

“Friendly exclusivism and aggressive inclusivism”

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Last week an Isaan Christian I baptized last year died. Until his death he was sharing the Gospel with his relatives. They were listening with interest. He also clearly said he wanted a Christian funeral, and no Buddhist monks present. But after he died, his relatives immediately arranged for a Buddhist funeral. At the same time, they were very happy for the church to take part in the ceremonies as well. After the monks finished their chanting, and just before the body was cremated, a brother of the deceased invited me to the front. “My brother was a Buddhist. But in the last few years, he added a religion. He also believed in Jesus. And therefore we invite a leader of the church to come and share with us.” Right in front of the monks with their sign ‘There is no resurrection’ I shared the Christian hope of eternal life and resurrection. At the end, everybody applauded.

What happened here? Christianity is an exclusive faith. That means we believe God is Creator of heaven and earth, Jesus is the Saviour of the world, and that if you don’t believe that, you are wrong. Buddhism is an inclusive religion. Two statements or two systems that are logically incompatible, are seen as two parallel possibilities. Buddhism and Christianity are both good religions.

In the West inclusive thinking is becoming ever more popular, and exclusive thinking is less and less acceptable. The main reason is the slow disappearance of logical thinking. When two statements are contradictory, one or none can be true. But they cannot both be true. Let’s say I claim ‘there is a wall over there’. Somebody responds ‘don’t be so fundamentalist, I have the right to the opinion there is no wall—actually, wall’s don’t exist’. I’ll happily grant the right to that opinion. But I’ll only start to consider this person as a serious participant in the conversation when he walks through the for him non-existent wall.

Christianity and Buddhism offer competing views of the world. You can trust the grace of God, or you can trust your own understanding. You believe that Jesus opened the way to heaven by his death on the cross, or you believe feeding monks will help get you to heaven. You believe that one day the living and the dead will be judged, or you believe your actions in this life result in karma that will be lived out in your next

reincarnation. When the one is true, the other is not. That is exclusive thinking, and people are often offended by it. They claim it is aggressive. Actually, exclusiveness and aggression logically are not tied to each other. Various combinations are possible.

1. Aggressive exclusivism

There is only one truth, and if possible it is forced on others. In many instances, Islam is an aggressive exclusive religion. Islam often (though not always) has grown by conquest, and freedom of religion is absent in the Islamic world.

2. Friendly exclusivism

There is only one truth, and probably it is propagated as well. But everybody has the freedom to live according to his convictions. In many cases, Christianity is a friendly exclusive religion. We try to convince people that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Yet we believe that should be a conviction of the heart, and the use of force is neither right nor possible to bring about that conviction.

3. Eastern aggressive inclusivism

Everybody has his own truth. But everybody has to take part in the truth of others. In many instances, Buddhism and Hinduism are examples of eastern aggressive inclusive religions. It's okay to believe in Jesus, but you are pressured to become monk and to take part in Buddhist rituals. The story I started with is a clear example of this.

4. Western aggressive inclusivism

Everybody has his own truth. But don't try to convince others of your truth, then you'll be in trouble! In many cases, secularism is western aggressive inclusivism. Inclusivism is a call not to bother others. Being interested in each others opinions is good, but your conviction should not be so strong that you try to win others for it.

5. Friendly inclusivism

Everybody has his own truth, and is free to live according to that conviction, including trying to win over others to his truth with peaceful means. This attitude is rather scarce, and is mainly found among the select group of people that thinks inclusive, yet understands what is important to exclusive thinking people.

Why spell all this out? To make clear that it is rare that Christians are behaving aggressively. Besides Muslims, it is often Buddhists and

secularists who are. Christians are exclusive thinkers, but are being nice about it. Buddhists and secularists are inclusive thinkers, and most of the time are aggressive about it.