

Of Blind Men and Elephants, Roads and Rome, and the Truth about God:

A Critique of Religious Relativism

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**Jeffrey Borrowdale
Social Science (Philosophy/Religion)**

Background

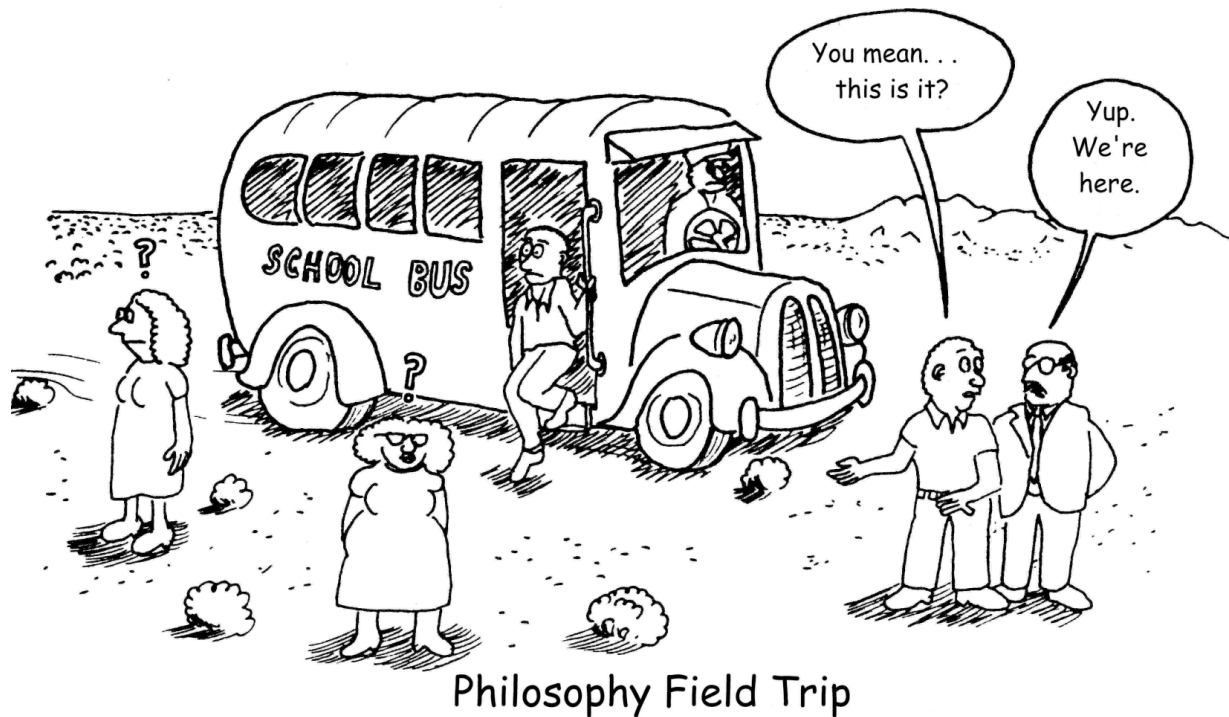
Many people believe that each religion is true in its own way and that there are "many roads to God", but it is not easy to understand or defend these claims since different religions make inconsistent claims about the nature of God and reality and have conflicting conceptions of piety. My Sabbatical project focused on this question of whether a relativistic conception of religion can withstand logical scrutiny.

Goals

The problem of pluralism is at the heart of any systematic understanding of religion, so my first goal was to develop my thoughts on this issue through research and writing. Since exploring this issue would necessarily immerse me in the particulars of religious belief and practice, it was also my purpose to gain more in-depth knowledge of the history and texts of the various traditions. Finally, I set out to glean worthwhile and thought-provoking material with which to infuse my classroom instruction. Teaching applications included how to understand the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, treated together in *my Religions of the Middle East* course, providing additional material for the religious epistemology section in my *Theories of Knowledge* course, and expanding the section on arguments for the existence of God based on religious experience in my *Theories of Reality* course.

The Project

There's an old joke about a university in a budget crisis which wants to add a new faculty member. In which field would it be would be least expensive to hire? "Obviously, that would be a Math professor," says an administrator. "All he requires is a pencil, paper and a wastebasket." "Not so fast," replies another. "What about a Philosophy professor? All he needs is the paper and pencil!" While I do occasionally discard unworkable ideas, my project didn't require much in the way of resources. I researched and wrote on religious pluralism locally; all I required was available through the University of Oregon or interlibrary loan, or available online.



Thesis Development

My thesis attempted to address the following questions:

- Why are there so many religions?
- Is one of them true?
- If not, do some contain more truth than others?
- Could they *all* be true?

I began with a brief refutation of **uniformitarianism**, the view that all religions basically teach the same thing, share a core of essential beliefs or differ on metaphysics but agree on ethics. On the contrary, I established that religious differences are real and pervasive, and about fundamental, not merely peripheral issues. Furthermore, I demonstrated that there is no universal agreement on ethics, and that, even if there were, it would not be sufficient to grant the claim of uniformitarianism, as the essence of religion has to do with gods and spiritual forces, not morality.

Next, I turned to the claims of **religious relativism**:

- No religion is *absolutely* true
- No religion is more or less true than any other
- Each religion is true *for* its adherents, from their point of view

A favorite analogy of the religious relativist is that of *The Blind Men and the Elephant*. A group of blind men examine an elephant, with one grasping the leg concluding that the elephant is like a tree, another taking hold of the trunk concluding that it is like a snake, another holding the tail asserting that it is like a rope, etc. This analogy seeks to establish that:

- Religious experience has the same Divine source
- Judgments differ, but are all authentic experiences of the Divine
- We judge from a position of ignorance
- No one's judgments are false, but none are absolutely or universally true, either
- Dogmatism causes religious strife and violence and is thus to be avoided

My critique of the analogy consisted of the following rejoinders:

- There is a truth about the elephant, even if unknown to the blind men
- The analogy supports the view that each religion contains part of the truth, *not* that religious truth is relative
- Were the blind men to investigate from the perspectives of the others, they would learn more about the elephant
- One of the blind men might have been told the true nature of the elephant by a sighted person or might have had previous experience with elephants which would put him in a privileged position

The first mistake of the blind men is not making *exclusivistic* claims but rather in making judgments based on a narrow range of subjective experience, rather than a thorough empirical investigation and logical reasoning. Their second mistake was in quarreling rather than having a rational discussion or working together to understand the elephant. But religious relativism actually removes the need for investigation - you already know *your* truth, so there is no need to do further exploration or reflection.

Moreover, supporters of religious relativism confuse the benefits of an ethic of tolerance with the truth of metaphysical relativism. I point out that the contrary view, **metaphysical absolutism**, is not identical with **dogmatism**, the certainty that one has the truth and that all contrary views are false, and is just as consistent with religious tolerance. What religious relativism does it to confuse sincerity of belief or the existence of a cultural tradition with epistemic justification. However, individuals or entire cultures can be mistaken in their beliefs in other matters (e.g. the medieval view that the sun revolved around the earth, the myth of the Aryan Superman shared by Nazi-era Germans), so why assume false beliefs concerning religious matters are impossible?

Next, I turn to the idea that "all rivers lead to the sea," "all roads lead to Rome," and that by analogy there is one God, but "many paths." All religious, it is claimed, although perhaps not equally true, are equally pleasing to God and equally efficacious vehicles to salvation or enlightenment. I argue that this is an unjustified *a priori* claim. When one does an empirical investigation, one sees that religions differ greatly on the human problem and its solution. To take one example, Western religion sees the human problem as sin and offers as a solution measures such as strict rules, rewards and punishments, atoning sacrifice and divine forgiveness. Eastern religion, on the other hand, sees the fundamental human problems as ignorance and

attachment and offers solutions such as meditation, mental discipline, study, a moderate asceticism and withdrawal from the world.

There is no reason why some religious practices wouldn't be viewed by God as misguided, offensive or even blasphemous. The Canaanites who sacrificed their children to Molech in the burning brazier of his idol or the Israelites who committed genocide in the name of Yahweh may have been *sincere* in their beliefs, but does that mean that those practices are as acceptable to God than taking care of orphans or being a peacemaker?

Conclusions

To answer the questions I began with, there's no reason *a priori* why one religion might be true and the rest simply false, or that some religions might contain more truth than others, but they can't *all* be true. At the end of my project, I offered up some criteria for grading religions on their probability of being true, including verification of historical and scientific claims, internal consistency, the character of founders and the degree to which their teachings accord with our moral intuitions. I further suggest that one might make a through examination of supernatural claims such as fulfilled prophecies, miraculous healings, etc., which are publicly made and open to rational scrutiny. As to why there are so many religions, I have some ideas, but, as I researched, I realized that this question was both tangential to my main thesis and a much more ambitious project than my sabbatical allowed.

Exclusivistic and exclusionary truth claims are central to the beliefs of many religious traditions, particularly those of the West. The only way for a relativistic conception of religion to be plausible is to embrace religious liberalism, which attempts to downplay differences between religions and transform spiritual beliefs into metaphors and symbols. This revisionist interpretation of religion neither represents the views of rank and file believers nor the meanings of the sacred texts as intended by their authors and interpreted through a scholarly, objective grammatical-cultural-historical method.

Religious relativism may have a noble motivation and make us feel more comfortable about religious difference, but it is theoretically flawed and an impediment to understanding the truth about God. Furthermore, a relativistic view of religion is not necessary for *social or political* pluralism. As a matter of fact, modern notion of religious tolerance comes from the Enlightenment ideal of religious *liberty*, which says that you ought to allow your neighbor the freedom of his belief, *even if* you believe it to be false, misguided or wrong. The idea that one must be enemies with one's neighbor until it is admitted by each that the views of the other are equally true, noble, or justified is a post-modern canard.