

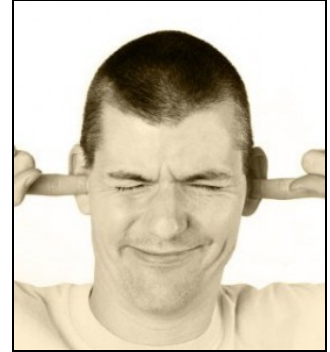
# Close-Minded?

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One of the most common objections to Christianity that I hear is the objection of “Christian close-mindedness.” Time and time again, Christians are accused of being close-minded because of their view that Jesus is the only way of salvation. A view such as this is seen as narrow, intolerant, or even immoral in today’s relativistic and pluralistic society.

Prominent Christian philosopher and apologist William Lane Craig agrees, when he states that:

“This attitude is pervasive in Western culture today. Most people are happy to agree that God exists; but in our pluralistic society it has become politically incorrect to claim that God has revealed Himself decisively in Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>



In other words, “there isn’t just ‘one way’ to salvation,” the pluralist says, “but many ways.” Or, “everyone finds their own way – whatever works for them.” And for the Christian to say that his way is right and that every other way is wrong is both close-minded and intolerant, and therefore cannot be accepted.

But is it true that Christianity teaches this? And if so, does that make it close-minded? And if it does, would that be a good objection to it?

## Is it True?

So, to answer the first question, “Is it true that Christianity teaches this?” Well, yes, to be short; and I’d guess that most people probably already know that. The real question is why. So, to start, I think it’s important to quickly clarify why Christians claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Contrary to what many people might believe (including many self-professed Christians), it’s not just because we feel like it, or because our parents or pastor said so, or because we think we’re better than everybody else, or because we have a bone to pick with the world and enjoy stirring up trouble.

Now, although a lot of Christians might think like that, that is not what Christianity teaches, and the real question here has to do with what *Christianity* claims, not what *Christians* claim. So, to answer, the simple truth is that Christianity claims that Jesus is the only way of salvation because that is what is clearly taught throughout the Bible. In fact, Jesus himself probably said it best in John 14:6, when he claimed:

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Now you can’t get much clearer than that! He makes it explicitly clear that He is *the* only way to the Father. Not *a* way, but *the* way. And there are a plethora of other examples in Scripture as well, but for now I think it will suffice to say that it *is* true that Christianity is particular in its claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation. So what’s the problem?

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<sup>1</sup> William Lane Craig, “How Can Christ Be the Only Way to God?” <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5347>

## What Seems to be the Problem?

Well, as I stated earlier, the problem for most people is that this just seems close-minded and intolerant. If this is true, then that means that millions, if not billions, of people today and throughout history would have missed the boat on this one, a thought that just seems unconscionable in our exceedingly “tolerant” and politically correct culture. And this attitude comes as no surprise. In fact, this isn’t just a recent development, but has been maintained by enemies of Christianity from its beginning. As Dr. Craig comments:

“This particularistic doctrine was just as scandalous in the polytheistic world of the Roman Empire as in contemporary Western culture. Early Christians were therefore often subjected to severe persecution, torture, and death because of their refusal to embrace a pluralistic approach to religions.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, this attitude is nothing new to Christianity, but is part-and-parcel of its history, and has continued through the ages to the present day.

## The Problem Analyzed

So, at this point, two observations can be made: 1) Christians *do* believe the exclusive claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation and 2) This claim has been adamantly opposed by its enemies since its inception and this attitude continues to flourish today.

However, those are not the real issues, as most people would be willing to grant both of those points. The real issue isn’t whether or not people *think* that Christian particularism is close-minded (they obviously do), but is whether or not Christian particularism actually *is* close-minded - and if so, if that serves as adequate grounds for rejecting it. We’ll start with the latter first.

### Failure #1: Not a Good Objection

Before we ask ourselves if Christianity is close-minded, we must first ask ourselves why it would matter. In other words, what follows if Christianity is close-minded? Is that grounds for rejecting it? Well, to start, let’s assume it *is* close-minded for a minute.

Then, the most fundamental question becomes: if Christianity *is* close-minded, would that be a sufficient objection to it? Well, I don’t think so at all. The reason being is that Christianity makes statements that claim to be true, and therefore a good objection to it would be one that objects to it on grounds of its truth, nothing less. A good objection would be one that successfully attempts to show that the claims of Christianity are, in some way or another, plausibly false.

But does close-mindedness do that? Well, obviously not. Even if Christianity *is* close-minded, that wouldn’t make it false. After all, whether a view is close-minded or not has absolutely nothing to do with whether it’s true or not. You could have a view that is largely close-minded, yet entirely true; and, on the other hand, you could have a view that is largely open-minded, yet entirely false. There is no logical rule of inference that can move you from a view being close-minded to it therefore being false. It is logically impossible. And it is the intellectual duty of the rational person to accept or reject a view based on its truth or falsity, not on its emotional implications.

So, I guess we might as well pack up and go home. After all, this virtually stops the objection in its tracks, right? Well, although it does show that this is a poor and misconceived objection even if

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Christianity *is* close-minded, I think more can be said about this issue that, to keep the same analogy, will essentially blow it right off the tracks, so to speak. And that has to do with the pluralist's claim that Christianity actually *is* close-minded. Now is that true? Well, I don't think so for several reasons, let me explain.

### **Failure #2: Confusion of Terms**

One mistake I think the pluralist makes here has to do more with a confusion of terms than anything else, primarily, the confusion of "exclusiveness" with "close-mindedness". To review, since truth is exclusive (see my article "What is Truth?"), it logically follows that if one's view is true, then all views opposing one's view are false. That is the exclusive nature of truth. In other words, whoever is right here (whether the religious pluralist or the Christian particularist), the other person has to be wrong. It would make no sense to say that the pluralist claim that "Jesus *isn't* the only way" and the Christian claim that "Jesus *is* the only way" are both true. Someone has to be right and someone has to be wrong - both views are *exclusive* (the Christian particularist would *exclude* the pluralistic claim that salvation can be attained apart from Jesus, and the pluralist would *exclude* the Christian particularist claim that salvation cannot be attained apart from Jesus).

So, contrary to initial appearances, the pluralistic view is just as exclusive as the particularist view which it obstinately opposes. And if the pluralist's definition that holding to a view which is "exclusive" implies it is "close-minded," then both views would be "close-minded," including their own, because it also excludes anything that opposes it. In fact, if that definition were true, then since all truth is objectively exclusive, *anyone* who holds *anything* to be true would be close-minded (including the pluralist who claims that truth is relative, because that would *exclude* the view that truth is objective)!

Now, this brings me back to the main point, which is the pluralist's confusion of the term "exclusive" with the term "close-minded." Just because a claim is exclusive doesn't mean it is close-minded. This is where definition of terms is critical. To clarify, the classic definition of close-mindedness doesn't have anything to do with *what* you believe, but *how* you believe it. A person is not close-minded by merely holding a certain type of belief (the what), but by their attitude towards, and unwillingness to consider, opposing beliefs (the how). And this leads to the next problem, which has to do with the wrong motives on behalf of the pluralist.

### **Failure #3: Wrong Motives**

Now, I think it's safe to say that the proper motive for objecting to a view which claims to be true is a motive which seeks to verify or falsify the truth of that view on its own merits. So for starters, how does the Christian hold up here? Well, it seems to me that on the correct definition of close-mindedness, the Christian particularist is not close-minded here at all. In fact, as a Christian, I try to make it a point to come to the table as open-minded as possible, considering different views and accepting the ones which seem the most reasonable and verified by the evidence.

So don't get me wrong, I'll be the first to admit that from an emotional point of view, I wish that salvation was universal and everyone could find it their own way. But unfortunately, I cannot accept that view because that is not where reason and evidence point (I'll blog about the evidence for the historical reliability of the Bible, specifically the New Testament and the Gospel narratives, at another time; but for now, you'll just have to take my word for it as far as "evidence" is concerned - but the rational and logical reservations I have are still sufficient for rejecting it, i.e. truth is both objective and exclusive).

Now what about the pluralist? Well, it does, on the other hand, seem to me that it's the religious pluralist who seems to be the close-minded one here, because it is *he* who is either completely unwilling to

consider the claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation, or *is* willing to consider it, but upon consideration, rejects it on grounds of personal dislike rather than on sound reasoning. In other words, his motive isn't to discover what is true, but is to dogmatically defend the view that he already holds, regardless of whether it's true or not.

If the pluralist is as open as he claims to be, then he should be willing to approach the issue with the proper motives, and legitimately and openly consider the claim that Jesus is the only way. By doing that, he will place himself in a better position to judge the view on its own merits, rather than on his own personal bias against it. To neglect an opposing viewpoint without even considering it is on par with a judge who decides the verdict of a case without even holding a hearing. And then to verbally attack and label the person who holds that opposing belief as “close-minded”... now *that* is classic close-mindedness. And that leads me to my next point - this objection is self-refuting.

#### **Failure #4: Self-Refuting**

So, to summarize thus far, not only is the pluralist's objection invalid by 1) failing as a legitimate “objection” to the Christian claim, 2) confusing close-mindedness with exclusiveness, and 3) having the wrong motives; there is an even bigger problem - their objection is self-refuting. They trap themselves in their own reasoning, and as Christian apologist Greg Koukl puts it:

“[The pluralist] is not able to escape this self-refuting circle. Based on his definition of openness, he is either not open to even consider [the Christian] view—making him truly close-minded—or he would have to admit [that the Christian's] “narrow” view might be correct—making him just as close-minded as he says [the Christian] is.”<sup>3</sup>

The pluralist has essentially boxed himself in – either way he is close-minded. And since, on his definition, a view that is close-minded cannot be accepted, he cannot even accept his own view. He is in a lose-lose battle and his objection has committed suicide, so to speak.

#### **Closing Remarks**

So, what are we supposed to make of all this? Well, from the four reasons I gave alone, I think it's safe to say that the objection of “Christian close-mindedness” has suffered death by a thousand qualifications, so to speak. It is a misplaced objection at best, and fundamentally invalid, logically fallacious, and self-refuting at worst. So, why do I care?

Well, I care because it is my hope that this will help clarify a commonly misconceived objection to Christianity and its followers. For the seeker who has struggled with this stumbling block, my hope would be that it would no longer be a barrier in their quest for truth. For the believer, my hope would be that this would not only strengthen their faith, but also provide a firm foundation to help them deal with this objection in the future, but in a logically compelling, yet gentle way.

And for those who aren't sincerely seeking the truth, but simply throw up this objection to justify their personal dislike for, and rejection of, Christianity, my hope would be that they would abandon their juvenile attitude, opting instead to approach the issue from an open-minded standpoint, where they can give the Christian view a fair hearing instead of simply dismissing it on the basis of personal prejudice. I don't mean to sound harsh, but the truth is there, and one is unlikely to find it by stubbornly locking himself into an intellectual closet of childish irrationality and poignant dogmatism.

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<sup>3</sup> Greg Koukl, “My niece was accused of being ‘close-minded’: What I told her may help you” (April 1, 2009), <http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8555>.

If you simply approach the issue with an attitude of honesty and sincerity, and keep truth as the ultimate goal, then I am confident that you will be delightfully surprised at where the combination of sound reasoning and solid evidence will inevitably lead you. I know I was!