

Six traits of a pluralist Christian vision of human flourishing

## **Can Christianity make universal claims without being exclusivist?**

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Nearly all Christian accounts of flourishing life share one important feature that has become unpalatable for many today: they claim universal validity. A Christian vision of flourishing life addresses every person and the entire world. Notwithstanding humanity's and the world's lush diversity—or, better yet, *in* that diversity—the “new creation” is one; the “heavenly city,” though made up of many dwellings and

neighborhoods, is one; the “kingdom of God,” though having many diverse regions, is one; “God’s home” is one. Therefore, the vision of flourishing is one.

The singleness of this vision implies more than that everyone ought to live it out. All humans and all life on the planet are interdependent, an interconnected ecology of relatedness. The image of home expresses this vision, perhaps, better than any other in the Bible. For one person to truly flourish, the entire world must flourish; for the entire world to truly flourish, every person in it must flourish; and for every person and the entire world to truly flourish, each in their own way and all together must live in the presence of the life-giving God.

The universality of this vision of flourishing pushes against an important cultural sensibility prevalent in the contemporary West. Many of us have come to think that categories of “true” and “false” do not properly apply to religion. Instead, we assess religion in aesthetic or utilitarian terms, placing a religion as a whole, or aspects of its teaching and practice, on the spectrum from attractive to repugnant or from useful to harmful. We do the same with accounts of flourishing life more broadly. A particular account may be good or true for me but need not be good or true for you or someone else; and if it is good or true for me today, it need not be so tomorrow.

Many also worry that a life deemed universally “true” may push us to undervalue or despise those who do not live “in the truth.” People also resist commitment to a universal truth about the good life because they fear that it will divide us into mutually intolerant groups, clashing irreconcilably as we seek to live in a common space.

There are, however, reasons to embrace a different understanding. First, positive, substantive visions of the flourishing life are unavoidable. As all affirmations are also denials, there is no avoiding contestation between such visions. Furthermore, accounts of the Christian vision of true life are available such that those who advocate them can peacefully coexist and collaborate with and even learn from people who advocate alternative visions. In addition, when properly understood, Christian visions of true life take into account the changing particularities of individual lives in specific places.

Positive visions of the good life are inescapable. We can contest the nature and scope of any particular positive vision, but we cannot and should not want to eliminate all positive visions. Even liberative negations presuppose normative

affirmations of individual autonomy.

Similarly, we can contest particular ways and goals of crafting persons, but we cannot and should not want to eliminate the activity of crafting. Even the “autonomous subjects” we might be tempted to take as “natural” are in fact the result of people having been *thus crafted* in the wake of modernity. If we must operate with positive visions and craft persons, we are better off doing so explicitly, carefully, and in the company of the best of our traditions rather than implicitly and likely subject to the whims of current trends.

It's clear that a Christian vision of flourishing life is not the only one on offer. Many positive visions claim to be universally valid, true for all human beings. These visions do not agree with one another, at least not on all essential points; one always denies some crucial aspects of what the other affirms. We cannot and should not try to avoid contestations among them. Nor can we simply assert our preferred vision as incontestably good. Rather, we must approach rival visions of the flourishing life, including the Christian vision, as *contending particular universalisms* and engage in a truth-seeking conversation about them.

We call these contesting visions universalisms not because all human beings will come to embrace them, but rather because they make a claim to be true for all human beings. The Christian faith is itself one such universalist account of flourishing life—or, more precisely, it is a quarrelsome family of such accounts of the flourishing life. Some universalisms are secular, like the philosophy of Nietzsche or the psychology of Freud; others are religious, like Christianity or Islam; still others are somewhere in between, like Buddhism or Confucianism. Even the “soft relativism” so popular in some circles is a form of universalism, though it may not appear so on first sight. What could the idea of letting each person do his or her own thing have to do with universal values, especially if he or she is doing so by being, for instance, a follower of the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad at the same time and seasoning this homemade brew with insights from experimental psychology? The answer is that for the soft relativist, letting each person do his or her own thing without subjecting their values to criticism is a moral obligation rooted in the universal *right* of each person to live their own life as they see fit. Intolerance is the corresponding moral transgression that ought not be tolerated.

Though each universalism makes claims to truth, none is a complete and strictly closed system. All universalisms have partly permeable boundaries. This is true to a

degree even of various forms of fundamentalism, religious or secular, which insist on being embodiments of the pure, original faith. The fact that each universalism contains a significant set of convictions that overlap more or less with the convictions of other universalisms suggests such permeability. Multiple universalisms are, to a certain degree, mutually intelligible, able to criticize one another as well as to learn from one another. In a phrase, they are able to shape one another.

All universalisms are also *particular*. This may seem like a paradox, but it isn't. It's a consequence of the fact that the human beings who make universal claims about the flourishing life are creatures of time, space, language, and culture. Although their visions are universal in scope, their spread is restricted. Even today's most widely embraced universalism, Christianity, commands the adherence of less than a third of the world's population. Though transplantable and able to grow anywhere on the planet, each universalism also always has roots in a given place at a given time. The origins, history, and present reality of all universalisms are spatiotemporally particular.

Rival visions of life call for truth-seeking conversations.

The diverse universalisms aren't merely sitting next to one another like different flavors of ice cream in the freezer case. Each is a claimant not just to our preference but to our allegiance, some even to our ultimate allegiance. In this sense, each is a *contending* candidate for deep convictions orienting our entire lives, grounding our values and shaping our preferences. By "contending" we mean that universalisms are always (implicitly, at least) both contesting one another intellectually and jostling with one another for power in a common space. After all, to formulate a vision of the flourishing life is to offer an alternative to another vision of flourishing.

Are contending universalisms necessarily violent? That concern undergirds many people's unease about universalisms. Contending for a given truth claim *can* lead to violence, but it need not. Most universalisms have their own internal ways of controlling the violence that they might generate.

What is a Christian account of the flourishing life that allows those who embrace it to live in peace and pursue common good in a pluralistic setting—and to do so not only notwithstanding its claim to be true for every human and the entire world, but also largely because of it? It is one with six key elements.

First, *trinitarian monotheism*. Monotheism, some people contend, is the most violent form of religion (all religions supposedly being violent on account of their irrationality). The oneness of God, the extreme version of the story goes, stands for universal sameness. But the one God is the source not just of the unity of the world but also of all the stunning diversity in it. Since, for Christians, the one God is the Holy Trinity, God is internally differentiated. Difference is not secondary, subsequent to unity. Difference is equiprimordial with unity.

Second, the *God of unconditional love*. God is not a mere omnipotent force. Neither is God a mere universal lawgiver. The central attribute of God is unconditional love. As a creator, God loves unconditionally. God brings all creatures into being and keeps them in being. God's power doesn't come to creatures first from outside as either supporting or constraining force; in relation to creatures, it is first of all the power of their being, establishing their identities.

Third, *Jesus Christ, the light of the world*. Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word who was at the beginning with God and through whom "all things came into being" and who is "the light of all people" (John 1:3-4). All light and all truth, whether possessed by Christians or non-Christians, is the light of the Word and therefore Christ's light. This too is the consequence of monotheism: not just that the truth about flourishing life that Christ proclaimed is for all people, but also that in virtue of Christ all people always already possess some of that truth. They have what Justin Martyr famously called "seeds of the Word."

Fourth, *distinction between God's rule and human rule*. Monotheism, at least as Christians have understood it, implies two categorically distinct though related realms, transcendent and mundane, with the absolute primacy given to the transcendent. It follows that religion (allegiance to God) is a distinct, though not entirely separate, cultural system from politics (allegiance to a particular state). The entry of the Christian faith into a political space always pluralizes that space: an individual or a community emerges whose primary allegiance is to the God of Jesus Christ rather than to the community itself, its rulers, or any source of legitimacy they may invoke. The Christian church is (or ought to understand itself as) a loose international network of communities whose primary allegiance isn't to the states of which they are citizens or to some yet-to-be-created global superstate but to the one God of all people.

Fifth, *the moral equality of all human beings*. God made all human beings in God's image, and Christ came to announce the universal rule of a God whose chief commands are to love God and neighbor, including the enemy. All people have equal dignity; all have the same rights and the same moral obligations; all have fallen short of those obligations. There are no moral outsiders according to the Christian faith.

Sixth, *freedom of religion and areligion*. The call of Jesus Christ "Come, follow me!" presumes that an individual who hears it is free to follow or not. From the earliest beginnings, it was clear that faith is either embraced freely or not at all: one *believes with the heart*, which is to say not by outward conformity to ambient influences or in reaction to outside dictates backed by overwhelming force but with the very core of one's being. Behind the stress on embracing faith freely lies the conviction that every person has the responsibility for the basic direction of his or her life.

These six principles are foundational to the Christian faith. If we embrace them, we will be able, *because of* rather than *despite* our Christian convictions, both to nurture a culture of respect in pluralistic societies and to help craft political regimes of respect that open up the space for particular universalisms to dispute with each other intellectually in search of truth and to struggle for social space without employing violence.

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