

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Romans 1:16-20

Other Ways?

Today's question from the "Ask The Pastor" series is: "*Hindus believe there are many paths to God, but most religions – including Christianity – believe there is only one way. How can we understand that there is no possibility for salvation for billions of Hindus, Muslims, Jews, etc. outside of a belief in Jesus Christ?*"

Once again, why is this a pressing question today? Because our world is changing fast: multiculturalism is a reality of our societies; we now constantly rub shoulders with people of many different cultures and religions. In Europe there are now millions of Muslims and many Hindus. As more and more Asians come to the US, we meet more people from Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian backgrounds. How should we as Christians think about their religions? Would we be threatened if a group wanted to build a mosque in our town?

1) *Salvation for Israel*

For Christians, the place to start thinking about "other religions" is the history of Israel. The believers of the Old Testament era knew nothing about Jesus. Where then was their salvation? The answer the New Testament gives us is that they were *saved by faith*. "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." The position of the Christian Church has always

been that the Old Testament saints were objectively saved - reconciled to God - by the one sufficient atoning death of Jesus. Subjectively, although they did not know Jesus, they were saved by their faith in the promises of God. So we have to conclude that *it is possible to be saved by Christ without knowing him explicitly*.

But, you may say, this was Israel, God's chosen people! They have to be a *special case*. What about others? The Old Testament also tells us about individuals who were not part of Israel but clearly had faith in YHWH, the LORD, the only true God. In Genesis 14 we read that Abraham was met by Melchizedek, "king of Jerusalem and priest of God Most High." How did *he* get to know the LORD? Exodus tells us that when Moses fled from Egypt after killing an Egyptian taskmaster, he settled on the Arabian peninsula with Jethro, "the priest of Midian." Moses married his daughter, and decades later Jethro reappears in the Sinai desert to tell Moses that the way he is ruling Israel is not God's way. How did *Jethro* become a priest of the one true God?

According to Isaiah and Jeremiah, the LORD selected Cyrus, king of the Medes and Persians, as "his shepherd... his anointed... whom he summons by name and on whom bestows a title of honor... though [he does] not acknowledge me." God directs Cyrus to release the exiles to return to Judah and rebuild their land, their city, their temple. How did such revelations of God's will, and

obedience to it, come to *Cyrus*? Examples like this are used by Jesus, to point to *knowledge of God, obedience to God, faith in God, outside the covenant community of Israel.*

What about Israel after Christ came? "*What about the Jews?*" Paul wrestles for three chapters of *Romans* over what God will now do with the Jews, given that in his day most of them did not accept Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world. But "theirs," says Paul, "is the adoption, the glory, the covenant, the law, the temple, the promises, the patriarchs...theirs is the human ancestry of Christ. Did God reject his people? No! God's purpose in election stands. Even now there is a remnant chosen by grace, while a hardening in part has come on Israel. But the deliverer will come from Zion, and so all Israel will be saved, for the gifts and call of God are irrevocable." Sounds pretty certain! – even if many people today are still puzzled by what it means to say "all Israel" will be saved.

2) *Exclusive or Inclusive?*

Well, many argue, this is all beating around the bush – yes, there are special cases where God saves people outside the "normal" lines, but the *normal* line for Christians is clear: *Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me."*

And what Jesus said about himself, in many different ways, Christians have always affirmed. In the early church, facing Jews and pagans who thought differently, Peter claimed "salvation is found in no one else... there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." "You people," he said, "killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead." Says Paul, "*Christ died for all... God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself.*"

You can't get much plainer than that. The Christian claim is, and always has been, that Jesus is the way to reconciliation with the Father, the God who made heaven and earth and will one day judge all people. It's what has been called an *exclusive* claim; today scholars prefer to call it a *particular* claim.

Of course there have always been Christians and others who didn't like that claim, or who thought it was inconsistent with other things the Bible tells us about God. In the 2nd C. Justin Martyr wrote that "those who *live according to the Logos* are therefore Christians, even though they were regarded as atheists..." Socrates and other virtuous Greeks, for example.

In the 20th C., the Jesuit scholar Karl Rahner put the so-called *inclusive* case in a classic form: he argued that if we accept the exclusive view that "Jesus is the only way," then "*those living before Christ, or who never heard of him, seem to be excluded from salvation, which is contrary to the saving will of God.*" That is, we know the Bible teaches that "God is patient, not wishing that any should perish, but that all would reach repentance" – which means, according to Rahner, "*God wills all men to be saved.*" Therefore, he argues, "non-Christian religions must be valid, and capable of mediating saving grace, until the gospel is known... their adherents are *anonymous Christians.*" Rahner got in a lot of trouble for that phrase, which many thought condescending, patronizing, insulting!

A more nuanced Roman Catholic view of non-Christian religions came in a papal encyclical from 1965, *Nostra Aetate*. It states "*the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions, but has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and the doctrines... which often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.*" The encyclical quickly goes on to say "Yet, the Church proclaims, and is in duty

bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life; in whom God reconciled all things to himself, and in whom men *find the fullness* of their religious life." Here is that idea that "*some rays of truth*" are to be found in all religions, but that Christianity represents the "*fullness of truth*."

But of course other scholars and theologians have said this is all nonsense. Nobody was firmer about it than Karl Barth, the Swiss Reformed biblical scholar whom many regard as the greatest theologian of the 20th C. Barth was fighting the seduction of the German church by Nazi nationalism, and declared that they were pursuing "*religion*," which was "a human fabrication" and was only an "upward search for God," ultimately all about self-justification. Barth contrasted religion with the *self-revelation that comes from God*, which is all grace and leads to faith. Barth was sure that "*there was no knowledge of God apart from Christ*."

His strictures against man-made "religion" were of course pointed at the crumbling Christian church, as well as at non-Christian "religions" that "sought God" on their terms instead of accepting his. But Barth was also convinced that in the end, God was more powerful than all human inventions or perversions; that ultimately, *grace would prevail over unbelief*; that at the end of history, "all will come to faith in Christ." Like Paul in his view that "all Israel will be saved," Barth would seem to counsel *patience* while God works out his patient purposes in the world.

3) Aren't They Really All The Same?

There is, of course, one more approach to "other religions" that is rapidly becoming the "default view" in many parts of our culture. "*Aren't all religions really the same?*" Maybe Christianity is "right for us," but Islam is "right" for Arabs, and Hinduism for Indians,

and nature-spirit-worship for Native Americans...

There is a popular as well as a scholarly version of this idea – at the simplest level, it's "let's just get along" and act as though nothing we believe really matters; not enough to argue about, certainly not enough to fight over. So if you won't mention your specific beliefs, I won't either, and if we talk about beliefs at all it will be in terms of a vague "religious feeling," some experience of "spirituality," which, for the sake of peace and harmony, we're going to assume can be experienced in all religions in different ways. After all, *nobody knows the "truth"* – there may not be any such thing, only things that are "true for you" and others that are "true for me."

The scholarly version comes from people like theologian John Hick, who has said "we need a Copernican revolution in our understanding of religions... we must make a *shift from Christianity at the center*, with all other religions revolving around it at smaller or greater distances... *to a picture with God at the center*, where Christianity is one more religion revolving around God." In other words, Christians should get rid of their "Christ-fixation" and *focus on God* as the "*ultimate Reality*" whose essence is unknowable but to which (or whom?) all religions point imperfectly.

Responses to "all religions are really the same" come in two forms. A classic reply came from Lesslie Newbigin, a missions scholar who spent much of his life as a Bishop in India. Newbigin said "*That none of us grasps the whole truth* is true, but that is not an excuse for saying *nobody has a clue where to begin*." At the scholarly level – if God is the "*ultimate Reality*," but ultimately unknowable in form except through our imperfect personal attempts at knowing, then, Newbigin rightly argues, Hick's

Copernican revolution has in fact not put God in the center but *self*.

And to those who say "all religions lead to the same place," Newbigin asks "*How do you know that?*" "What is the vantage point that allows *you* to relativise all the absolute claims that different scriptures make?" Whence the arrogant certainty that you, of all people in all times, have figured out what none of the practitioners of specific religions have figured out: that they are really all talking about something else, something beyond their grasp, but which unites them under the surface ?

If you say that all paths lead to God, how do you know that? They certainly don't appear to, don't all want to, all make very different claims about what that might mean and how you get there. *How did you get to the top of the mountain* where you could look down and see that all paths eventually lead to the same summit? And don't you post-modern theorists insist that *nobody* has a meta-narrative, that there is no overarching "story"? Where did you get yours; the one that allows you to say "all religions are really the same"?

So perhaps we should pay more respect and listen more carefully to what specifically each religion claims to deliver. We will discover that "how will people who have not heard of Christ be saved?" is a question that doesn't even make sense to most people! *What is "salvation" anyway?* In truth, Buddhists want to follow the Excellent Eight-Fold Path to enlightenment and Nirvana and the extinction of "self." Hindus want to live well enough to be reincarnated as someone or something better, until finally they realize - in some life - that their "true self" is their immortal soul and not any of the bodies they have inhabited, and so they can pass out of the cycle of reincarnation. Muslims struggle for an earthly rule and then paradise that is

like a garden with fine food and clothes and good company and all the sensual pleasures you can imagine. Jews, today, for the most part, want their names to pass down to posterity.

Only Christians are invited to live in communion with the Creator who is Father, Son and Spirit, who is renewing all things, who is joy and love and life, but into whose presence no one can come unless they are reconciled and sanctified by Jesus their mediator. These are all very difficult goals! A noted Catholic theologian was on a panel dealing with relations between "world religions," and tells how he was stunned by the rabbi on the panel, who said "Jesus is the answer to a question I have never asked." Is Jesus the only way? It depends where you are going. He is the only one we know who leads to his Father and ours. Other paths may lead elsewhere.

Finally, we can believe that God's *general revelation*, or his *common grace*, means there is *some truth* in other religions, just as there is in many other "non-Christian" aspects of God's world - but I wouldn't rely on them to bring me into the fullness of God's presence! What God plans to do with those "outside Christ," I think we can safely leave to him. *Our call* is to love, serve, teach, evangelize, pray for, respect, value, every human we meet - because they are all made in God's image - doing all this in the name and for the sake of Jesus our Lord.

Let us pray...