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"TIS SO SWEET TO TRUST IN JESUS": WHAT A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRUST IN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS SUGGESTS ABOUT THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

By

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INTRODUCTION

The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.

Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge*, 1956

Personal trust (*fiducia*) in the Lord Jesus Christ is traditionally considered one of three necessary components of the virtue of Christian faith (*fides*), along with cognitive belief (*notitia*) in Jesus and volitional commitment (*assensus*) to him. There may be other elements worthy of consideration as essential components of the virtue of Christian faith, such as a disposition to love God and our neighbors, or to obey God, or to practice good works, but the focus here will be on the dimension of personal trust in God as revealed in Jesus Christ.[1]

Religious *beliefs* presumably reflect either immediate

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[1] Notice that the reference so far to Christian faith is narrowly focused on the *virtue*, not on faith as a global term or synonym for religion, as in the phrases, "the Buddhist faith" or "the Muslim faith." In what follows it may be assumed that the references to faith are to the *virtue* of faith unless noted otherwise.

perceptions (or intuitions) on the one hand or mediated mental states on the other (cf. Russell's knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description), which one assumes could be formulated as propositional statements (e.g., creeds), even if one goes beyond *belief that* to *belief in*. If philosophers are in the business of analyzing the rationality of anything, surely it is of beliefs or belief statements (though of course, philosophers analyze many other things as well).

Or again, a religious *commitment* may be to a belief, an ideal, or a course of action as well as to a person. Since such a commitment normally entails behavior, one could presumably work out some sort of formula whereby the rationality of the required actions is measured in terms of a preliminary cost-benefit analysis, a "calculus of risk." Risks and potential losses are weighed over against the odds in favor of and the potential benefits of prospective gains. One counts the cost of discipleship. Whatever the particular probability theory appealed to, one senses a family resemblance to Pascal's wager. Even those, such as myself, who are not terribly sympathetic to such approaches or arguments because of ontic concerns about the [dis]place[ment] of truth, are at least likely to recognize that here is a traditional means of assessing the rationality of commitment.

But Christian *trust* (as analytically distinct from belief or commitment) does not have quite the same legacy of philosophic analysis. Among the few serious attempts are the seminal essays by C. S. Lewis, "The Efficacy of Prayer" and "On Obstinacy in Belief" (1960b, 3-11 & 13-30). Though he treats issues of trust primarily in terms of belief, Lewis at least makes some tentative suggestions as to exploring the rationality of something which entails personal relationships, suggesting that the rationality of believing in someone (*i.e.*, here understood as trusting that person) rests on our personal knowledge of the person we believe in (*i.e.*, again read here as trust).

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Trust may be the most distinctive component of Christian faith, yet also the least carefully analyzed and least well understood.[2] Trust is sometimes defined as *belief in the reliability of something or somebody*. Christian trust might then seem to be no more than another form of *belief in God*, so discussions of trust are commonly assumed to reduce to discussions of belief, often blurring important distinctions between *belief in* and *belief that*. But from a traditional Christian perspective, genuine *trust* requires a confident, personal relationship with the living God, an *existential belief in* which mere *belief that* (or even *subjective belief in*) does not necessarily entail. Presumably demons have not just a belief that, but also a *subjective belief in God* (they "believe and tremble"; Jas. 2:19), yet demons lack *trust in* or *commitment to* God. Thus, while *belief that* may be a *necessary condition* of certain forms of *trust*, including *Christian trust*, neither *belief that* nor even *subjective belief in* by themselves guarantee any such trusting, intimate relationship. So the position taken here is that Christian trust, while not an isolated domain autonomous from Christian belief that or subjective belief in, still retains its own formal identity which cannot be wholly reduced to mere belief that or even to subjective belief in. *Mutatis mutandis*, similar conflations of trust and commitment also appear in the literature, even by persons theologically literate who should know better.

The philosophical literature on belief, including religious belief, is so voluminous as to be overwhelming, while the literature on religious commitment is fairly significant. Relatively little in philosophy, however, has been written analyzing *any* form or dimension of trust, and there is next to nothing in contemporary philosophical literature on *religious* trust (though see Erdel 2000, 138-194, where I attempt to discuss some of the biblical and experiential grounds for trust, as well as the *rationality* of Christian trust). To give a few indications of the situation, there is no article

[2] Though see the recent popular work by Brennan Manning 2000.

on trust in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and only one paragraph on trust in an article on "Ethical Theory" by Stephen Darwell (1996) in the supplementary volume to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Edwards 1967). Annette Baier (1979, 1986, 1989, 1992), Judith Baker (1987), C. A. J. Coady (1992), Lorraine Code (1987), Diego Gambetta (1988), John Hardwig (1991), Martin Hollis (1998), [Hollis and] Robert Sugden (1993), Olli Lagerspetz (1998), Mark Owen Webb (1993), and Linda Zabzebski (1996) are among the few recent philosophers who are beginning to write seriously about trust (and distrust), a topic which has finally been recognized in the new *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, where Karen Jones (1998) contributes an article on "Trust." To date, however, most serious philosophical reflections on trust either continue older discussions of social and political trust by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke (1954), or grow out of more recent discussions in epistemology or ethics, with an occasional application to the philosophy of science or economics (cf. Fukuyama 1995).

When one turns to literature from the history of religions and comparative religions, the situation is not much different. While there is an avalanche of literature on religious beliefs and a significant amount on religious commitment, there is next to nothing that makes a comparative analysis of religious trust across major religions. There is no article on trust, nor even an entry on trust in the index in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Eliade 1987). The only piece on "Trust," at least that I have noticed, which makes a comparative analysis of trust across various world religions is a brief but informative two and a half column entry by William Morgan (n.d.) in that older but still reliable treasure of a reference work, the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings. In this article, I would like to make a preliminary overview of the role that trust plays across major world religions, with a side glance at some secular worldviews, in order to suggest that trust is the element of the virtue of Christian faith which most underscores the uniqueness of the Christian faith, whether one understands faith in

either the narrower sense of virtue or in the more global sense as a synonym for religion as a whole.

From an evangelical Christian perspective, Christian *belief* may be unique in that Christian beliefs (e.g., the Resurrection) are both true and significantly different from those in other religions, but this is a matter for serious debate. For example, Muslims or Jews may argue that their form of monotheism is more coherent, and therefore more likely to be true. Or an Enlightenment skeptic such as David Hume may argue that miracles are highly unlikely, implying that secular beliefs are more likely to be true than Christian beliefs tainted by supernaturalism. In both instances, there may be significant quarrels about the superiority of one set of religious beliefs or worldview to another. Though I am an evangelical Christian convinced of the truth of Christian beliefs, such a position is not one which can simply be taken for granted if one is to be intellectually honest (Erdel 1983). Even if there is a place for properly basic beliefs, to argue that religious beliefs are properly basic does very little to advance one's apologetic case for Christianity as over against competing religious beliefs and truth claims.

If we move from the arena of belief to *commitment*, the situation is perhaps even less easy to compare in a way which would demonstrate the obvious superiority of Christian commitment to other forms of religious commitment. It goes without saying that someone who is a Buddhist or a secular Communist might show far more personal commitment to their cause than might the average evangelical Christian. I do not mean to suggest that no case can be made for the integrity or intensity of Christian commitment; but again, this point is not a particularly easy one to make. Making such a case will probably depend in good part on making a prior case for the truth and trustworthiness of Christian beliefs.

I do think, however, that comparing Christian *trust* to the way trust functions in other religions and worldviews is a very telling

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exercise. That is because a comparative analysis of the place of trust across various religions and worldviews does provide a fairly direct means for underscoring the uniqueness of Christian faith in both its major senses, that is, with reference to the virtue of Christian faith, and to the Christian faith as a religion. It does so, I will suggest, because other religious traditions and worldviews lack a serious analogue to Christian trust. Although space does not allow in this medium to develop further *arguments* that the domain and experience of Christian trust provide good grounds for thinking Christianity is therefore *superior* to other religious traditions, I will nevertheless at least *suggest* that such a claim is plausible enough to deserve closer scrutiny.

I will begin my project by surveying the role trust plays in non-Christian religions and worldviews. Though I will necessarily have to speak in a fairly broad and sweeping fashion, giving but very brief summaries and overviews, I presume most of my claims are non-controversial. This is because I take my claims not only to be true, but in most cases to be widely accepted as trivially true.[3] I also hope to suggest that although most of my claims may be trivially true, the implications and consequences of such claims are far from trivial.

PRIMAL RELIGIONS

Primal religions, which number in the thousands, are really too variegated and complex to be reduced to a single category (cf. Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001). Furthermore, as one who is rather unsympathetic to theories of religious pluralism, which suggest that in some important sense all religions are the same (cf.

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[3] I certainly welcome any factual corrections persons more expert in the history of religions than I am may make to the proposals that I put forward, but I will be surprised if any such corrections are so substantial as to significantly change the basic thrust of what follows.

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Erdel 1996), I do not even believe that all *primal* religions are the same, not by any stretch of the imagination. Nevertheless, some basic characteristics do appear again and again within primal religions, whether they are traditional tribal religions or the more recently emergent spiritist cults (see Erdel 1988a, b; cf. Erdel 1986). Primal religions usually focus on finite gods and lesser deities, especially local spirits; but such spirits are generally sources of terror, not of comfort. The emphasis is on placating and appeasing the spirits. There is virtually no sense that even the "friendliest" spirits, whether immediate ancestors or the tribal totem, are deities which characteristically and unfailingly initiate loving, gracious, forgiving actions on behalf of living persons. The lower gods are not to be trusted. The high God of henotheism, if such a God is recognized at all, is simply absent in terms of any intimate interaction with human beings which would lead to a relationship of trust. For the high God of henotheism is characteristically a *deus otiosus*.

EASTERN RELIGIONS

Eastern religions by and large lack any notion of a personal god, except on the popular level, where Eastern religions sometimes function more like primal religions. So, despite the popularity of various *bhakti* cultus traditions within Hinduism, there is really no place for personal trust in a living, loving personal deity, except, perhaps, on a phenomenological level with a god like Vishnu in the form of Krishna or Rama. But there are at least two important qualifications to be made about such *bhakti* cults. First, when one makes a careful study of people who follow the path of devotion with a god such as Shiva, or his demonic consort Kali, then one realizes *bhakti* does not necessarily entail trust in a Christian sense at all. This is not to say such paths are devoid of meaning to their followers, but that some (though by no means all) of the differences with traditional Christian understandings of the meaning, purpose,

and object of devotion are fairly pronounced. Second, and more importantly, any relationship with any Hindu deity is in the end at best no more than a religious fiction to placate the masses; for, strictly speaking, all apparent personality will again be lost in the ultimate One beyond any particulars. Impersonal monism and the ultimate denial of individuals obliterate the very possibility of personal trust (cf. Hackett 1979).

In the same way, the *bodhisattva* traditions of Pure Land Buddhism, calling on the Amitabha Buddha (or Amida Butsu), however popular in some areas, are not rooted in an actual historical personage whose life and works would justify such salvific hopes, nor are they in any obvious way compatible with mainstream Buddhist theories. There are no historical or rational grounds for such trust. To put the matter harshly, the Amitabha Buddha might as well be the Great Pumpkin. Again, the practices seem largely a series of concessions to deeply felt human longings, but no more than a popular fiction given the basic nature and teachings of Buddhism. This is not to denigrate the beauty of the doctrine of grace in Pure Land Buddhism, which may come about as close as any other religious tradition to the Christian idea of unmerited forgiveness and redemption. Rather, it is to say that this "grace" lacks adequate grounding within Buddhism itself. Does Buddhism in any of its classical forms really allow conceptually for a personal savior or an actual heaven? Is there any historical evidence of such a personal savior in Buddhism?

What the Hindu *bhakti* and Buddhist *bodhisattva* traditions may well suggest, however, is a widespread, deeply rooted human *desire* or *longing* for a personal relationship with a loving, powerful savior who is completely worthy of human trust. They help us define, at least in part, the sort of Savior-God we all long for and so desperately need.

ISLAM

Allah would also seem to lack any offer of *grace;* for the Muslim looks to Allah for justice in the light of good deeds done, not for loving, unmerited forgiveness. So the Islamic notion of trust is basically limited to a confidence that God is just combined with a basic optimism that human beings are sufficiently good, on balance, to please God by means of the Five Pillars (or six with *jihad,* however *jihad* is understood). The Muslim may trust God's power and justice as well as his own ability to meet the standards of eternal justice, but will not look for any offer of unmerited forgiveness; for none will be forthcoming. The perspective presented here is that the Muslim notion of Allah as the all-merciful, while admirable in its own way, is simply not the same as the Christian doctrine of divine grace. The Christian understanding of grace is substantially different in its emphasis on unmerited forgiveness, a forgiveness based upon the unique, substitutionary atonement for sins, which was accomplished by Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, through his sinless life, his sacrificial death on the cross, and his triumphant resurrection to new life. The definition of God's grace in terms of such a substitutionary atonement by the crucified Son of God would normally be considered an affront to the very nature of God by a traditional Muslim. Thus, the very basis for Christian trust is both denied and abhorred by Muslims, who advance no case for a comparable notion of trust on other grounds.

It was suggested to me that in the Sufi mystical tradition there may be a sense of God's grace that would allow for personal trust. If so, my initial observation would be that, *mutatis mutandis,* Sufi stands to more traditional forms of Islam as Hindu *bhakti* and Buddhist *bodhisattva* streams do to more traditional forms of Hinduism and Buddhism. Sufi would then point to a fundamental human *need* or *desire* or *longing* for an intimate relationship with a God of grace, but without providing adequate intellectual grounds

for thinking the God of traditional Islam really is compatible with such a vision, nor that the Sufi God actually exists.

SECULAR WORLDVIEWS

Secular worldviews simply posit the lack of any referent which would allow human beings to establish a trusting relationship with an infinite, personal, living, loving God. This is not to say that secular worldviews allow no place whatsoever for trusting relationships, but rather that such relationships must by definition be analyzed in terms of love (or sadly, merely sexual) relationships between finite human beings (see Bloom 1993 & 1990; cf. Shirer 1994). Even a secular age is drawn to the enduring power of art reworking basic themes of [un]faithfulness, [dis]loyalty, [dis]trust, jealousy, and revenge in all sorts of creative works, from Greek dramas and *Othello* to popular cinema and country and western songs (cf. Updike 1988). The analysis of human love relationships may indeed prove useful in trying to better understand what Christians mean by trust in God, and what might make such trust rational; but secular worldviews simply have no place for actual divine-human relationships, except as fiction.

Some Western worldviews do allow at least metaphorically for "God's" existence, but judge and defy God as a malevolent being, one who should be cursed rather than worshiped, loved, and obeyed. They may not be strictly anti-supernatural, but they are decidedly anti-Christian. In the memorable phrase of C. S. Lewis, God is in the dock. One thinks of the ancient Greek myths of Sisyphus and of Prometheus, of the writings of certain Romantics, of Nietzsche, of many existentialists, and of some postmodern authors. Some generally thoughtful writers, who may themselves be relatively decent persons, may still think of God in this way (cf. Thomsen 1969, 1989, 1990, 1996). It virtually goes without saying that such thinkers would see no reason to trust in God. In fact, given the fact that their worldview frequently includes an inclination toward a

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hermeneutic of suspicion, they may trust very little at all. They are more likely to deconstruct and to debunk the very notion of trust.

HEBREW FAITH AND CONTEMPORARY RABBINIC JUDAISM

Hebrew faith as described in the Hebrew Scriptures would seem to entail trust in the living God who creates all things and redeems his people as an essential dimension of that faith. This is true whether one examines the lives of Job or Ruth or Daniel and his three friends or other prototypes of faithful, trusting servants of God, or whether one examines the repeated injunctions to "Trust in the Lord . . .." found in Psalms or Proverbs, or whether one does Hebrew word studies of critical Hebrew terms. So Judaism would seem to constitute an exception to the foregoing pattern. Perhaps in some sense, this is so. However, there are at least five very important caveats to make before one accedes to such a claim with respect to contemporary Rabbinic Judaism.

First, the more theologically liberal or radical forms of contemporary Rabbinic Judaism do not necessarily assert the reality of a living, loving, personal God who intervenes in our daily lives on our behalf. Some forms of Judaism are much more the children of Enlightenment skepticism than of traditional Rabbinic Judaism. Some are in fact merely ethnic variations on secularism. For others, God may exist, but does so as some distant deistic deity, rather than as the infinite-personal God of traditional theism. The God of deism is certainly not immanent in our daily lives. But if God does not exist at all, or if God is very remote from creation, then how is any serious counterpart to Christian trust even possible?

Second, the focus within Rabbinic Judaism is much more on prayer and good deeds than on the all-merciful God who showers unmerited grace, love, and forgiveness upon his people. This is so despite the powerful message of prophets such as Isaiah or Hosea. In some ways, even the more traditional forms Rabbinic Judaism,

which reject Enlightenment skepticism, are closer to Islam than to Christianity, at least to the extent that they trust God for justice in light of good works rather than clinging to God's wholly unmerited, gracious forgiveness.

Third, no form of contemporary Rabbinic Judaism, from the most traditional Hasidic Orthodoxy to the most radical types of Reform and Humanistic Judaism, are in fact the same religion as the religion of the Hebrew Scriptures. They may to varying degrees find their source of inspiration in the Hebrew Scriptures, though, as read through the lenses of Rabbinic commentary; but no form of contemporary Rabbinic Judaism revolves around priests, Temple sacrifice, or the like. Furthermore, all forms of Rabbinic Judaism, with the possible exception of Messianic Judaism, are in several senses shaped by a deliberate, Rabbinic polemic against biblical Christianity. This polemic takes many forms and dimensions. Most regrettably, some aspects of this polemic, such as elements formulated and articulated as a response to and defense against "Christian" anti-semitism down through the centuries, may be far too justified in terms of the ugly attitudes and actions promulgated by self-professed Christians. But the polemic against Christianity that I wish to single out here is the denial of the Christian doctrine of the triune God. This in fact brings me to my fourth caveat.

Fourth, not only is contemporary Rabbinic Judaism not the same as the religion of the Hebrew Scriptures; but by denying the reality of the triune God of the universe, any form of contemporary Rabbinic Judaism which does so is in danger of denying the ontological grounds for a trust comparable to Christian trust. Why do I make this claim? Well, to reduce what is potentially a very long discussion to a simple assertion, I will simply suggest that if God is love, then a triune God seems to me to provide a much more likely ground and basis for the claim that God is love than does a monotheism asserting that God exists solely as one person. For if the very nature and essence of God is to be a being of love, then it is

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hard to see how this could be so if there is no possibility for a relationship of love, for love by its very definition suggests a relationship of some sort. That is, when God alone exists, and when God is but one person, then it is difficult to understand how the very nature and essence of God could be that of a loving being. If, however, there is a triune God, a God in three persons, then, even before God creates any other being or object, God can exist in an eternal relationship of love. But if the claim that God is love is not well-grounded ontologically, then what basis does contemporary Judaism have for clinging to the fact that God is a God of love who is worthy of our trust, especially in light of the horrific history of Jewish sufferings, right on down through the Holocaust?

Fifth, aside from Messianic Judaism, contemporary Rabbinic Judaism also denies the best, clearest, and most extreme expression of God's love to human beings, namely, the Incarnation of Jesus the Christ, the Jewish Messiah. For in the sufferings and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ we see the extent of God's merciful love toward us, and in the Resurrection of Jesus we are reassured of the truth of his teachings and the power of God to reverse the most awful moral, spiritual, and physical situations by offering us new life, eternal life, with a resurrected body and a glorified being to come. Thus, or so at least it seems to me, contemporary Judaism lacks not only the ontological but also the historical and existential grounds for trusting in God in the same way that Christians do. The last thing I would want to do would be to deny, diminish, or demean the mighty acts of God as Israel's deliverer in such great events as the Exodus from Egypt, the destruction of Sennacherib's army, or the return from the Exile. Yet, from a Christian perspective, in some important sense these and many other deliverances were but the foreshadowings of the great Redemption provided by Jesus Christ, a redemption that contemporary Rabbinic Judaism deliberately and systematically denies.

So, while the Hebrew Scriptures may teach and the history of ancient Israel may provide more than adequate grounds for trust in

the unique covenant-God of Israel and Judah, contemporary Rabbinic Judaism would, from an evangelical Christian perspective, seem in various ways to hinder rather than to help develop a biblical notion of trust in the living, loving, forgiving God who is the Creator of all things and the Redeemer of his people. I believe that it is fairly telling that the only mention of trust in a survey of standard Jewish general reference works, at least the only one that I could find, occurs toward the end of a relatively brief article, in the context of a brief discussion of early *Christian* faith ("Faith" in Neusner and Green 1996; cf. Neusner, Avery-Peck, and Green 1999, Roth 1971-1972, Werblowsky and Wigoder 1997).

CONCLUSION

I have very briefly surveyed primal religions, Eastern religions, Islam, secular worldviews, and even contemporary Rabbinic Judaism, claiming that there is no good *prima facie* reason to think that other religions have a serious analogue to the notion and experience of Christian trust. To the extent that certain religious groups might claim to offer such a trusting relationship with the divine, whether in the *bhakti* cults of popular Hinduism or the Saviour Buddha of Pure Land Buddhism, the rational grounds for such trust seem to be wholly inadequate from a Christian perspective, however much such longings point to the need for a genuine relationship of trust with the living, loving, all-powerful Creator of the universe and Redeemer of his people. Hebrew faith might constitute a serious exception to this claim if the teachings of contemporary Rabbinic Judaism did not tend to in various ways undermine the possibility of appropriating what is taught in the Hebrew Scriptures about trust.

I have not in this brief paper tried to demonstrate either the truth or the rationality of Christian teachings in general, nor to establish specific Christian claims with respect to trust. Nor have I even developed a biblical or theological outline of the nature and

significance of Christian trust (though again, for some preliminary steps in that direction, see Erdel 2000, 138-194). Perhaps more importantly, for the purposes of this paper, I have not yet made a philosophical case for the role(s) trust could or *should* play across religious traditions and secular worldviews. I have yet to make a formal argument that religions or worldviews which lack the analogue to Christian trust are genuinely and substantially deficient. A great deal has either simply been presumed or left for another day. But I do *suggest* here that there is a fairly important fact of the matter with potentially serious implications, especially if some of these other propositions are also in fact true. That is, if Christianity is indeed true, then traditional, biblical Christianity alone would seem to offer us what I think we all so desperately need, an intimate relationship of trust with the living, loving God who creates and redeems, a personal relationship with the sole being who is able to carry us through times of terrible stress, crisis, and suffering. We trust God, moreover, for the strength and grace with which to live our ordinary, daily lives, which can be very hard in and of themselves (cf. Balcomb 1994; cf. also Gunst 1995, 175-176).

It is no accident, I think, that some of the Christian hymns and gospel songs which most clearly express the trust of the believer, whether such works as "Now Thank We All Our God," or "When Peace Like a River"/"It Is Well With My Soul," or "Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus," were in fact written in grateful response to God following horrific human tragedies. If Christian claims are true, Christian faith alone offers adequate grounds for trusting God completely in the midst of excruciatingly hard times. Most other religious traditions do not even claim to do so.

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