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TH151 – Y

Midterm Exam – Reason for God, Chapter 1: Are All Religions Equal?

In the first chapter of his book, Dr. Timothy Keller begins his discourse by pointing out that major world religions are often barriers to peace. Christianity is no exception to this, as we can see in its role during the Dark Ages wherein it exercised drastic measures against those who were branded as heretics. Similarly, Islam nowadays is stereotyped as a violent and discriminating religion.

A frequent objection against Christianity is the exclusivity of its claims. A notable example is that of Christianity’s belief about Jesus, that he is God made flesh. Other religions such as Judaism and Islam maintain that he is but a teacher or prophet. Using this premise, Keller suggests that “we couldn’t all be equally right about the nature of God.” There were two reactions to this statement. The first is “All that matters is that you just believe God is a loving person. To insist that one faith has a better grasp of the truth than others is intolerant.” The second, “We will never come to know peace on earth if religious leaders keep on making such exclusive claims!” elicits a response from Keller. He says that “It is easy for one religious group to stereotype and caricature another religion.” Following this, active oppression, abuse, and violence will naturally stem from inter-religious tensions.

Community leaders use three secular approaches to handle the resulting conflict: outlaw, condemn, or privatize religion. Outlawing religion restricts the people’s freedom of religious expression. Several countries prohibit its residents to convert from its main religion into another. A major, now-defunct reason for this is that national governments believe that the evolutionary process and modern technology will render religion obsolete, since major religions around the world are growing. Suppressing religious beliefs will only make them stronger, as per the statement “Religion is not just a temporary thing that helped us adapt to our environment. Rather it is a permanent and central aspect of the human condition."

Condemning religion is a subtler approach compared to the brute force of outlawing. It seeks to achieve the same effect through education and social pressure. This approach also fails, as explained through its four axioms. First, is that all major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing. Second, each religion sees part of the spiritual truth, but none can see the whole truth. Third, religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be truth. Fourth, it is arrogant to insist your religion is right and to convert others to it.

Privatizing religion is the most commonly adopted secular approach today. It aims to eliminate religion from the public sphere. Everyone is still free to practice their religions, but public and civic functions must remain a neutral ground for religion. In my opinion, this approach is the most socially acceptable and the least destructive to religion. Technically, it does not violate the human right of having and practicing religion, but there are still restrictions to fully practicing one’s religion. Christianity is a communal religion, which calls for religious practices through social interaction. If Christians cannot express their religious beliefs with one another, Christianity might as well die out. It is impossible to practice Christian beliefs in permanent isolation. A person’s moral reasoning is also based on his/her religion, and he/she will lose morality if religion is eliminated from the public sphere. Consequently, humanity will be reduced to relying solely on logic and instinct for every aspect of human life. Everything will be seen from a utilitarian point of view. Procreation, for instance, will merely be seen as a means of propagating humanity and will only be done because of necessity, not because of love. Copulation and matrimony will also be rendered obsolete since from a logical point of view, being restricted to only one partner permanently is pointless, and therefore reduces a person’s potential for reproduction.

These approaches, along with many other efforts of addressing the diversity of religions, are not effective. Although the secular approaches offer a solution to problems which stem from religious conflict, such as violence, oppression, and abuse, differences in religion have not stopped humanity from interacting with one another with positive outcomes. Keller concludes that better examples of “being human” can be seen from non-Christian religions, even though “Christians should be the most loving, honest, humble, and forgiving people in the world…” We, as a member of our religion, must simply learn to respect and understand other religions’ beliefs and not force our own as the absolute moral standard. If we can do so, our differences in religion will not matter and we can live without further conflict and strife.

Source: PowerPoint lecture presentation *(ReasonForGod01.pptx)*