

Why So Many Religions?

Religious Diversity, Disagreement, and the Checkable Claim

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I. Ten Thousand Religions, Every One of Them Sure

The Muslim in Riyadh, the Hindu in Varanasi, the Baptist in Tulsa, and the Catholic in Kraków each holds his faith with the same inward certainty—and each, mostly, holds the faith of his parents. To many honest minds this single observation outweighs every argument for God: if revelation were real, would it not have produced agreement? This essay takes the objection at full strength, because it deserves it—and because, examined closely, it is not really an argument about God at all, but an argument about knowledge, and one that proves both too much and too little.

II. The Objection, Fairly Stated

Its strongest form has three strands. First, the map: religious identity is the most heritable of convictions, distributed like language rather than like scientific conclusions, and a belief that tracks geography looks produced by geography. Second, the symmetry: the

Pentecostal's warmed heart, the Muslim's awe before the Qur'an, and the Mormon's burning in the bosom feel identical in authority from inside, and each community discounts the others' experiences by criteria it exempts from its own—hence the demand that every believer take the “outsider test,” examining his faith as he examines everyone else's. Third, the contradictions: God is triune and strictly one; Christ was crucified and was not; the self is immortal and is an illusion. Ten confident, mutually contradictory witnesses do not invite a juror to pick his favorite; they teach him that confidence, in this courtroom, is not evidence.¹

III. Disagreement Does Not Dissolve Truth

Take the underlying principle at face value: where sincere, intelligent people disagree deeply and durably, no one may hold a confident view. Philosophy has disagreed about free will for twenty-five centuries; ethics about justice; historians about causes; and the skeptic holds firm views in all three—including atheism itself, a minority position maintained against a vast, sincere, intelligent majority of mankind. If deep disagreement discredits confidence, atheism goes first. If it does not, then the map of religions shows what the map of philosophies shows: that the question is hard, and that humans approach truth from where they stand—which no one ever doubted.

The birthplace argument recoils the same way. Secular unbelief tracks time and place of birth as tightly as any creed: the child of 1950s Moscow or of modern Stockholm inherits his unbelief exactly as the child of Tulsa inherits his Baptism. An argument that discredits every position that has a demography discredits every position there is—its own included. The genetic fallacy is a fallacy in both directions: where a belief comes from is a fact about the believer; whether it is true is a fact about the world, and only evidence, not geography, can touch it.²

IV. What the Diversity Actually Shows

Now look at what the ten thousand religions disagree about—and at what they do not. Beneath the contradictions lies a startling unanimity: that the visible world is not the whole story; that something is owed to the divine; that the self is answerable beyond the grave of its reputation; that gratitude, sacrifice, and purification mean something. Ask what the word divine means anywhere on earth—not who holds the office, but what the office is—and the answer converges on one thing: the reality on which all else depends. That finding, surveyed on this site's page about the meaning of “God,” is precisely what Paul claimed for the nations: a real but clouded knowledge of God from the things that are made, and a law written on the heart (Rom. 1:19–20; 2:14–15).³

Read this way, mankind's religions look less like ten thousand inventions than like ten thousand attempts at the same door—which is evidence of the door, not against it. If there were never anything to find, universal seeking is a strange fossil; thirst is odd evidence against water. The diversity records the search's human half: sincere, partial, culture-shaped, sometimes corrupted—exactly what seeking without full revelation would look like.

V. What the Church Says About the Others

The objection usually imagines Christianity claiming that every other faith is simple darkness. That is not Catholic teaching, and the Church's own sentence belongs on the table: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions," whose precepts and teachings "often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men." The thought is not a modern accommodation; Justin Martyr taught in the second century that seeds of the Word were scattered among the nations, so that whatever has been said well anywhere belongs to Christians. And the Church teaches that those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel but seek God with a sincere heart are not outside His mercy. The map assigns no one's eternity.⁴

VI. The Scandal of Particularity

Why, then, did a God who left His witness everywhere reveal Himself fully somewhere—one time, one place, one people? Because anything genuinely historical must happen somewhere. A "revelation" delivered everywhere at once, to all cultures identically, would be indistinguishable from philosophy—another set of ideas, another voice in the parliament of guesses. The Christian claim is of a different kind: not that a better idea occurred to some Galileans, but that God acted, in datable history, at a particular address. Particularity is not an embarrassment to that claim. It is the signature of the genre; events, unlike ideas, have coordinates. The map's unevenness—faith radiating outward from one century and one empty tomb, carried by human feet at human speed—is what a real event's aftermath looks like.⁵

VII. The Tie-Breaker the Courtroom Allows

The juror with ten confident witnesses does not go home; he looks for the witness whose testimony can be checked. And here the symmetry on which the whole objection rests quietly breaks, because the grounds of the great religions are not formally identical. Most rest on private disclosure: a recitation received alone in a cave; golden plates shown to a handful; an enlightenment attained in solitude beneath a tree. These can be believed, but they cannot be examined—there is nothing public to check. Christianity's central claim is a public event: a man known to thousands, executed by a named Roman official on a

recorded charge, and proclaimed risen within weeks, in the same city, by witnesses who could be and were cross-examined, imprisoned, and killed without recanting.⁶

That claim can be false. But it is checkable in a way its rivals are not—it stakes everything on a fact in the public world—and this site spends two essays checking it. The outsider test, honestly applied, does not flatten the field; it sorts it. Apply to every foundational claim the question an outsider would ask—what would show this false, and has anyone been able to?—and one claimant volunteers for the examination the others cannot take. Paul himself applied the test in public: if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile (1 Cor. 15:14–17). No other founder dared an “if” like that.

VIII. Behind Pilate’s Question

The scene this essay’s page sets at its head is the whole argument in miniature. A sophisticated Roman governor, administrator of a province boiling with cults, hears a prisoner say “Every one who is of the truth hears my voice”—and answers with the weary question of every pluralist age: “What is truth?” The diversity of religions stands behind Pilate’s shrug. And the Truth stands in front of him: particular, embodied, checkable, and about to submit to the one test that settles anything in history. Pilate had the advantage over every reader of this essay—he could have walked to the tomb that weekend. What he shares with every reader is the question’s real force, which was never “why are there many claims?” but “what will you do about the one that can be examined?” The map explains why men seek. It cannot examine what one Man claimed. That examination is the next page’s work—and it is the reason this site, surrounded by ten thousand religions, is not a shrug.⁷

Endnotes

1. The “outsider test for faith” is John W. Loftus’s formulation; the demographic and symmetry arguments are staples of the contemporary literature on religious disagreement. On the contradictions: the Trinity against tawhid; the crucifixion against Surah 4:157. Scripture quotations in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. On disagreement in philosophy as the parallel case, see the epistemology-of-disagreement literature.
3. Romans 1:19–20; 2:14–15. Roy Clouser’s survey of the meaning of “the divine” is presented on this site’s page “What Do We Mean by God?”
4. *Nostra Aetate* (1965), §2, quoted from the Vatican translation; Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 8, 13, paraphrased; *Lumen Gentium* §16; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§847–848.

5. Cf. John 1:14: the Word became flesh—at an address.
6. 1 Corinthians 15:3–8; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, for the execution under Pontius Pilate as a matter of Roman record.
7. John 18:37–38. The examination is made in the essays accompanying “Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?” and “Why Christianity?” on this site.

For Further Reading

Nostra Aetate, Vatican II (1965)—what the Church actually declares about the non-Christian religions. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

What Do We Mean by “God”?—the convergent meaning of the divine. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/yarn/divinity/divinity.php>.

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?—the checkable claim. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/yarn/resurrection/resurrection.php>.

Why Christianity?—from generic theism to one claimant. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/yarn/christianity/christianity.php>.

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“Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” — John 18:37–38

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Christian response to the argument from religious diversity*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.