

What About Other Religions?

In the past, the standard answer in England for people answering the question 'what is your religion' was Church of England, or possibly Catholic, depending on their background. Now many more will answer that they have no faith or belong to a different religion as, as a country we become more culturally diverse. However, we are still blessed with being in a society, particularly in Rustington actually, which is sympathetic to the church and our values.

I am going to take you through a few common questions, looking at biblical evidence. Please don't make judgements before you've heard the whole argument, as there are parts which are quite subtle and qualify earlier statements! I will put this sermon on the website, and welcome further discussion. Remember I have a limited time, so have to be concise.

So, the questions are:

Is Jesus the only way to God?

What do we say about other religions?

What about those who have never heard of Jesus?

Firstly, is Jesus the only way to God?

The answer of the New Testament is 'Yes'. Jesus himself said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). He claimed to be the way to God.

The late columnist Bernard Levin made the point that Jesus used unequivocal language:

I take it that a religion which claims to be following the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth must, even if only by a process of elimination, think that the other religions are, for all their holiness and worship, mistaken. ... it is surely reasonable to ask Christianity what its founder meant when he said, 'None shall come to the Father but by me.'

In Acts 4, when Peter and John healed the crippled man outside the temple, a large crowd gathered. Peter proclaimed Jesus as the 'author of life' who had been crucified but was now resurrected and glorified. They were arrested and put on trial and asked 'by what power' the crippled man had been healed. Peter, 'filled with the Holy Spirit', replied that it was 'by

the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth' and that 'salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved' Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is unequivocal.

St Paul is equally emphatic: 'For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human' (1 Timothy 2:5).

Christians believe that Jesus brings salvation. Jesus comes to bridge the gap between humanity and God that first opened up in the Fall, and which exists wherever God's people turn away from him in self-centredness and sin, failing to recognise and worship God as the giver of all the good gifts that surround us.

Jesus is uniquely able to bridge that gap of sin, first, because of *who* he is. He is the one whom the early church worshipped as God. This sets him apart from the leaders of the other great world religions. Muslims do not worship Muhammad and Buddha did not consider himself to be a god. Second, Jesus is unique in his achievement, or what he has *done*. We all need a saviour because we have all sinned and we cannot save ourselves from the results of sin. None of the other great religions even claims to have a saviour. Buddha is thought of as a Teacher. Muhammad is regarded as a prophet. In Islam, sinners will face judgment without forgiveness – the obedience of their lives will be weighed against their sin.

By contrast, Jesus saves us from our guilt, and he saves us from the judgment we all deserve.

Third, Jesus is unique in comparison with the leaders of the other great faiths of the world in his *resurrection*. Peter described him as the one 'whom God raised from the dead' (Acts 4:10). The resurrection is a unique event in the history of the world.

The resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is alive today. We can know him, and it is only because of this living relationship that the gap between God and humanity, which the Bible describes, is bridged.

In summary: Jesus, the unique Son of God, the unique Saviour, the one uniquely raised from the dead, is the way to God.

So, if Jesus is the way to God, this immediately brings us to the two further questions:

‘What do we say about other religions?’ and ‘What about those who have never heard about Jesus?’

What do we say about other religions?

The fact that Jesus is the only way to God does not mean that we simply write off all other religions as completely wrong or misguided. Jesus said, ‘I am the truth’. In him, ultimate truth is to be found and he is the standard by which all truth claims are to be tested. But this does not mean that parts of the truth cannot be found in other religions. Indeed, we would expect to find truth in other religions for at least three reasons.

First, although God’s revelation of himself in Jesus, witnessed to in Scripture, is unique and final, God has partially revealed himself in creation. ‘The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands’ (Psalm 19:1). The pinnacle of his creation is human life. As Sir Isaac Newton, the brilliant physicist and mathematician, said, ‘In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God’s existence.’

Therefore, the psalmist says, only a fool can claim that ‘there is no God’ (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). From creation, it is possible for people to find out the truth about God’s existence and gain an insight into his character: his power and his glory. The evidence provided by creation is available to all- followers of other religions and those of none.

Second, human beings are made in the image of God and God has given us a conscience with which to distinguish right and wrong. As Paul put it, ‘Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law... they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them’ (Romans 2:14–15). Thus, it is not surprising that the essence of ‘the golden rule’ (‘Do to others what you would have them do to you’ – Matthew 7:12) is contained in almost every religion.

Third, in every heart there is a hunger for God. God has 'set eternity in the human heart' (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Deep down no one is satisfied by materialism; we know there is more to life. There is a God-shaped gap in the heart of every human being. This hunger drives us to search for God.

It is understandable then that we find good in many religions, and we should be challenged by aspects of the lives of adherents to other religions, for example, their commitment, their devotion or their dedication to what they believe. In the life of St. Augustine, his Confessions describe the way in which the Holy Spirit was leading him years before his conversion to Christ. I see no reason as to why this searching for truth and coming to Christ could not continue to happen at the point of death and beyond.

We are all fallen human beings (Christian and non-Christian alike), and none of us can find God by ourselves. But God has revealed himself in the person of Jesus.

By putting other religions alongside God's revelation in Jesus Christ, we see that they contain both truth and error. There may be dark aspects to other religions, and, at times, the Bible is very strong in its opposition to the practices of some other religions (e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:21). Of course, there may also be a dark side to the way some people use Christianity to certain ends,

C. S. Lewis reminds us:

If you are a Christian, you do not have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through...of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions... As in arithmetic – there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong; but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others.

Finally, what about those who have never heard about Jesus?

If we can be saved only through Jesus, are all the rest damned? If so, is that not unjust? Five quick points.

First, the Bible is a practical book, not a philosophical one. It does not answer hypothetical questions directly.

Second, we can be sure that God will be just. When Abraham asked the

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rhetorical question, 'Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?' (Genesis 18:25), he clearly expected the answer, 'Yes, of course he will.' We need not fear that God will be unjust. He will be more just than we are, not less. On judgment day, every right-thinking person will say of God's judgment: 'That is completely just.'

Third, what we do know is that no one will be saved by their religious behaviour. We are saved by God's undeserved love through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8). He died for us so that we can be forgiven. We receive salvation when we accept the gift by faith.

Fourth, it is important to note that it is at least possible to be saved by grace, through faith, even if someone has never heard of Jesus. 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness' (Romans 4:3). This is possible because the cross is effective for all those who lived before as well as after Jesus. Abraham was forgiven because of what Jesus was to do for him on the cross.

In the same way, the person who lived at the time of Jesus or after him would be justified by faith – even if they had not heard about him. So, Jesus tells us in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector that the tax collector who said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner,' went home justified before God (Luke 18:9–14). Surely the same is true for anyone today who has not heard of Jesus but did what the tax collector did.

So, the essential elements would seem to be a God-given sense of sin or need, and a self-abandonment to God's mercy.

Leslie Newbiggin 'If a man...never hears the gospel here on earth, then I suppose that he will wake up, as it were, on the other side of the grave to worship the One in whom, without understanding it at the time, he had found the mercy of God.'

Fifth, we seem to be assured by Paul that many more people will be saved than lost because Christ's work in causing salvation will be more successful than Adam's in causing ruin and because God's grace in bringing life will overflow "much more" than Adam's trespass in bringing death.¹² (See Romans 5:2.)

As we finish, we might wonder why should we bother to tell others about Jesus?

First, because the route we have taken all the way through this argument has begun with Jesus and set out into the world: who he is, what he has done, the reality that he is risen.

We are compelled to proclaim the glory of Jesus Christ which will fill in the glimpses seen in creation and in the lives of human beings.

Also, Jesus commanded us to go into all the world and tell the good news and we know that people will have their Spiritual hunger satisfied by him.

Finally, because without knowing about Jesus no one could have the assurance of forgiveness and the abundant life he offers both in this life and in the life to come. For Jesus is not only the way and the truth, he is also 'the life' right here, right now.