

**Christophobia:  
Confronting the Problem of Religious Discrimination on Campus  
by Paul Copan**

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**SYNOPSIS**

Western universities claim to promote religious diversity and freedom of speech, but in practice Christianity is often ridiculed or censured. Openness to discussion and debate over matters of truth has been replaced with a religious pluralism that argues “all religions are the same” and “religious truth is subjective.” All religions, however, are not the same; they make radically different and exclusive truth claims about the nature of ultimate reality and of humankind. The Christian who recognizes this fact and rejects religious pluralism is often singled out for censure — all viewpoints are considered equal, except Christianity.

How can Christians and non-Christians approach the spectrum of religious claims fair-mindedly and for the common good? We must begin by understanding the true meaning of tolerance and religious pluralism. Tolerance has come to mean the acceptance or “celebration” of all views as true. True tolerance, however, recognizes the real difference in religious truth claims, yet allows others to think differently. All persons are equal, but all beliefs are not equal. Moreover, the fact that many religious beliefs exist (religious diversity) does not mean that they are all true (religious pluralism). People with different religious views can coexist, but only by understanding and exercising true, respectful tolerance can we avoid errors that censure Christianity and blur the real differences between religious truth claims.

American Enterprise recently exposed the myth of political diversity on university campuses. Departments at Harvard and Cornell, for example, have one or no faculty member on the political “right” but several dozen on the political “left.” At the University of California in Santa Barbara, the ratio across five departments was 1 (“right”) to 72 (“left”)! The study concluded that there is “a wider — and freer — cross-section of human reasoning and conviction in the aisles of any grocery store or city bus.”<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to religious diversity, Yale University law professor Stephen L. Carter has observed “a trend in our political and legal cultures toward treating religious beliefs as arbitrary and unimportant, a trend supported by rhetoric that implies that there is something wrong with religious devotion. More and more, our culture seems to take the position that believing deeply in the tenets of one’s faith represents a kind of mystical irrationality, something that thoughtful, public-spirited American citizens would do better to avoid.”<sup>2</sup> The common opinion is that the devout can pray and worship as they wish, but they “should keep their religious ideas — whether good or bad — to themselves.”<sup>3</sup> This mindset treats religion as a personal hobby rather than something foundational to one’s life, permeating and informing all that one does both privately and publicly. The result is that religious thought is marginalized or censured.

One former Harvard student recalls the silence she encountered regarding the most fundamental religious truth: “I had become deeply disturbed by many of my classes in which we were never

able to ask whether or not there is a God. A student who is never challenged to ask such questions may be a student divorced from the possibility that a God exists, and that in knowing a loving God we might find the purpose of human existence.”<sup>4</sup>

Where religious ideas are discussed, an unwritten orthodoxy says, “All religions are basically the same.” Some academics, especially those in religious studies departments, say, “We affirm all religions,” but I would submit that religious beliefs are affirmed only if they do not “rock the boat.” The one heresy on university campuses is orthodox Christianity. The Christian who rejects religious pluralism and who maintains that public reasons (i.e., objective evidence) can be given for God’s existence and for the historical Jesus is singled out for censure. Why? Because she has rejected the default position that religious truth is purely personal and subjective.

There is an anecdotal story of a professor who, on the first day of classes, would hold up a Bible and ask incoming students, “How many of you believe this is the Word of God?” After several students had raised their hands, the professor would toss the Bible out an open window and say, “That’s what I think of your Bible.”<sup>5</sup> Whether or not this actually happened, the current environment is such that it is conceivable. What would be the reaction, however, if the book was the Qur’an or some feminist book or Karl Marx’s *Capital*? The campus would be up in arms! The environment is that of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* — all viewpoints are equal, but some are more equal than others. The message is, “Be sensitive to every group on campus — except Christians. Don’t insult anyone — except Christians.”

Islam is defended as a “peaceful religion,” but when one raises questions about Muhammad as a warrior, the history of Islam (remember, the Crusades responded to Muslim aggression!), the condoning of religious militancy in the Qur’an and Islamic traditions, and the miserable human rights track record of most Muslim countries, one draws the accusation, “Islamophobic” — while the truth and implications of such claims are never discussed. (There exists no parallel charge such as “Christophobic.”)

In light of such double standards, I offer some observations about religious diversity as well as suggestions as to how Christians and non-Christians might approach the spectrum of religious claims fair-mindedly and for the common good. This will help us avoid two errors: singling out Christianity for censure and ignoring the essential differences between religious truth claims.

## **REFLECTIONS ON RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH**

First, our chief commitment must be to truth, not to diversity or pluralism. Too often diversity is pursued as an end in itself, while truth takes a back seat. Some are more concerned with not upsetting the political applecart than with examining matters of truth. Religious plurality (i.e., many religious beliefs exist) is a fact to be acknowledged, but this does not mean that religious pluralism (i.e., all religious beliefs are equal) is true.

Religious studies departments typically treat religion as a matter of personal rituals, practices, and experiences while leaving out any discussion of truth claims and doctrines. Religious studies tend to focus on the subject of religion and not the object of religion.<sup>6</sup> Religious experience is paramount, not the nature of ultimate reality or truths about this reality. When talking about truth and the object of belief, however, we must also talk about falsity. Some people will take this

personally or be “offended” at such “intolerance.” Truth, however, is more basic than tolerance since genuine tolerance presupposes that some things are true while others are false. Tolerance, unfortunately, no longer means a willingness to put up with something we believe to be false; it has come to mean acceptance of everything as true. Should we, however, accept as true beliefs we think may be delusional or self-contradictory? The apostle Paul exhibited a fundamental commitment to truth when he declared in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ has not been raised, our faith is meaningless — there is no point in pretending Christianity is true if its central doctrine is false.

Second, commitment to truth-seeking must be coupled with respect for those who strongly disagree with us — that is what tolerance means. Commitment to seeking truth or commitment to a certain set of beliefs as true need not lead to arrogance or intolerance of others’ right to hold a different belief. For two years, I attended a mosque as a Christian observer, getting to know Muslims and respectfully communicating the Gospel with them. Despite disagreements, we could be friends. We could disagree respectfully.

Third, though seemingly open and tolerant, religious pluralism is exclusivistic. You’ve probably heard the pluralist story of six blind men from India, each of whom touches a different part of an elephant and mistakes it for a tree, a wall, a rope, and so on. The moral? “No religion has the whole story; every religion has only part of the picture.” Religious pluralists like John Hick claim that religions are culturally conditioned responses to the Ultimate Reality, and each is capable of bringing salvation or liberation.

This begs one question: If all views are culturally conditioned, how does the pluralist know an elephant exists? There is nothing wrong with claiming to see the big picture about religions (if divine revelation exists, one can get the big picture!), but religious pluralists believe they are not like one of the blind men — that they are not culturally conditioned like the Christian or Buddhist. Pluralists believe they see the whole picture while orthodox Christians and Buddhists do not. Our pluralistic society views the pluralist’s claim to know the truth as acceptable but the Christian’s claim to know the truth as “arrogant.”

Christian evangelist Franklin Graham commented that he does not worship the same God as the Muslims. Political commentators saw his statement as arrogant. The Qur’an itself, however, says those who worship the Trinity do not worship the same God as the Muslims! Christians worship the Trinity,<sup>7</sup> which Muslims consider heretical. This politically correct idea — “You are wrong if you don’t believe Muslims and Christians worship the same God” — comes from a pluralistic view that claims to see the whole picture. Both Christians and Muslims, however, should reject this view based on simple logic: God cannot both be and not be triune at the same time.

Fourth, all religious traditions — not merely Christianity — make exclusive truth claims, yet only Christianity is criticized as being “narrow” and “exclusivistic.” All religions make exclusive claims about the nature of the Ultimate Reality, the nature of the human problem and its solution, and the afterlife. The Dalai Lama, for example, claims full salvation and compassion are impossible to achieve unless one accepts the absence of inherent or independent existence; that is, the doctrine that everything is emptiness (*sunyata*). He claims that “only Buddhists can accomplish” the state of liberation,<sup>8</sup> and that Tibetan Buddhism is “the highest and complete form of Buddhism.”<sup>9</sup> If the Christian is narrow and exclusivistic, then so is the Dalai Lama.

Fifth, some metaphysical beliefs do a better job than others of grounding important basic beliefs and intuitions. Theism makes better sense of our rights and dignity than does naturalism or pantheism. It is precisely because we have been made in the image of a rational, personal, moral God that we can have true moral and social ideals. Former sociology professor Alvin Schmidt points out in his book *Under the Influence* that much good has come precisely because people lived out the essence of the Christian faith. Examples include William Wilberforce, Jean Henri Dunant, Lord Shaftesbury, William Booth, and Mother Teresa — not to mention the science of Copernicus and Boyle and the musical genius of Bach and Handel.<sup>10</sup> Abuses carried out in the name of Christ, such as the Crusades or the Inquisition, were inconsistencies that violated Christian principles.

The situation, however, appears different with naturalism. If we are nothing more than products of mindless, impersonal, valueless, nonconscious processes, then how could we have become purposive, personal, valuable, conscious beings who have inviolable rights? Despite the prevailing belief that naturalism can ground objective moral values and human dignity, this idea is rather, according to University of Toronto professor John Rist, the “ethical hangover from a more homogeneous Christian past.”<sup>11</sup> Even agnostic political scientist Guenter Lewy admits:

Adherents of [a naturalistic] ethic are not likely to produce a Dorothy Day or a Mother Teresa. Many of these people love humanity but not individual human beings with all their failings and shortcomings. They will be found participating in demonstrations for causes such as nuclear disarmament but not sitting at the bedside of a dying person. An ethic of moral autonomy and individual rights, so important to secular liberals, is incapable of sustaining and nourishing values such as altruism and self-sacrifice....There exists no secular counterpart to the Order of the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa, which today has almost 5,000 members seeking to meet the needs of the crippled and diseased in one hundred countries. The Christian injunction to care for those in need, reinforced by the inspiration and fellowship that are provided by the church as an ongoing community, has produced results no secular ethic has been able to match.<sup>12</sup>

Humans, though morally flawed, have great worth by virtue of the divine image. If God really exists and we really have human dignity, then this reality has the necessary staying power for ethical living that its secular alternatives fail to furnish.<sup>13</sup>

## **SIX SUGGESTIONS FOR GREATER CONSISTENCY IN THE ACADEMY**

In September of 2002 I delivered a lecture to the faculty of Knox College, a secular liberal arts college in Illinois, in which I offered six suggestions that point to how academia can achieve greater consistency toward religious truth claims:

First, non-Christians in academia must acknowledge the academy’s glaring inconsistency between the ideal of the “free exchange of ideas” and the assault on Christianity. To say “all ideas have a right to be heard” and then to treat Christianity as though it has no such right is inconsistent and mocks the ideal of academic freedom.

This notion of tolerance is what philosopher Francis J. Beckwith has called “passive-aggressive tyranny.” The trick is to sound “passive” and accepting of “religious diversity” while at the same

time putting forth an aggressively partisan agenda and implying that those who disagree are not only stupid but also harmful.<sup>14</sup>

Second, non-Christian academics must be pressed to admit that atheism (or secularism, scientism, etc.) is not neutral and unbiased; it must be defended, not merely assumed. Atheism makes a knowledge claim that no God exists, that we are not made in God's image, and that everything has a naturalistic explanation; but atheism is a worldview, just as is theism or Theravada Buddhism (which dismisses a belief in God). In the marketplace of ideas, worldviews should not simply be assumed, they should be argued for and justified; yet so many academics simply assume secularism, atheism, and materialism. Harvard biologist (and Marxist) Richard Lewontin frankly admits his philosophical bias:

It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.<sup>15</sup>

Modern science, ironically, was launched by theists. Newton, Galileo, Kepler, Copernicus, and others believed in the regularity and rationality of the natural world because it was created by a rational, noncapricious, supernatural God — a God who also is sovereign, sustains the existence of the world, and acts within it.

Some academics are under the illusion that religion is biased but secularism is not. They think that science is our best way of dealing with issues, but views like Lewontin's do not adequately address the issues of meaning and purpose, human rights, and intrinsic dignity, as well as objective versus subjective moral values. Neither do they reveal whether truth is more fundamental than survival, whether or not it is right to euthanize the helpless, nor how or whether to resort to nuclear arms or biological warfare. By taking metaphysics and questions about God and special revelation seriously (and we should urge our non-Christian friends not to close themselves off from such issues a priori), humble explorations can help shed light on our most difficult questions.

Christians, therefore, can and should be well equipped to address the deep existential — but unanswered — questions in academia and public life. When Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, was asked what was the biggest problem facing today's students, he replied, "Emptiness."<sup>16</sup> Secular academic explanations do not fill the hunger to understand our humanity. Cold, reductionistic, naturalistic explanations of humans as merely animals or molecules in motion ignore the fact that there is something mysterious, warm-blooded, and purposeful about them.

Third, we must understand what true tolerance is and what it is not. As we've seen, a common definition of tolerance today would be "accepting all views as legitimate or true" (the academy, as we've also seen, does no such thing with Christianity). If this definition were true, then we would have to agree with all kinds of contradictory views, which is silly. According to its historic usage, tolerance necessarily presupposes error or disapproval — we put up with something we find false, erroneous, or disagreeable.<sup>17</sup> I don't tolerate chocolate or the music of Bach or Handel; I enjoy

them. I tolerate the person in the library who is constantly blowing his nose while I'm trying to study; I put up with this person rather than try to have him evicted.

With regard to different religious beliefs, I allow other people to believe what they do even though I disagree with them. Tolerance does not mean agreement; it means allowance for another to think differently. Too often there is a Rorty-esque assumption that religious toleration means “the willingness of religious groups to take part in discussions without dragging religion into it.”<sup>18</sup> Tolerance is not “celebration” or even “accepting all views as legitimate”; after all, the atheist does not “accept” — let alone celebrate — belief in God, otherwise, he would no longer be an atheist! Toleration arises only where there is disapproval.<sup>19</sup>

There will also be different levels of tolerance. A church should not tolerate adultery (ecclesiastical intolerance), but that does not mean that the adulterers should be put into prison (civic/legal tolerance). We must be discriminating about these levels. A university can, on one level, tolerate the formation of different social, religious, or ethnic groups or clubs, while, on another level, be intolerant. A Christian group, for instance, should not be required to allow an atheist student to become its leader, just as a gay group is not required to allow a “homophobe” to be its group president.

Tolerance must be nuanced and discriminating. Tolerance not only presupposes that (a) truth and error exist and that (b) different viewpoints exist but also that (c) coexistence is important — even if we do not celebrate the views of those with whom we disagree.<sup>20</sup> We must take care, however, not to obliterate real differences or eliminate truth and falsity from the discussion. All people have a right to hold their views, but this does not mean that all views are true or even beneficial.

Fourth, in dialogues on worldviews, begin with the equality of persons, not with the equality of beliefs. Religious dialogue usually assumes that all religious beliefs are equal or that we should not take a realist view toward them (by “realist” I mean a view rooted in reality rather than being mythical, made-up, purely subjective, etc.). If we assume that all religious beliefs are equal, however, then we strip them of their very essences. Rather than saying, “We want to hear what is the heart of your religious view even if we disagree,” many in academia say, “You can come to the table only if you’re not exclusivistic (which would make us feel uncomfortable).”

I’ve (co)edited various debate or dialogue books.<sup>21</sup> What is refreshing about such books is that the disagreeing parties don’t pull any punches but speak frankly. We can talk about reasons why the Muslim or Buddhist takes the view she does or about evidence that substantiates a view. In dialogue, we can better understand one another’s views, which prevents stereotyping them, but we do religions a great injustice if we ignore genuine differences in the name of political correctness or “tolerance.”

Fifth, keep in mind the three Rs — rights, respect, and responsibility — which make public discourse possible.<sup>22</sup> These three Rs will help us engage and understand one another rather than talk past one another — something all parties have been guilty of and need to correct:

- Rights: A student’s grades should not be lowered based on whether or not he or she believes in God. Conformity to the professor’s opinion is not the ultimate goal of education. A person should have the right to make a case for his or her worldview and not be written off a priori.

- Respect: Our society is increasingly lacking civility. Atheistic professors should not encourage this trend by ridiculing or insulting those who believe in God. Discourse, debate, and persuasion must be possible on campus without threat of suppression. Proper discourse also involves charity, where we give the person the benefit of the doubt rather than caricaturing his or her arguments or setting up straw men. We seek to understand; we respectfully criticize after we've taken pains to understand the other person's perspective. One Christian university professor tells this to his students at the outset of each semester:

Every teacher approaches his material from some perspective — tacit or explicit — and I think you have a right to know where I'm coming from....I am a Christian. Jesus Christ and His teachings are crucial to my outlook on the world and everything in it. I try to present every view fairly, and I won't beat you over the head with my own; in fact I encourage you to express your own views on the course material, provided that you give reasoned arguments for them. Make good use of this information. If anything that I say is unreasonable or distorted, you now have a fighting chance of finding out.<sup>23</sup>

- Responsibility: Rights imply responsibility or duty to work for the common good. We must recognize our universal rights and mutual responsibility, within which we can negotiate deep differences of belief. We have certain obligations in the marketplace and the academy — to work together to dismantle caricatures, to create an environment conducive to healthy debate and discussion, to find common ground and work together in fundamental causes (e.g., religious freedom, women's rights, human rights in oppressive countries), and to expose hypocrisy and double standards (e.g., Muslims benefit from freedom in the West to build mosques, but Christians in many Muslim countries cannot build churches or even meet).

Sixth, encourage investigation of the intellectual integrity of theism and its ability to shed light where secularism leaves us with unanswered questions. Philosopher Alvin Plantinga correctly states that theism “offers suggestions for answers to a wide range of otherwise intractable questions.”<sup>24</sup> This is borne out by a number of observations: the universe's beginning with the Big Bang, the universe's fine-tuning, the universe's rational orderliness, the existence of consciousness, the existence of objective moral values, the reliability of our cognitive faculties, and so on — all of which reveal a supernatural, powerful, intelligent, moral, and self-aware Being, who is the source of these realities. We can reasonably expect these features to exist if a personal God exists, but not so with naturalism.

Theism — and especially the Christian faith — is a viable intellectual option in the marketplace of ideas. Atheist philosopher of science Quentin Smith laments the “desecularization” of philosophy in the academy, where belief in God is now alive and well. According to his count, one-fourth to one-third of philosophy professors in this country are theists, and most of those are Christians.<sup>25</sup> In his words, history has shown that “realist theists were not outmatched by naturalists in terms of the most valued standards of analytic philosophy: conceptual precision, rigor of argumentation, technical erudition, and an in-depth defense of an original world-view.” The amazing growth of the Society of Christian Philosophers and the Evangelical Philosophical Society — with their respective journals *Faith and Philosophy* and *Philosophia Christi* — attest to this. Such trends should give Christians courage in defending the foundations of their faith and should give non-Christians pause before dismissing Christianity as anti-intellectual or irrelevant.

Theism can be taken seriously, and the reasons for belief and social engagement are publicly accessible.<sup>26</sup> The early church similarly proclaimed that the historical events that grounded their faith were not “done in a corner” (Acts 26:26).

Western academics like to cite John Stuart Mill’s book *On Liberty* in favor of individual rights, but they often fall prey to the very error Mill condemns: the tyranny of opinion that makes “eccentricity a reproach.”<sup>27</sup> Today a tyranny of opinion makes the eccentricity of Christianity a reproach. We should all — with mutual respect and civility and despite our disagreements — stand together against it.

## NOTES

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2. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 7.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. Rebecca Baer Porteous, quoted in Kelly Monroe, ed., *Finding God at Harvard* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 17.
5. Cited in J. Budziszewski, *How to Stay Christian in College* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999), 43.
6. Some of these thoughts are taken from William Wainwright, ed., *God, Philosophy, and Academic Culture* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).
7. For a defense of the doctrine of the Trinity, see chapter 14 of my book *That’s Just Your Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001).
8. José Ignacio Cabezón, ed., *The Bodhgaya Interviews* (New York: Snow Lion, 1988), 22.
9. Dalai Lama, *Kindness, Clarity and Insight* (New York: Snow Lion, 1984), 51.
10. Alvin Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).
11. John M. Rist, *Real Ethics: Rethinking the Foundations of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.
12. Guenter Lewy, *Why America Needs Religion: Secular Modernity and Its Discontents* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 137.



13. For more on this, see John Rist's *Real Ethics*, in which he argues that the only two options are a transcendental/theistic ethic and one based on power.
14. Francis J. Beckwith, "Deconstructing Liberal Tolerance," *Christian Research Journal* 22, 3 (2000).
15. Richard C. Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons," review of *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* by Carl Sagan, *New York Review of Books*, 9 January 1997, 28, 31.
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20. *Ibid.*, 78.
21. See, e.g., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998); *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); *Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).
22. From Os Guinness, "Tribespeople, Idiots, or Citizens," in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Academie, 1990), 481–82.
23. J. Budziszewski, "Practical Responses to Relativism and Postmodernism: Part II," in *Philosophy: Christian Perspectives in the New Millennium*, ed. Paul Copan, Scott B. Luley, and Stan W. Wallace (Atlanta/Dallas: RZIM/CLM, 2003), 117–18.
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25. Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism," *Philo*, 4, 2 (2001), online at [http://www.philoonline.org/library/smith\\_4\\_2.htm](http://www.philoonline.org/library/smith_4_2.htm).
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27. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Aubrey Castell (New York: Meredith Corporation, 1967), 3.4801, 67.