

Religions of the World – Part I – Questions People Ask

January 7, 2007

12 Days after Christmas we celebrate something called the Epiphany – which is the revelation of Jesus Christ to Humanity – specifically we look at this as the Magi or the “Three Kings” as we commonly call them.

I thought it was appropriate for us to start our new sermon series about different religions on a day that we celebrate the revelation of Christ to people of a different religion.

When many of us grew up we might not have known anyone from a different religion. Many of us went to high school and maybe even college without having a single Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu classmate.

Many of us may have grown up without even knowing a single Jewish family.

But it is not that way anymore. Look around our neighborhoods. Society is much more religiously diverse than it has ever been.

It is very likely that today, one of your neighbors, a business owner, or even the teacher of one of your kids or grandkids is from a different religion.

Many of your kids or grandkids go to school or have a friend that is someone from a different faith.

Above and beyond this, our world is divided and at war because of different religious beliefs. We have seen Muslims and Hindus engaged in conflicts – then there is the age old battle between the Muslims and Jews in the Holy Land – that each claim as their own.

I believe it is important, especially in this day and age, that we, as Christians seek to understand the faith of others – and compare them to our own. Then we as Christians, can use that understanding when we associate with others of different religions.

As I said last week, it is so common for people to fear the unknown. If we take a little time to understand other religions, and not be afraid to associate with others from those religions, it can help us grow in our own faith and help us seek a little peace in our lives.

Today and the next two weeks, we will be taking some time to look at a few of the world's major religions.

This can be hard for people. Many of us haven't wanted to look at a different religion because, "What if the other religions are right?" It can be threatening to our own faith.

Many of us here in the room are Christians because, quite frankly, our parents were Christians. Many of us didn't choose Christianity, but it chose us.

So when faced with claims of another religions, we may feel a little uncomfortable. We might ask ourselves if our faith can withstand seriously looking at another religions. What if we have been wrong?

Being your pastor, I don't want to weaken your faith. I have always felt that the best way to strengthen your faith is to ask serious questions about it and challenge it.

Now, as my disclaimer, I am looking the these other religions through the eyes of a Christian. I know I can't be fully objective. When I did my research for these messages, through tapes, books, and speaking with people – I still had on my "Christian Goggles."

I see the world knowing that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior and I see the world through my own personal Christian experiences, and I can't change that perspective.

Now next week we are going to take a closer look at two of the world's religions. But today we are going to look at 4 main questions people ask about world religions.

The first question people ask is, "Why are there so many religions?"

Many atheists believe that the pure existence of so many religions is proof that there isn't a God. From their standpoint, if there was One True God, then why doesn't he make himself known in the same way to all people?

For me, I believe just the opposite. The mere fact that there are so many people searching for, yearning for, a desiring a relationship with some supreme being is evidence that there is something more out there.

As we look through our history, we see that every continent, every nationality has looked towards some kind of supreme being. From Tucson, Arizona to the jungles of Africa.

And there are times when all of us, no matter where we have lived, have felt that nudging, or tugging or insight that we know came from someplace else.

These are universal experiences throughout history and throughout the world which, I believe, point to God.

Then why so many different religions? I believe that two people can experience the exact same thing but rationalize and internalize and feel it completely differently.

For example, Shirley and I can go watch the same movie, but when I ask her about it afterwards and she starts talking about how this part of the movie really touched her and this other part was really meaningful –

Sometimes I just look at her and ask her if we saw the same movie. Not only do I not always see it the same way, but sometimes I don't even remember the parts she mentions!

Two people – the exact same experience – but each rationalized it, internalized it and felt it in two completely different ways.

If this is how we are as humans, then why does it surprise us so much that different people living in different places try to express their own answers so differently to these yearnings and searchings for something more?

I believe one reason for our religious differences is the way God has made us to learn. We are a lot like infants. At first, our parents are excited when we first recognize them – although incorrectly sometimes.

I know that some of the men in this room were probably called “mama” when your kids were first learning to speak. But you were happy anyway, right? Your kids still recognized you as a parent.

Then as they got a little older and they were ready, you taught them rules around the house – like the oven is hot, don't pull the dog's tail and be nice to others and share your toys.

Then they got older and matured and your relationship changed from just a parent, to one that they could get to know a little better – deeper.

Looking at the history in our Bible, we see God teaching us in much the same way.

About 1,800 years before Jesus was born, most of the people in the world were polytheists – they believed in more than one god. They knew there was something out there, but all of the beauty in the world, all of these emotional feelings, all of these yearnings – they couldn't believe they came from only one god – it was too much for any one god.

Now I believe God was okay with this – he understood this. They were yearning for him – but not sure how to express their feelings – so they worshipped many gods.

Then God spoke to a man named Abraham and basically told him, “Look, I know your forefathers for a long time now have believed in more than one god. But that isn’t true. There is only one God. Believe what I am telling you and your descendants will become a great nation and a light to the rest of the world.”

Through Abraham, God sent the people of the world on the right path. Much like some fathers would do if their infants called them mama – you would eventually correct them that you are the daddy.

But God didn’t just forget about the other people – the ones that believed in more than one god – he still loved them but knew they were like children in their understanding and as a people, it would take time for them to mature.

Then about 600 years later, God called a man by the name of Moses up a mountain. God hadn’t really given Abraham any major direction, except for the fact that there is only one God.

So God felt it was time to give these people some rules – some direction – and he gave them the 10 Commandments and some other rules. Much as you would a child – give them rules and more direction.

After Moses we start to get a little more insight into God through the prophets; God speaking to individuals so they could share a little bit more of the essence of God. Showing us a little bit more of God’s heart and character.

Then, as Christians, we believe that about 2000 years ago, God gave us the biggest look at himself so that we might be able to understand God’s heart, God’s character, and God’s will for our lives. He gave us Jesus.

This leads us to our next question: “How should we, as Christians, view those of different religions?”

Possibly billions of people on this planet are not Christians and many of them are faithful to their religions. They, like us, long to know the truth. They are seeking to serve and understand God.

The Bible tells us that God forms us all in our mother’s womb. Well, if that is true, and I believe it is, then wouldn’t it seem fair to say that God knows each of them by name – knows their stories – even has heard their prayers – although those prayers might be directed towards a different god?

With this as a starting point, it seems important for us to decide how Christians should view other religions.

With this in mind, I would like you to consider the three main views.

The first is the Pluralist Perspective:

According to the pluralist view, all religions are equally valid paths to some “Ultimate Reality” or God.

Put another way, pluralists believe that religious people around the world are all really saying the same thing in different languages – or at least pointing to the same truth.

Pluralism is probably the predominant view in popular culture today. Many people take this view to be fair – or to honor the people of the other religion – or to be politically correct – to be respectful to other faiths – to be open-minded.

You might hear a pluralist say, “Your truth is true for you and my truth is true for me.” -- There might be some in this room that feel that way.

Now I am not here to destroy anyone’s beliefs, but to share with you other beliefs, other positions and share with you where I am as well.

I personally struggle with the pluralists view. First of all I don't think it really honors or is respectful to the other religions. For example, most Muslims would not think you were trying to honor them by saying that what they believe is as true as what the Hindus believe.

The second reason I struggle with the pluralist view is that it fails to logically take into account the various claims of other religions.

In fact, some claims of different religions are mutually exclusive. So if one religion claims there are many gods while another holds that there is only one, these two truths would be impossible to reconcile.

Also, if we take the pluralists viewpoint, and believe that all religions are equally valid – we would have to include all of the deluded religious leaders.

Twice in the past 30 years we have seen religious leaders start new faiths, claiming to have spiritual insight from God, and ultimately lead their followers to mass suicide. Just because people claim that God has spoken to them and they can convince others to follow them in their new religions, it does not mean that it is true to God.

I do respect the compassion and sensitivity of those who have the pluralist view. I believe in honoring and respecting religious people of different faiths. But I do not believe the pluralist view really makes sense or honors the various claims of different religions.

The next viewpoint I want to share is called the Exclusivist Perspective. This viewpoint is at the other end of the spectrum from the pluralist view point and I know many people who hold this viewpoint including some here.

In its most rigid interpretation, this view holds that all who do not accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord will be condemned to hell for all eternity.

To the exclusivist, it does not matter how faithful you are to your religion, or if you are earnestly seeking God, or even if you have never had the opportunity to learn about Jesus or not. If you don't fully accept Jesus into your life – they believe, quite literally, “To Hell with you.”

Now a more moderate exclusivist interpretation might allow grace for those who haven't heard of Jesus yet.

The exclusivist view has been held by a majority of Christians throughout the last 2000 years. Today, it is a position held mainly by a large number of evangelical and conservative Christians.

According to this view, two-thirds of the world's population will not experience salvation: rather, they will perish because they have not received Jesus Christ as Lord.

Jesus did say, “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

Many exclusivists would point to one of my favorite verses: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” We will consider this verse in a moment.

I used to be an exclusivist. I used to believe that the rest of the world was damned to hell if they did not accept Jesus. I felt bad for those who didn't hear about him, but I needed to let God worry about that.

But as I read the Bible more – and I draw closer to God, I really see that the exclusivist view doesn't mesh with the very spirit of the gospels, which tell of God's love for a broken world. The gospels paint a picture of God that even a lost soul finds difficult to understand – a loving God who wants to have a relationship with us.

A loving God that wants a relationship with us? I can't look at God that way and then think of him as a God who punishes two-thirds of the world's population because they were not born in a predominantly Christian Culture.

Jesus himself said that he came to seek and save the lost.

Imagine asking Jesus this question, "What would you say at the Judgment Day, Jesus, to a person who loved God, who sought to serve God, but never had an authentic opportunity to accept you?"

I just can't imagine Jesus saying to such a person, "Away from me! For though you fed the hungry, clothed the naked, you worshiped my Father, you bowed in prayer and sought to submit your life to God, you never personally invited me to be your Savior."

To me, this seems inconsistent with the actions of Jesus in the Gospels.

Then, besides those who haven't accepted Jesus, what about the people before Jesus was born – what about them? Are they all damned to hell as well? Including Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses, Abraham?

I believe there are too many inconsistencies with the exclusivist view.

The third view point is the Inclusivist Perspective. This position believes that God is at work among all people everywhere. Even in those places where missionaries haven't been.

An Inclusivist believes that Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God: God's Word made flesh.

Inclusivists believe that God may be actively involved in the lives of non-Christians too. That God hasn't written them off. Actually through His Grace – he may work through their religions to draw them closer to Him.

Think about it – for those here who haven't been Christians since birth – did you feel God tugging at your heart – did you feel the yearnings for God? A different religion or no religion – God still wants a relationship with all of us.

For those of different religions, I believe God sees their acts of righteousness and of worship and their efforts to know, and to follow Him - and views these as directed at Him. Even if those of other faiths haven't accepted God's definitive Word – Jesus.

Inclusivists believe that God accepts the intent of their hearts – that they are reaching and yearning.

They also would note that it is Jesus Christ that saves us and that faith is our only prerequisite to salvation.

Inclusivists are not saying that all religions are equally valid paths or that their teachings are all true. Inclusivists do not believe that all people will be saved.

Rather, inclusivists believe that God examines the hearts of people of other faiths; that God sees their true faith in him; as was the case with Abraham who was a very faithful person, but believed in several gods before knowing the truth.

This is the viewpoint of many of the mainline Protestant churches. The Roman Catholic Church at their Vatican II summit gave support to this same theology.

This idea of God's mercy and love for those who are currently outside of the Christian faith – and God's willingness to speak to them in familiar terms and symbols – is proven in the Bible – but is shown so clearly in the birth story of our Savior.

And that brings us to the question: “How is God at work in other religions?”

As we discussed earlier, the three kings from the east saw the star. Well, through our traditions we call them kings. Actually they were called Magoi which is the Greek word where Magi comes from. Which if we look at the world during Jesus' time, we learn that they were probably Zoroastrian priests from the Persian Empire.

They had some of the basic beliefs as the Jews, but they were Astrologers – looking to the stars to speak to them. Nowhere in Judaism does God call people to follow a star.

But here we have it – God speaking to Zoroastrian priests in a way that they would understand – using their religion to teach them more about who He is.

The Bible tells us that when the star stopped where Jesus was, the Magi were overwhelmed with joy. When people are seeking God, regardless of their religious background, they will feel joy when they discover the truth – when they see God in some new and profound way.

I believe that God is not as small as we often think he is. Yes, I believe that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God. I believe that his life, death, and resurrection are God's direct love for us. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Savior. I believe that by his death, he died so we could live.

This same God spoke to Zoroastrian priests through their religion, he sent Jonah to warn the non-Jewish Ninevites to turn from their wickedness – the same God who showed compassion upon Hagar and Ishmael and promised to make Ishmael into a great nation – which became the Arabs and Muslims.

So my last question for today: “What is the fate of those who earnestly pursue God through other religions?”

Let’s look back at our verse from John 14:6 – “I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

When I read that verse, and I think about it, and I pray about it – there are several things that come to mind. First: Was Jesus, in this verse, trying to teach us about other world religions and about how God will judge the faithful of those religions? Reading the whole context around John 14, this does not seem to be the aim.

When Jesus said those words, he was speaking to his disciples – he was affirming that he is the Messiah and that when we have seen Jesus, we have seen God.

But he does say, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Some people believe that this says you must believe in Jesus or be condemned to hell.

But that is not the only interpretation – Another way of looking at it is to simply recognize that, while the merits of Jesus Christ’s death are essential for all persons to enter heaven, it is up to God to apply those merits as God chooses.

For example, through our belief in Jesus we know we have salvation.

Now, for those who don’t know Jesus, God could choose to give this gift of salvation to someone based on their faith.

Think about the faithful Hindu who was never given the opportunity to know Christ, but who has given his life to being faithful to God as he knew him. God could, if he chose, give the gift of salvation to this Hindu.

For the Bible does tell us that eventually every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

For those who are not Christians, but who God has shown mercy - because of their faith, will one day fall on their knees – with joy – knowing that Jesus is Lord.

For those of you who struggle with this, think about a severely mentally handicapped person. He may not be physically able to accept or even understand Jesus. Yet, I believe this person can be given the gift of salvation from God.

Or how about the small child that dies and was too young to understand? They can be granted salvation by the same loving God.

It is still important for us to share the story of Christ with people of other religions. Christ is the guaranteed way, the guaranteed truth and the guaranteed life. Zoroastrian priests found joy once they found the truth. Those of other religions that have come to Christianity have shared similar joy.

Many of us have been blessed to be a Christian our whole lives – never knowing a specific moment when we first believed – others of us know a specific time in our lives when we realized that Christ is our Lord and Savior – and it brought joy to our hearts and guaranteed our salvation.

It is with this same joy that we remember Jesus' gift of salvation. On the night before he gave himself up for our eternal salvation.....

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