

## DISCUSSION

## CHAPPELL ON THE CONSISTENCY OF CRITICISMS OF CHRISTIANITY

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In a recent issue of Ratio Timothy Chappell<sup>1</sup> examines the following two typical criticisms of Christianity:

(1) Christianity is an implausibly anthropocentric religion.

(2) Christianity has no convincing answer to the problem of natural evil. (p. 84)

(2) is concerned with the existence of pain and suffering caused by natural disasters, such as drought, plague, earthquakes and tornados. Such pain and suffering seems to show, contrary to the tenets of Christian theism, that this world was not created by an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.

Chappell contends that one cannot consistently make both criticisms (1) and (2) because (2) is based on an idea that is inconsistent with (1):

(3) Human well-being is what matters most in the world. (p. 84)

Chappell's argument is, however, unsuccessful. In what follows I provide three distinct interpretations of (1) and (2), each of which allows one to criticise Christianity consistently on both grounds.

First Interpretation: Chappell seems to assume that (1) and (2) are independent criticisms. However, it is possible for critics of Christianity to regard (2) as providing support for (1). For instance, they may argue as follows. While Christianity regards human well-being as what matters most in the world, it does not explain why human beings have to suffer from natural disasters; therefore, Christianity is an implausibly anthropocentric religion. Thus, according to this interpretation, (1) is inferred from the conjunction of (2) and the fact that Christianity is anthropocentric.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Chappell, 'Anthropocentrism and the Problem of Natural Evil: A Note', Ratio XIV (2001), pp. 84-85.

Second Interpretation: Chappell thinks that (2) contradicts (1) because (2) is based on (3).

However, this might not be true. One does not have to believe that human well-being is what matters most in the world in order to advance (2). It is perfectly possible for one to hold (2) on the basis of the following claim:

(3') Human well-being is an important matter in the world.

While (3') is much weaker than (3) and consistent with anti-anthropocentrism it does support (2). On this interpretation, one can criticise Christianity by holding (1) and (2) without incoherence.

Third Interpretation: Again, anthropocentrism is a doctrine according to which what matters most in the world is human well-being. Thus (1) can be spelled out as follows:

(1') Christianity is an implausible religion because it says that what matters most in the world is human well-being.

If one wants to criticise Christianity by holding (1') and (2) at the same time, one may establish (2) by appealing to animal pain, rather than human pain, that is caused by natural disasters. For natural evil does not always involve, or always involve only, human pain and suffering. Thus, anti-Christians can deploy the following version of (2):

(2') Christianity has no convincing answer to the problem of animal pain caused by natural disasters.

Under this interpretation of (1) and (2), the apparent inconsistency in the criticism of Christianity evaporates. Note that in order to advance the problem of natural evil, critics of Christianity do not have to list all the actual instances of pain that creatures experience. If they want to provide a logical version of the problem of evil, which is most notably endorsed by J. L. Mackie<sup>2</sup>, they need only point out one clear example of natural evil. If they want to provide an evidential version of the problem, which is most notably endorsed by William L.

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<sup>2</sup> See J. L. Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', Mind 64 (1955), pp. 200-212.

Rowe<sup>3</sup>, they need only point to a certain amount of natural evil. Either goal may be accomplished without referring to human pain.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See William L. Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp. 335-41.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Campbell Brown for his helpful comments.