

Five Arguments against Religious Tolerance Relativism

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ABSTRACT

This paper puts forward the notion of ‘Religious Tolerance Relativism’ (RTR), which is thought to help in coming to understand the diversity of religions. In short, RTR aims at the proper treatment of one’s fellows, and prescribes that one should not express the opinion that another’s religious beliefs are wrong, lacking, or mistaken. In this paper, I present five arguments that challenge the RTR position.

KEYWORDS

‘Religious Tolerance Relativism’, religion in the public sphere

INTRODUCTION

The presence of a variety of religions in our societies is a fact. However, how we best respond to this fact is the topic for debate. The following paper will address five arguments against one specific response to religious diversity, namely Religious Tolerance Relativism.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE RELATIVISM?

Religious Tolerance Relativism (RTR) is one way of dealing with the diversity of religion. It is made up of two aspects, the first being an argument as to the importance of tolerating other people's religious beliefs. In its simplest form it can be expressed in the following way:

- 1) It is of the utmost importance to be tolerant of one's fellows; this includes being tolerant of the other's religious beliefs, and
- 2) Expressing the opinion that another's religious beliefs are wrong, lacking or mistaken is not being tolerant of these religious beliefs, and therefore
- 3) One should not express the opinion that the other's religious believers are wrong, lacking, or mistaken.

The second aspect of Religious Tolerance Relativism is a notion of qualified truth. This understanding of truth is most simply formulated in the use of the phrase 'true-for-me' and/or 'true-for-you', and comprises the relativist portion of RTR.

In other words, the Religious Tolerance Relativist position is that criticism of religious beliefs is equal to intolerant behavior toward the individual holding those beliefs. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has expressed a similar view,¹ and this is the position that will be addressed in this text.

WHAT I AM NOT GOING TO DISCUSS

In an effort to stave off unnecessary question and/or criticism, I would like to now point out several interesting aspects that will not be discussed further in this paper, but are none the less relevant to the broader discussion.

The term 'tolerance' is used instead of 'respect', and no definitions of the terms are given. Inherent to my understanding and formulation of RTR are the ideas of human dignity and human rights with which I assume the reader is familiar. The extent to which I am justified in this assumption and the issue of whether or not these ideas prescribe *merely* tolerance or additionally respect is up for discussion, but will not be dealt with here.

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity* (New York, NY: Harper and Row 1976), 14. '...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 fellow human beings: "...we believe that we know God and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong."'

In addition, there are of course various ways in which the opinion that another's beliefs are wrong, lacking, or mistaken can be expressed. These ways can, in and of themselves, be kinder or more aggressive, and can reflect a more or less tolerant attitude. However, it seems reasonable that the desire to be tolerant results, at least in part, in tolerant behavior. To that end, I will assume that expression of the opinion that another's religious beliefs are wrong, lacking, or mistaken, even when made in the kindest and most respectful manner, results in the non-proper treatment of one's fellows.

PRESENTATION OF THE FIVE ARGUMENTS AGAINST RTR

It should be noted that each of the arguments presented here will not be dealt with in equal detail; more is said about the first two than is said about the following three. Additionally, please note that there is no priority given to the order in which they are discussed.

Argument 1: All Beliefs Are Created Equal

There are both religious and secular contexts that seem to employ the understanding that religious beliefs are somehow different than other beliefs and therefore require special treatment. This argument addresses this specific understanding. Special treatment can be understood in the following way: for example, the taking of statements concerning human rights or ethics in a realist sense (that they are true because they correspond to the way the world is, independent of culture, context, or the subject expressing them) while at the same time arguing that religious beliefs cannot be understood in the same way. This special treatment of religious beliefs (possibly taking the form of focus on the subjective, contextual, and/or 'true-for-me' aspects) points to inconsistent reasoning. This move, no doubt, is motivated by RTR and a desire to treat one's fellows properly. However, this display of inconsistent reasoning is troubling. No special treatment of religious beliefs is warranted; religious beliefs are of the same 'stuff' as all other beliefs.

Let us now take a closer look at what a religious belief is by examining what it is that makes religious beliefs religious. Right away, we can discount the possibility of beliefs being religious because they are 'active in their faith'. One might call my Aunt Gladys religious because she attended church regularly, but one cannot say the same thing of a belief. The adjective 'religious', when applied to beliefs, does not describe a given behavior. It seems to me that the only alternative is that it answers the question 'of what it is made'.

Simply put, what makes religious beliefs religious is that the content of the belief has to do with religion.

Now if what makes a religious belief religious is that it expresses something to do with religion, then we ought to have countless number of other sorts of beliefs alongside our religious ones. For example, one can have: philosophical beliefs, time beliefs, transportation beliefs, and even what-my-children-will-eat-for-dinner beliefs. These other beliefs may be very closely related to one's religious beliefs (as in the case of ethical beliefs), or the relationship may be seemingly nonexistent (as in the case of lawn-maintenance beliefs). In many cases, the same belief can be classified as more than one type of belief. For example, the belief that it will rain later today would reasonably count as both a weather belief (because it has to do with rainy conditions) and a planning-my-day belief (because it has to do with remembering to bring my umbrella).

In addition, some beliefs might be counted by the same person as religious in one situation and not in another; and, the same belief could be regarded as religious by some but not by others. Finally, now that religion is considered by some as 'way of life' beliefs whose contents have little or no connection to traditional religious subjects may be considered religious. The belief that God does not exist might be counted by many Atheists to be a religious view; similarly, the belief in the integrity of the individual may be considered religious by the Secular Humanist.

But, even given the existence of other kinds of beliefs and difficulties in determining which beliefs are specifically the religious, one could respond that religious beliefs are especially important to the creating and maintaining of existential meaning in light of life's inevitabilities. The claim is that their special standing lies in this task.

My response however is this: What is it about the task of creating and maintaining existential meaning that is so different than all the other tasks that our non-religious beliefs accomplish? In other words, if religious beliefs deserve special treatment because they are integral to existential meaning, isn't this task simply one among many? Surely it can be argued that the task of finding and ingesting nutrition is at least as important as dealing with life's inevitabilities. At best, the task of meaning making when faced with life's inevitabilities can be placed on the same level as the various tasks concerning one's bodily survival. So this puts meal-making beliefs (integral to nourishment) on par with religious beliefs (integral to coping with inevitabilities). The religious beliefs are not in any way special. Simply put, all beliefs have

content; the content varies, as does the usefulness of the specific belief in any given situation. This is the case for all beliefs, including our religious ones.

Now, this is not to say that religious beliefs are very important or special to the people that have them. It could very well be the case that, for any given person, religious beliefs: play an overwhelmingly large roll in their lives, outnumber all of their other beliefs, build the foundation upon which all other beliefs rest, and/or fill a function that no other type of belief can do. It could even be the case for some individuals, that what makes religious beliefs so extraordinary is that they have so few of them. This sort of specialness, having to do with the valuation of a given belief with a specific content, is *not* what I propose we deny. Simply put, I would like to challenge considering religious beliefs, as a type of belief, as being different from other beliefs.

In short, various beliefs are more or less important in being able to contribute to the task at hand. This is the case for all beliefs and all tasks; there is no reason to treat religious beliefs any different than our other beliefs. For those willing to ascribe to realist truths in some areas (for example about human rights), the burden is on them to explain why religious beliefs cannot be treated in the same way.

Argument 2: Be Reasonable

Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, states that ‘We should not seek the same degree of exactness in all sorts of arguments alike, any more than in the products of different crafts’.² Now admittedly, he was discussing ethics and he placed metaphysics at the top of the hierarchy of sciences, reasoning that one had to know of what the world was made before being able to examine it more closely. But, although the idea of ‘metaphysics as the foundation of science’ is hardly a view that is accepted today, Aristotle’s point about evidence still holds. One can hardly demand that the precision that can be found in the field of physics be expected in sociology. In other words, the unit of measurement is smallest and the predictability is highest at the physics end of the hierarchy. Precision and predictability decrease as one moves toward the sociology end of the scale.

Metaphysics is a controversial subject; everyone seems to have an opinion. In today’s society science has taken over the roll that metaphysics once played, contributing to the description of the way the world is. Metaphysics has been relegated to philosophy and, given recent developments, is consi-

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis 1985), 3.

dered by many to be a lost cause. However, putting this aside, *were* one to include metaphysics in the hierarchy of scientific disciplines, it would be placed furthest away from physics. The unit of measurement would be relatively largest and the predictability relatively lowest.

Now, one could argue that we simply do not have access to the world ‘in itself’, uninfluenced by our preconceptions, and that because of this it is not possible to measure the world ‘as it is’. Therefore, the argument continues, there is no point in attempting to discover the description of the world. In conclusion, it is either the case that there is no description of the world ‘as it is’ or that we have no access to this description; hence the abandonment of the metaphysics project.

Although agreeing with the first part of this argument, I do not ascribe to the conclusion. I do not believe that metaphysics is a lost cause, although I cannot simply write off the challenges that postmodern thinking poses. Even if there is no perfect description of the world in itself to be had, there are descriptions that are more or less correct. Our realist natures do not allow us to believe whatever we want. This in combination with the fact that we ought *not* to demand more evidence than is reasonable (given the discipline), means that it is quite possible to make realist claims about religion, without traditional scientific evidence. We have no right to expect of metaphysics the exactness that is possible in other disciplines; those demanding ‘proof’ or ‘hard evidence’ will be sorely disappointed because it is, at least at this point, simply not to be had. In short, one can be justified in making realist claims concerning religion despite the lack of evidence, because the demand for evidence is unreasonable. This means that we may be more often wrong than right, and that it may be impossible to know undoubtedly which is the case. Neither of these however, prohibits the believing or expression of religious realist claims.

Argument 3: If You Don’t Look You Won’t Find

The use of religious tolerance relativism is, no doubt, grounded in the desire to act appropriately towards one’s fellows. However, it is worth looking at the cost of such an understanding.

Simply put, if religious beliefs are understood as relative there is no hope of ever discovering realistic truths (concerning religion). Similarly, if we decide that it is not worth looking for realistic truths, then we might miss them were they ever to make themselves more apparent.

I should make clear that it is not my intention to propagate for the abandonment of all other disciplines in favor of religious truth searching. What I do find reasonable is openness toward the possibility of realistic religious truths. This openness might just be the key to avoid missing what would undoubtedly be an amazing discovery. Accept relativism and one might never know what has gone undiscovered. Give realism a chance and the payout might just be extraordinary.

Argument 4: Avoid Inconsistency

Simply put, the relativist would like to claim that there are no realistic truths. Truth for the relativist is dependent upon cultural, historical, and even subjective aspects; correspondence is not the deciding factor, and therefore no realistic truths can be made.

Here however, the relativist runs into the same problem as our ‘tolerant fellow’ from argument one, the one who wanted to claim that religious beliefs require special treatment. For, inherent to the relativists’ position is a realistic claim: that all truths are relative. Now, the relativist *could* claim that all truths are relative, except the claim that all truths are relative, but she seems to have dug herself into a hole. The relativist is now left with the difficult task of arguing for the non-possibility of realist truths while, at the same time, requiring the specific realistic truth: ‘All truths are relative’. This seems to me an impossible task; and highlights the inconsistency in the relativists’ line of thinking.

Argument 5: Conflict Can Be Advantageous

History is filled with examples of conflict that have ended in violence. Perhaps this is why people are so afraid of disagreement. However, it is worth investigating what is to be gained (and lost) by simply making the relevant ‘umbrella’ bigger, so that real differences are downplayed. Why is it always better to identify and discuss the similarities?

I propose that it is not always better to focus on that which things have in common; there is real advantage to having actual disagreement. The advantage is this: It is when we are forced to try to take into account two (or more) seemingly incompatible views that we become the most creative in our solutions. The fact is, that the way we think about things changes over time. ‘Advancement’, ‘development’, ‘progress’, ‘paradigm shift’, and ‘new creative ways of thinking’ are all concepts with which we are familiar. We move for-

ward in our thinking, finding and using better, more useful theories and ideas. Conflict is integral to this progress.

Philosophers can be regarded as ‘problem solvers’, taking on the task of reflection in order to formulate better ways of thinking; our job is to contribute to the discussion. This is the case regardless of subject matter; it applies to philosophy of religion just as it does to any other area of philosophy. No doubt do some, if not all, of those who read this text have an idea or way of thinking about something that he or she feels is better somehow than the present understanding. Were there no problems to be solved, if differences were downplayed and concepts simply broadened, there would be no creative solutions. This is true even for ideas having to do with religion.

In short, when incompatible views are simply accepted as ‘the way it is’, written off as reflecting a complicated world, there is no impetus to try and resolve the tension between them. On the other hand, when we accept real disagreement and/or incompatibility we can struggle to find a solution. Sometimes, we succeed and advancement is achieved.

CLOSING

These arguments (separately or even together) should not be expected to convince everyone. However, these five arguments give serious reason to examine the validity or usefulness of Religious Tolerance Relativism. At the very least, the burden now lays upon the Religious Tolerance Relativist to argue for the use of RTR in light of the challenges presented.