from the vast bulk of the world's population in thinking all of the great religions (and most of the nongreat ones as well) are literally *false*. (No doubt he also exclusivistically thinks views incompatible with this one are false.) Now perhaps he thinks he has a *good reason* for this view of his: the fact that there *is* all this diversity, the best explanation for it being that they all have things literally wrong, even if many are salvifically effective. But of course others have that same evidence and don't think it *is* a good reason for the view in question. Furthermore, chances are that Hick is prepared to concede that these others are flouting no epistemic duties in believing as they do, and that the internal markers of their views for them are like the internal markers for his own view; still further, he no doubt realizes he can't produce arguments that will con-

vince those others that in fact what he takes to be a good reason for his pluralism really *is* a good reason for it.

Is he therefore being arbitrary in continuing to believe as he does? Not necessarily. He presumably thinks those who disagree with him just can't see something he does see; they suffer from a blind spot in an area where he doesn't; perhaps they aren't quite ready, psychologically speaking, for that cool and bracing air of skepticism with respect to the beliefs they have inherited from their elders. In any event, and whatever the explanation, he is somehow in a better epistemic position, he thinks, than those who disagree with him, even though he can't show them that he is. He might therefore be wrong (in my opinion he *is* wrong) but he's not being merely arbitrary; he's not treating differently things he sees to be the same.

But then the same goes for the Christian. He believes that those who disagree with him lack some epistemic benefit or grace he has; hence he isn't being merely arbitrary. He thinks those opposing opinions are less well founded, epistemologically, than his own.

Finally, just a word about Hick's suggestion that if I had been born elsewhere and elsewhere, I would have had different beliefs: he thinks this should give me pause about the beliefs I do in fact have. I pointed out in my paper that if Hick had been born elsewhere and elsewhere, he probably wouldn't have been a pluralist, so that by his own principle, he should think twice (or more) about his pluralism. He replies that he's thinking only of beliefs with which one is brought up, not just any beliefs one has. Well, I'm not sure that's a relevant difference, but let's go along with it for the moment. And once more let's consider moral beliefs. No doubt Hick, like me, was brought up to believe that racial intolerance is wrong. Now it is fairly likely that most relevant place-times are such that if he and I had been brought up there and then, we would have had quite different views on this topic. Does that mean that we should eye our tolerance with special suspicion? Maybe we should; but if, after careful, prayerful thought and consideration, it still seems to us that racial intolerance is wrong, unjust, and morally repugnant, there is nothing arbitrary in our continuing to reject racism. But then why should it be different for Christian belief.

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