

The Current Intellectual State of Affairs in America Religious and Philosophical Pluralism

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BY

[Tim Keller](#)

Senior Pastor of

[Redeemer Presbyterian Church](#)

Manhattan, NY

and

Charles Garland

About every other week, I confront popular pluralist notions that have become a large part of the way Americans think. For example, pluralists contend that no one religion can know the fullness of spiritual truth, therefore all religions are valid. But while it is good to acknowledge our limitations, this statement is itself a strong assertion about the nature of spiritual truth. A common analogy is often cited to get the point across which I am sure you have heard — several blind men trying to describe an elephant. One feels the tail and reports that an elephant is thin like a snake. Another feels a leg and claims it is thick like a tree. Another touches its side and reports the elephant is a wall. This is supposed to represent how the various religions only understand part of God, while no one can truly see the whole picture. To claim full knowledge of God, pluralists contend, is arrogance. When I occasionally describe this parable, and I can almost see the people nodding their heads in agreement.

But then I remind the hearers that the only way this parable makes any sense, however, is if the person telling the story has seen the whole elephant. Therefore, the minute one says, 'All religions only see part of the truth,' you are claiming the very knowledge you say no one else has. And they are demonstrating the same spiritual arrogance they so often accuse Christians of. In other words, to say all is relative, is itself a truth statement but dangerous because it uses smoke and mirrors to make itself sound more tolerant than the rest. Most folks who hold this view think they are more enlightened than those who hold to absolutes when in fact they are really just as strong in their belief system as everyone else. I do not think most of these folks are purposefully using trickery or bad motives. This is because they seem to have even convinced themselves of the "truth" of their position, even though they claim "truth" does not exist or at least can't be known. Ironic isn't it? The position is intellectually inconsistent. (Tim Keller)

In its pure form Pluralism is a fact. It's not an opinion or a belief or a religion. In other words, not every one believes the same things. We live in a society that's very diverse,

not just ethnically, but also religiously. But when pluralism starts to become a philosophy, when it starts to become a religious dogma, then it becomes a different animal. And that's what I want to call relativism -- or religious relativism, philosophical pluralism. It goes by different names but that is the dogmatic religious assertion that all religions are basically the same, that no one knows the truth about God. And no one can know the ultimate truth about God in a way that invalidates other peoples' religious opinions and the belief that it's arrogant to say that you have the truth religiously and it is arrogant to try to persuade other people to believe what you believe religiously. That's relativism, philosophical pluralism. And I would say that's the default belief of most people you run into in our city.-- whether they're religious or not, most people think about religion that way.

Here is what I want to urge on you and try to unpack in several ways. And that is that relativism is itself a religious belief. It is a dogma. Relativism is. It has affirmations and denials and a missionary force. One of the affirmations of relativism is that God is ultimately unknowable. No one can know the truth about God. But how do one know that to be true? This assumes an ultimate understanding of spiritual reality. All religions are ultimately the same. All religions are following a path to God. It doesn't matter how you believe, it matters how you live. Do you see this? Those are religious statements. Those are matters of religious beliefs, dogma. Doctrines! If people say, "No, I'm not religious. I'm saying you can't know. I'm saying, Nobody can know the truth about God. I'm not claiming that I've got a corner on it." But if you look at it closely, the statements of religious relativism are every bit as dogmatic as the statements of the Koran or the Bible. It's a religious dogma.

It has denials. Religious relativism denies with certainty that there is one God who is holy and just, who has taken on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, who is our creator and judge. Who can only be appeased and known through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and faith in him. Relativism says that is false. It makes a religious assertion: we deny this, creedally, that that is not true. It's a dogmatic assertion that relativism makes. And -- relativism seeks to persuade those who do not believe it to believe it.

Somehow, the relativist has come to understand that he alone sees the full reality. He alone is in the airplane. He alone is the king who is not blind telling the parable of the elephant. Only relativism is timelessly and objectively true. Relativistic belief is accepted so it can be taught as public fact in America today even though we have separation of church and state. I hear nonsensical statements like it is because of religion that all war starts - of course it is because of religion, but religion is an inescapable part of the human condition. Relativism also zealously fights to make sure no one believes in any absolutes while they must use their own absolute to establish this idea.

Now Christians have been known to be proudplenty of us. There are lots of arrogant Christians. But if you read the Bible, you see that Christians ought not to be arrogant. Arrogant Christians are betraying Christianity. And when we're arrogant, we're not believing the gospel. We're not being Biblical. But, ultimately, to hold a relativistic point of view, you have to turn the question back on yourself and doubt your own doubts and

say, "Why aren't the relativists' religious beliefs arrogant? Why isn't it arrogant to say that you're the one in the airplane? Why isn't it arrogant to say you're the king who's not blind and can see the whole elephant?" Ultimately, if you judge your doubts the same way you judge other peoples' religion, then you find yourself hoisted on your own petard. Right? Yes. It's just as arrogant to claim relativism, as it is to claim religious truth.

The Christian is not better in any way than a pagan. There are probably many pagans who have lived more moral lives than the Christian. In fact the Christian believes Himself not morally fit for God - a person who's so desperately broken that unless Jesus Christ dies under the wrath of God in my place, I can never be reconciled to God and have fellowship with Him." There are lots of people wiser than us, lots of people who are more moral than we are, people who are more devoted to their religion than we are. If a person claims anything different, he is missing the gospel. It's why we ought to be teachable. When we talk to friends who don't know Christ, we ought to be learning, instead of just talking.

But, someone will say, you only believe this because you were raised where you were raised, right? You say you know the truth but really its just provincialism. You're a product of your culture. So, how can you say it's the only truth?" But if you're raised here, you're raised in a relativistic culture. Right? And so you believe -- that all religions are one. You're a relativist. That's just because of your mom and dad -- and because you grew up in LA or the like. If you were born in Indonesia, you would not be a relativist. So, therefore, relativism couldn't be true. It's just a cultural construct. Right? You only believe it because of where you were raised so don't make any dogmatic assertions about all religions being equal. That's just what your little culture believes. Once you get out and about in the world and are a little more cosmopolitan, you'll realize that that's just one view among many. The criticism has to apply to relativism if it has to apply to other religions, doesn't it?

So -- if relativism is your default mode, if that's what you've booted up with, because of where you were raised, let me appeal to you this way. At least look at it, doubt it, the way you doubt religion. Look at your own beliefs with the same critical apparatus you use to look at other people's beliefs. See that it's a religious dogma like others and see if it holds water as a religious dogma. Is it true? Is relativism true? Ask yourself this important question.

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