— DIALOGUE #2 —

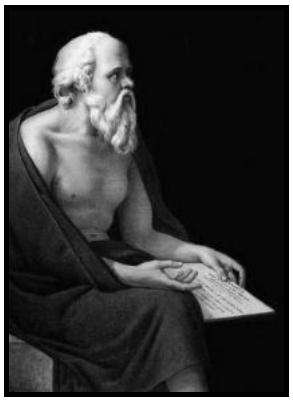
Socrates on Comparative Religions

Peter Kreeft
(Revised and edited by Jefrey D. Breshears)

This dialogue between **Socrates (S)** and **Paula Postman (PP)** takes place following the first class meeting of **Professor Toleranto's** course on Comparative Religions at Desperate State University. Professor Toleranto is a religious pluralist who prides himself in being tolerant and fair. According to him, all religions are essentially equal in that they all lead to God, and the differences between them are only superficial. This dialogue is excerpted and edited from Chapter 6 of Peter Kreeft's book, *Socrates Meets Jesus*.

ON OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Paula: Socrates, what's wrong? You didn't ask any questions in class, which is so unlike you. I was watching you – you looked interested at first, but then you just kinda sank into your seat.



Socrates: Oh, I had plenty of questions all right. I just don't think he has the answers.

PP: What? Dr. Toleranto is brilliant!

S: Did you not hear how he responded to the few questions that *were* asked?

PP: Why, yes. I thought he answered them quite brilliantly.

S: *Too* brilliantly, I thought.

PP: Huh? How can someone be *too* brilliant?

S: I think I can explain it quite succinctly. Would you agree that to give a questioner the answer he seeks, you must first hear his question?

PP: Of course.

S: With the heart as well as the with the ears?

PP: What do you mean?

S: I mean that you must understand the uncertainty of the questioner.

PP: Yes, but don't you think Professor Toleranto understands uncertainty? He certainly speaks out against all forms of dogmatism and intolerance and exclusivity.

S: Yes, he *certainly* does. But he reminds me of my old acquaintances, the **Sophists**. They were also quite certain there was no certainty.

PP: Oh, Professor Toleranto isn't a Sophist. He's just big on open-mindedness. That's one of his main themes in every class.

S: Yes, but don't you see how closed-minded he is about being open-minded? Wouldn't he be more open-minded if he were open-minded about *everything* – including open-minded toward those who disagree with him when it comes to dogmas and certainties and all that?

PP: Socrates, I think you totally misunderstand him. He's quite open to all points of view.

S: Except those who disagree with his *own* dogmas – people he calls "fundamentalists." You noticed, I'm sure, that he never answered the questions of that young man in class – he just dismissed him as a "fundamentalist." That's not open-minded. That's an *ad hominem* response, not an honest one.

PP: Oh, you mean the conservative Christian guy? Don't worry about it. He's so uncool and out of it.

S: But Professor Toleranto teaches that we should listen to people of other religions, yet he seemed very close-minded when it came to what this person had to say.

PP: Well, everyone has their limits. Anyway, that guy's really just a narrow-minded fundamentalist.

S: But what *is* a "fundamentalist?" I have heard that word several times ever since I arrived here at Desperate State University, yet I've never heard anyone actually define it. I'm beginning to think that "fundamentalist" is merely a word that you and Professor Toleranto and others use to label someone who disagrees with you.

PP: Well, I'm not sure how to define it, but I know one when I see him... or her. But anyway, you still have to agree that what Dr. Toleranto teaches is right.

S: How can I agree with a self-contradiction?

PP: What do you mean? What self-contradiction?

S: Dr. Toleranto preaches that we shouldn't preach. Just listen to all the critical things he says about those who try to force their beliefs on others, yet it certainly seemed that he was trying to force *his* beliefs on *us*!

PP: Well, I'm sorry you didn't like Professor Toleranto. I thought you two would get along great.

S: I didn't say I didn't *like* him. I just said I didn't have much hope he could answer my questions.

PP: Well, I just can't believe that you find him to be so close-minded. He is one of the most liberal professors around here.

S: Please define "liberal."

PP: Well, in comparative religions, it means accepting all religions as equally valid.

S: And this makes him open-minded – or "liberal"?

PP: Sure.

S: I fail to see the connection.

PP: Well, it's quite simple. If you believe only one religion is true, then you believe that all the others are false. Don't you see that?

S: Yes, but I don't see how thinking that an idea or a belief system that contradicts another is false. That has nothing to do with being closed-minded toward something. How could you have good reasons for dismissing an idea as false unless you first listened to it? And listening to an idea – truly listening – isn't that being open-minded?

PP: Sure, but once you conclude that the idea is false, you no longer have an open mind about it. You've made up your mind to reject it.

S: And you think that is bad?

PP: Sure. Any kind of closed-mindedness is bad.

S: Closed-mindedness at the end of an investigation as well as at the beginning?

PP: I think we should have an open mind all the time.

S: And having an open mind means always seeking?

PP: Yes.

S: Then you seek only to seek, not to find. But if you do not seek in order to find, then you do not really seek at all. There is nothing to seek for.

PP: You're confusing me.

S: Let me put it another way. What do you think is the value of an open mind? What is its purpose?

PP: Uhhh... to avoid being close-minded, I guess.

S: That is like saying the purpose of living is to avoid dying. You have not told me *why* you seek to be open-minded rather than closed-minded.

PP: Well, you know why. I've always thought of you as one of the most open-minded people who ever lived.

S: I am, but not in the sense that you think of "open-mindedness." You see, I've always thought that the point in being open-minded is to learn.

PP: Oh, I totally agree.

S: To learn truth, or falsehood, or both, or neither?

PP: Uhhh... both. To learn everything.

S: To distinguish between the two? To know falsehood as falsehood, or to mistakenly believe falsehood to be true?

PP: To know falsehood as falsehood.

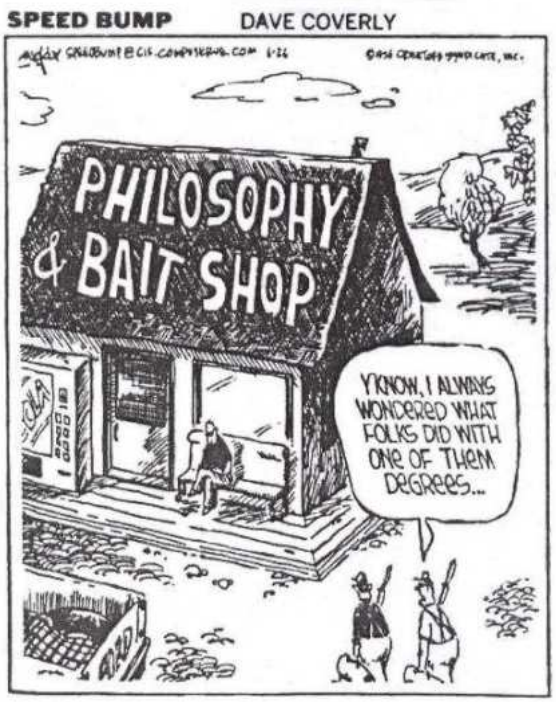
S: So, to know the truth about falsehood?

P: Uhhh, yeah.

S: Well then, the only thing we really want to know is truth – the truth about truth and the truth about falsehood. Isn't that right?

P: I guess so.

S: Then we have the same definition of open-mindedness and its purpose. Just as an open door is a means to enable a desired guest to enter, but not a robber, so an open mind is a means to the end of learning the truth about things – not falsehoods.



COMPARING RELIGIONS

S: So now that we agree about open-mindedness, let us see whether we also agree about the nature of truth. What *is* truth, Paula?

PP: Well, you tell *me*, and I'll tell *you* if I agree.

S: Very well. Truth is simply that which corresponds to reality. It is simply saying what is.

PP: Okay. So what is falsehood, then?

S: Falsehood does *not* correspond to reality. If you claim that it does, you tell a falsehood.

PP: You mean that I've lied?

S: A lie is a deliberate falsehood. I could also tell you a falsehood not deliberately but out of ignorance.

PP: Okay. I agree.

S: So truth and falsehood are opposed, then, are they not?

PP: Yes.

S: So that if it is true, for instance, that there is only one God and not many, then it is false that there are many gods and not just one, isn't that so?

PP: Yes, that's logical. Contradictions can't both be truth.

S: And religions *do* contradict each other, don't they?

PP: Not really. That's where I disagree with you.

S: But if monotheism and polytheism contradict each other, they can't both be right, can they?

PP: Well, no. But all the great world religions are monotheistic today. At least *they* don't contradict each other.

S: But isn't it true that some of those religions believe that God is a person, an *I*, who has a will, while others do not believe this? Isn't that what Professor Toleranto said?

PP: Well, it's true that Eastern religions generally conceive of God impersonally and Western religions conceive of him personally. But as Dr. Toleranto also said, that's just the difference in our perceptions. All perceptions are inadequate.

S: I agree that all our thoughts are inadequate concerning God, but I do not agree that they are just our imaginations.

PP: Well, you obviously haven't heard of the fable of the four blind men and the elephant.

S: No. Please tell me.

PP: Well, these four blind men who had never seen an elephant before went up to one and felt it. The first man felt its tail and said, "An elephant is like a worm." The second one felt its side and said, "No, an elephant is like a wall." The third man felt its leg and said, "No, it's like a tree." And the fourth man felt its trunk and said, "You're all wrong. An elephant is like a snake." And the four of them argued about it all day. That's how it is with the religions of the world, arguing about God. We know about as much about God as blind men know about an elephant. That's a great analogy.

S: Actually, I don't believe it is.

PP: Huh? Why not?

S: Because God may indeed be like many things, just as an elephant is, and it may be that we can only know one of them at a time. It may also be true that we can only know images or analogies of some of the things God is without realizing that our perceptions are only analogies. But the question we were talking about was whether God has a will or not. That is like two of the blind men arguing about whether the elephant has a trunk or not. Whether they call it a trunk or a snake, the elephant either has it or not.

PP: I don't see the connection. You think that the differences between religions is like that?

S: Some of them are. First, consider whether there is any God at all. If atheists are right, then all religions are wrong. Second, if atheism is wrong, then we must consider whether there is only one God or many. If polytheists are right, then all monotheists are wrong. Third, if polytheists are wrong, we must consider whether this God has a will or not. If not, then all your Western religions that say he does are wrong. And fourth, we must consider who Jesus Christ was. As I understand it, two of the three Western religions do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the divine Son of God, whereas the third religion does. Thus there seems to be fundamental contradictions between Christianity and Judaism, Islam, Eastern religions, polytheism, and atheism. If Christianity is right, all of these other religions are wrong. It's quite simple. I fail to see how you can fail to see it.

PP: Well, it may seem simple to you, but the truth is never that simple. To believe what you said, that would make the religions unequal. To believe that, one would have to be an exclusivist.

S: And you have a problem with that?

PP: Of course. Nobody has a corner on the truth. All religions are essentially equal because they're all man-made, and all human things are finite and imperfect. The same is true for political systems – whichever one works for the most people at a given time in history is best. You can't say that one is the absolute best.

S: I see your point about all human things being fallible and relative, but is religion a thing like politics – is it just a human creation?

PP: Yes. It's man's attempt to understand God.

S: But at least three religions claim to be invented by God, not man. Don't Judaism and Christianity and Islam all claim to be divine revelations?

PP: Yeah, that's what they claim.

S: And yet you know how different their claims are. So in claiming that they are all equal, you must be ignoring their specific doctrinal truth claims. To you, they are equal because of their practical aspects. You must think religions are based on something other than truth.

THE ESSENCE OF RELIGION

PP: Well, in fact there's a far deeper truth that they all hold in common – a mystical/spiritual truth.

S: Perhaps so. But is there not also a surface level, doctrinal kind of truth?

PP: Yes, but why is that so important?

S: Because without it, how can one say what is true about *anything* – even this "deeper truth" you speak of? To tell the truth about your "deeper truth," you must first examine the surface level truth.

PP: Well, surface-level truth is not the *essence* of religion.

S: Then what *is* the essence of religion?

PP: Well, like any essence, it must be what all have in common – the universal element in all religions, the core of all religions.

S: But what exactly *is* it?

PP: Well, that can't be stated in a simplistic and abstract way.

S: Then let's talk about it in a complex and concrete way.

PP: How?

S: Let's begin not with the common essence but with examples.

PP: Okay. Fine.

S: Is the essence of religion broad enough to include religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism?

PP: Certainly.

S: But neither Buddhism nor Confucianism even believe in a personal God. Isn't that true?

PP: Yeah, they're essentially agnostic on the question of the existence of God.

S: Then this cannot be the essence of religion: belief in a God, or the worship of God, or the love of God, or faith in God.

PP: I guess not. But religion isn't only worshiping God. It's any ultimate concern, any absolute value, any ultimate purpose to life.

S: Let's test your definition, Paula. My pupil Plato did not believe in the gods, but he certainly believed in absolute values, a Greatest Good, and an ultimate concern and purpose to life. Would you call Platonism a religion?

PP: Well, no. Platonism is a philosophy, not a religion.

S: And what about some of these strange philosophies I have heard about – Communism, Nazism, and Fascism – are they religions?

PP: No, they were antireligious.

S: But were they not ultimate concerns and purposes in life to their believers?

PP: Yeah, they were.

S: Then the essence of religion cannot be any of these things, anything broad enough to include irreligion as well as religion. For how can something include its own opposite? How can religion include irreligion?

PP: People can be religious about their irreligion.

S: That sounds like a contradiction. What do you mean by "being religious about it?"

PP: Well, you know – they were *fanatical* about it. They worshiped it.

S: So the essence of religion is fanaticism? Only fanatics are religious?

PP: No... well then, passion. Religion is passionate devotion.

S: So the essence of religion is passion?

PP: Uhhh... yeah, I guess so.

S: Are lust and lechery religious impulses?

PP: Well... I guess they *could* be.

S: I think I see the problem. For you, religion is an attitude, isn't it? Not a belief system or a set of doctrines that claim to be true.

PP: Ummm... yeah, I guess so.

S: But that sounds more like an Eastern religious mindset. Your three great Western religions do not mean that by religion, do they? They all have books that claim to teach you the very words of God, divine truth, and divine revelation. Correct?

PP: Yes.

S: So it sounds like you are more of a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Daoist than a Christian.

PP: Well, actually, I'm not sure what I am.

S: Oh, neither am I. But I had thought you knew what you believed, at least.

PP: Well, it's a problem defining religion broadly enough to include something like Buddhism but narrowly enough to exclude something like Communism.

S: Perhaps it's not just a problem for you. Perhaps no one can define this essence of religion for a very good reason. Perhaps it doesn't exist.

PP: Oh, but you're wrong, Socrates! It *does* exist! You can see it reflected in the different world religions. If you compare Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and Buddha's *Dhammapada* and Lao Tzu's *Dao de Jing* and the *Analects* of Confucius and the Proverbs of Solomon and the Law of Moses and the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Dialogues* of Plato, you see that they all say essentially the same thing.

Let me explain it this way: There are three different levels of insight in the world about how to live. Most people live on the lowest level by instinct and selfishness and pragmatism. And there are some philosophers, like Machiavelli and Hobbes and Freud, who even justify this and say it's as high as anyone can ever go because we're basically just sophisticated animals.

But some people aspire to something higher and live by the principles of justice and fairness and objective rightness and virtue. They live by what *ought* to be rather by what they want or feel like. And most philosophers justify this way of life – Plato, for instance.

And finally, a very few people live by something higher still – charity, self-sacrifice, and going beyond justice. And the thinkers I just mentioned wrote and taught about that. They reached the third level. That's the essence of religion. That is the

common theme in Moses, Solomon, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and other great spiritual teachers. They teach that we must die to self. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about.

S: Yes, I understand very well, Paula. But this is still philosophy, not religion. It is that division of philosophy we call ethics, and that part of ethics that deals with the *summum bonum*, or greatest good. It's ethics – a way of life. Are you saying that the essence of religion is ethics?

PP: Uhhh... yeah.

S: And you say that true religion is this third level?

PP: Essentially, yes.

S: Let me ask you a question: Are all atheists evil people?

PP: No. I know some atheists who live more upright lives than a lot of church-goers.

S: Then an atheist can be relatively moral and ethical?

PP: Sure.

S: And unselfish, and charitable?

PP: Definitely.

S: Then the essence of religion cannot be ethics if atheists can be ethical but not religious. So we're back where we began.

PP: Okay, so maybe there's something more basic to religion than ethics.

But anyway, getting back to my main point, I still believe that all religions are essentially equal. Religion is like a mountain with different roads that lead to the top – to God. That's why religion is so hard to define – how can you define a mountain? Inside, it's all dark and mysterious. But the surface is visible, and you can see many roads on it, all leading to the top from different sides and starting points. We shouldn't argue about which road is best. It's narrow-minded to deny the validity of roads other than your own. We shouldn't be so prideful, so arrogant, and so exclusive.

S: Okay. Let us examine your mountain metaphor. The various religions are the paths up the mountain of life to God, who is at the summit?

PP: Yes. God – or whatever you want to call him or her or it – is at the top. That's the goal of every religion.

S: And you say that the paths are all equal because they all start at the bottom and reach the top?

PP: Now you're getting it! I knew you were educable!

S: Thank you. But how do you know they all reach the top unless you have a perspective from the top?

PP: Well, I don't really know. I just... assume.

S: And here is something else you just assume: You assume to know that all religions are man-made, that they are man's roads to God rather than God's road to man. But how do you know that? How do you know it isn't the other way around? Certainly, the Bible argues otherwise – that God is searching for man rather than man searching for God.

PP: Well, that's just semantics. What difference does it make?

S: If religion is God's invention rather than ours, then it would make sense that there be only one road, the one made by God. If, on the other hand, religion is man-made, then it is reasonable that there be many roads, just as there are many people and nations and cultures.

Now if religions are man-made, it would be reasonable to assume that all religions are more-or-less equal. But if religion is God-made, it would be reasonable that human religions are inferior to the one God made.

See, you think it is arrogant to claim that only one religion is the truth because you assume all religions are man-made. Your conclusion follows from your premise, but the question you must ask yourself is whether your premise is in fact correct. Now let me ask you, how do you know that all religions are man-made?

PP: Well, that's what anthropology teaches us.

S: As we've talked about before, anthropology is more of a philosophy than a science. It has no scientifically proven and testable means to determine if its conclusions are valid.

PP: Yeah. Actually, I know that.

S: You see, Paula, if God made a road – a path to the summit – it is not arrogance but *humility* to accept this one road to God. On the other hand, it is not humility but *arrogance* to insist that man-made roads are just as good as God's road.

PP: Well, if it's true that God has established a path to him, then you'd be right.

A FANTASTIC CLAIM

PP: Well, before we go, let me ask you one more thing. Do you agree with the principle, "By their fruits you shall know them?"

S: It sounds like the principle of reasoning from the effect to the cause. Yes, I agree.

PP: Good, because that means the fundamentalists can't be right. Because they are so sure they're right, they have caused all kinds of problems in history.

S: I still don't know what you mean by "fundamentalists." But please go on.

PP: Well, they've caused wars, Crusades, persecutions, Inquisitions, and all kinds of disgusting stuff.

S: Yes, I've read about those things, but I do not see the connection between those things and the belief that a certain religion was revealed by God. Paula, you profess to be a Christian, don't you? And Christianity is based on the example and teachings of Christ, is it not?

PP: Well, it's supposed to be.

S: Was Christ an arrogant and imperialistic person who sanctioned violence?

PP: Oh, no. Just the opposite. Nothing got him madder than the arrogance and bigotry and hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day. No one in history was ever more merciful and humble and compassionate to everyone.

S: And did he teach that his religion was the one and only way to God?

PP: Well, according to the texts... yes, he did. He claimed to be "the way, the truth, and the life."

S: That sounds like an exceedingly arrogant claim.

PP: Yeah, I agree. That's one reason I doubt that the texts are historically accurate. It's hard to reconcile his humility with claims like that.

S: Yes, I agree... unless, of course...
Arrogance means claiming more for yourself than is true, doesn't it?

PP: Yes.

S: If any man claimed that he or his path to God was the only truth, the only way, it would be claiming more than a man has a right to claim, would it not?

PP: Absolutely. He would either have to be extremely arrogant or crazy.

S: But of course, if a *god* spoke those words.... Tell me, how long has this religion of Christianity been around?

PP: About two thousand years.

S: Remarkable! And have Christians consistently followed their teacher in being compassionate like him?

PP: No. Like I mentioned, there was even a time when some Christians burned to death heretics, people who didn't believe as they did.

S: What an appalling contradiction!

PP: Uh, to say the least. That's why people like Dr. Toleranto can't stand fundamentalists. He warns us to avoid bigots like that.

S: Do "fundamentalists" today still advocate burning heretics?

PP: Well, not Christian fundamentalists – at least, not that I know of. But they sure don't value tolerance like us liberals do.

S: Would you agree that a basic problem with the Inquisition is that they failed to distinguish heresy from heretics?

PP: I've never thought about it. What do you mean?

S: They tried to destroy heresy by burning heretics. Is that right?

PP: Yes, that's right. Wasn't that stupid?

S: Indeed – not to mention, counter-productive. But I wonder whether Professor Toleranto is not making the same mistake.

PP: Huh? How's that?

S: He wants to love and accept and tolerate everyone as equal, does he not?

PP: Sure. He's a true liberal – although I think he prefers to call himself a "progressive."

S: Do you not see, then, that he may be making the same mistake as they did in failing to distinguish the heresy and the heretic?

PP: Well, he's not like them.

S: In what ways?

PP: He tolerates and accepts everyone.

S: Except "fundamentalists," right?

PP: Well, yes. Except fundamentalists. But that's only because they don't tolerate and accept people different from... – oh, wait a minute: he doesn't either, does he? But it's only because he believes Christianity is a religion of love, not hate.

S: What about truth?

PP: Huh?

S: What about truth? Isn't Christianity also a religion of truth? And can we really separate those two divine attributes? Should we not always speak the truth in love?

PP: "Speaking the truth in love" – that's a quotation from the apostle Paul in the Bible. Have you been reading the Bible?

S: No, not yet. But I intend to.

PP: Then how did you know that quote?

S: I did not know it *was* a quotation. I knew it because it is true.

PP: Well, as far as I'm concerned, that's what it's all about – love. And sincerity, of course.

S: But what if one is sincerely wrong? Isn't truth more important than sincerity? Is sincerity alone sufficient for a surgeon, or an explorer? Don't we need guidelines and maps to find our way?

PP: Well, religion is a lot different than surgery or exploration.

S: Is it? Is it not a kind of surgery of the soul, and an exploration into God?

PP: No. Those are false analogies. It's a matter of the spirit – a metaphysical reality. It's not physical.

S: But does not the spirit have pathways that are just as objective as those of the body?

PP: Not that I know of. What do you mean?

S: Just as two different physical paths lead to two different cities, and two different logical paths lead to two different conclusions, can two different spiritual paths not lead to two different destinations: either *to* God or *away from* God?

PP: Well, I still think sincerity and honesty are the most important things. I'd rather be sincerely wrong than insincerely right. Wouldn't you?

S: Not if I were a surgeon or an explorer. It seems to me that true sincerity yearns to know the truth, and true honesty desires to believe a thing for one reason only – because it is true. Do you disagree?

PP: But if that's so, what about sincere pagans? Do they never go to heaven? Do they never find God?

S: I do not know. And by the way, *I* am one of those pagans who is sincerely seeking the truth. I doubt that a just God would punish anyone for not knowing what they could not know, or for disobeying a moral law they did not know. But a just God *would* hold everyone accountable for the knowledge they *can* have, and for purposely ignoring or disobeying that knowledge.

What I *do* know is that I must continue searching. I *do* believe that God is a rewarder of those who earnestly seek him.

PP: Socrates, you just quoted the Bible again. Are you sure you haven't read it?

S: I have not yet read it, but that is my intention. That along with attending Dr. Liberalis's theology class on Christology.

PP: Good. I'll see you in there. We've got some real "interesting" characters in that class.