


Basically, I am interested in a paper that would fit best in the philosophy segment of the program. The idea is this: if personal holiness is manifested in a religious experience of holiness ("purity of heart," "outpouring of love," etc.), then in what sense are Christian experiences of holiness to be distinguished from seemingly similar experiences in practitioners of others religions (or even people of no religion)? Simply put, if the truth of the Gospel is evidenced primarily in terms of one's experience of such inner love, peace, etc., then what epistemological justification is there for holding Christianity to be the highest truth IF such experience can be found among members of other religions, or even no religion? This is an important topic in that I think religious pluralism often leads to a sort of truth-relativism that focuses on the experience produced by the religion rather the particular dogmas of that faith tradition in judging the "truth" of various tradition.

On a more "liberal" model, this would mean that traditions with incompatible dogmas could still be equally "true" if they produced experience of holiness equally well. This often leads to the questionable view that it is not so important as to what one believes, as to whether or not one "loves." This sounds great, but it DOES seem (and did to Wesley as well) that doctrine and dogma do matter.

What I would like to do, then, is sort out the following points: If Christianity is afforded a privileged truth status, then either 1) non-Christians can have similar "heart experiences," but "truth" is determined by more than just whether or not an experience of holiness is produced by particular religious beliefs, OR 2) "truth" is determined solely by the "heart experience" it produces, BUT it can be shown that the heart experience of non-Christians is not equivalent to that which is had in Christian experiences of holiness. The second case seems unjustifiably presumptuous, as the evidence suggests that non-Christians are able to act as loving as Christians, thereby suggesting they ARE having similar heart experiences. On the other hand, if one names criteria other than heart experience for determining the truth of a religious position, it is difficult to see what difference these factors make if they are not essential to the occurrence of these heart experiences.

In short, most of us believe that knowing and embracing accurate doctrinal truth will have a practical pay-off in that it should lead to these experiences. But this once again raises the question as to how it is possible to have such experiences--as it seems non-Christians do--without embracing proper doctrine. From a Wesleyan position, the question becomes, how can one reconcile the emphasis on a purity of heart as the focal point of true religion with the importance of defending particularly Christian doctrines and dogmas? Wesley values both, but why? I will attempt to resolve the question by arguing that while God is capable, through prevenient grace, of filling even non-Christian people with love that is the equivalent of that experienced by faithful Christians, people's co-operation with this grace is made much more likely if they have been exposed to proper doctrine. This is true because our understanding of God's love (esp. in notions of incarnation, crucifixion, Trinity, etc.) are a most powerful stimulus for believing in, and desiring for ourselves, the experience and possibility of such love. I think this view is consistent with statements one finds in Wesley regarding non-Christian religions, the universality of grace, and so on.

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