

I've Got Issues: "What About Other Religions?"

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John 14:6, Acts 4:12, 17:16-33

Oprah Winfrey, who is, of course, one of the most influential persons in our society today, once remarked: *"One of the biggest mistakes we make is to believe there is only one way. There are many diverse paths leading to God."*¹ That's a very common view nowadays.

At last count there were at least 19 major world religions. While Christianity is still the largest at 33% of the world's population, Islam is now nearly 20%, Hinduism 13%, Buddhism 6%. We are talking here about a whole lot of people sincerely committed to encountering the divine through their particular tradition. So, the thinking goes, how can one possibly say there is only one way to God?

Oprah's view is attractive in that it understandably wants to play down religious differences, since it seems those differences have caused so much havoc and mayhem in the world. And it is in tune with the intellectual relativism of the day – where beliefs about morality and religion are generally considered matters of personal opinion and taste rather than objective realities. And this view seems open and tolerant.

But as I was saying in my last message, this "many ways to God" philosophy directly contradicts the clear teaching of scripture and of Jesus who said, *"I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father by me."* And it contradicts the earliest apostles, who proclaimed, *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humanity by which we may be saved."* Indeed, Christians have always believed and proclaimed that Jesus Christ is *the* way, not one way among many possible ways. He is the truth, not just a truth placed among other equally valid truths. He is *the* Lord, not one lord among many. Jesus is the Savior *of all*, not just those who are disposed to believe in him.

In other words, either Oprah is right, or the apostles are right. Either there are many ways or one way. Of course, Oprah's view that there are many ways to God is a *faith* assumption – just as much as the assumption that there is only one way to God. She and those who share her view do not have a special platform of objectivity from which to judge. It is their belief and nothing more. And it is a belief that is generally grounded in the notion that all religions are essentially the same. Different roads, but hey - they all basically teach the same thing and lead to the same end and to the same God.

Are all religions essentially the same? Are they all equal paths? To be sure, there are some common denominators among the major religions, especially in areas of ethics and morality. The major religions share broad agreement on ethical principles that approximate what we would call the golden rule. Most religions teach a standard of morality that includes truthfulness, honesty, and justice. Most religions teach that compassion and mercy are essential, especially to the defenseless, the weak, the needy and the poor. They teach respect for parents and one's elders. The obligation to give to the poor is pretty universal among the religions. But to infer that because of these ethical commonalities that all religions are basically the same is just wrong, for they each have a very different character and a very different

belief structure. They have very different understandings of the nature of deity, and of the meaning and goal of our existence.

A study of comparative religion will immediately reveal huge differences between the religions. Take for instance a comparison between Christianity and Hinduism, where the differences are perhaps most stark. As James Edwards, chair of the theology department at Whitworth University, puts it:

God is not the goal of Hinduism at all: Nirvana is. Where Christians envision a personal relationship with a divine being, Hindus seek a state of the soul in which there is no knowing, desire, suffering or individual consciousness. And so where Christians see the chief flaw of humanity as sin – that is, infraction of God’s will – Hindus see it as ignorance. Thus, the essential goals are different: Christians think of salvation as reconciliation with God; Hindus understand enlightenment as the product of a journey inward, of self-understanding. The differences go on, and it respects neither Christianity nor Hinduism to suggest that the two are basically the same.ⁱⁱ

I agree with Professor Edwards. It is disrespectful to the adherents of various religions to lump them altogether and say that they are all the same, when clearly they are not. Virtually every religion essentially makes a claim to have truth in a way the others don’t, or at least to the same degree. Religious people are comfortable with the differences and continue to advocate for their truth. The statement that all religions are the same comes most frequently from people who are not adherents of any religion, and who, with all due respect, speak from ignorance as outsiders. As Edwards puts it, “To assert that all religions are basically the same, or that one route to the summit is as good as another, is like saying that all sports are basically the same. Bullfighters and bowlers are unlikely to agree. Only a non-athlete can assert such a thing.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I make no bones of the fact that I stand with the apostles and with the Christian church and with the Presbyterian Church, believing that Jesus is the only savior of the world and that ultimate truth is to be found in Him. That truth I take to be absolute and universal – it is for everyone. And therefore we commend Christ to everyone. It is the very heart of Christian mission.

Does this mean we should condemn other faiths? Does this mean there is absolutely no truth or goodness in other religions? No. I dare say the fingerprints and light of God are not confined to our own faith tradition. God is at work in all places and cultures. Truth is truth wherever it is found – as far as it goes. Scripture tells us that humanity was made in the “image and likeness” of God. Stained by sin as our perceptions are, all human beings retain the capacity to recognize God and to know something of what it is like to walk in the light. So we shouldn’t be surprised to see some of God’s goodness and truth in other religions. Indeed, adherents of other faiths – even some atheists – lead far more exemplary lives than many Christians.

Professor Edwards offers the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle in thinking about the relationship between Christianity and other religions. I found it helpful. He says:

Imagine the religions of the world as a group of people trying to assemble a puzzle. Each religion has puzzle pieces before it, and each is trying to fit the pieces into a meaningful pattern. There are two problems, however. The first is that the box top with the picture of the puzzle on it is missing. All religions, in other words, are trying to assemble a pattern about which they are ultimately ignorant. The second problem is that not all the puzzle pieces fit the puzzle. Many pieces, indeed most of them, do not fit the puzzle at all. They are pieces belong to other puzzles

that have no relation to the puzzle needing to be assembled. The alien pieces must be discarded, of course, but without the box top it is difficult to know the right pieces of the puzzle from the wrong ones. *[These are beliefs and customs and traditions that just don't belong to the whole picture.]*

What are the various puzzle pieces that other religions possess? Hindus have a sense of the descent of various deities to earth to minister to specific needs. Buddhists stress the centrality of love, or better perhaps, benevolence, in their tradition. And both Hindus and Buddhists stress knowing of self, human consciousness, and the powers inherent in the mind. These are true pieces of the puzzle. Jews and Muslims have other pieces. Both traditions lay great emphasis on social morality, such as almsgiving to the poor, the transformation of society according to the will of God, and the requirements of justice. In addition, Judaism has an expectation of the advent of the Messiah. These are true pieces as well... Confucians possess pieces related to honor and respect for elders and those in authority... What Jesus said to the woman at the well and what Paul said to the Athenians – that they worship that which they do not know – could be said of the various religions. Each possess pieces of the puzzle, but none knows the pattern. The pattern of the puzzle is not contained in any piece, or in many pieces.^{iv}

Christians believe that the pattern of the puzzle – the final mystery of the ages – has been revealed in Jesus. Jesus is the box top. He gives us the whole picture. That's what the Apostle Paul was saying to those who held a piece of the puzzle on Mars Hill that day. *"You are very spiritual – that's an important piece of the puzzle, but let me point you to the pattern that makes sense of all your deepest longings. Let me tell you about Jesus."*

Now some folks say this is precisely the problem – you Christians claim you alone have the box top. And that is arrogant and offensive. Without a doubt some Christians have shared Jesus with great arrogance and with a desire to dominate and control, leading to truly tragic results. That should make us all weep. Of this, I will have more to say in a future sermon.

But let me reiterate what I said a couple of weeks ago. If we are truly in Christ - if we are infused with his gracious spirit - if we are at all living out the gospel message - than the our sharing of Jesus as the "box top" will lead not to arrogance but to humility, not to dominance and control - but to the desire to serve and to even to suffer. It is not arrogant to advocate for truth. Was the Apostle Paul "arrogant" when he shared Jesus with the teachers on Mars Hill? Did he condemn those he was speaking to? On the contrary, he treated them with great respect and love. And that is how we should approach every person and every religion – with profound respect - realizing that when we are dealing with the faith of others - with what is of supreme value to them - we are walking on holy ground.

We ought to enter into dialogue with people of other faiths, courteously discussing points of agreement and disagreement. We can graciously listen to and learn from the other, all the while maintaining our own ultimate allegiance to Christ as Lord. We are free to persuade others in the marketplace of ideas, just as Paul tried to do with the philosophers of his day. And surely we can persuade without being arrogant. There is nothing for us to be prideful about. Christians know that it isn't to their credit that they have the box top. They know it isn't because they are smarter or are somehow more worthy than others. They haven't created the box top or discovered it on their own. They have been given the box top solely as stewards and therefore have a responsibility to share what they know with others who are working on the puzzle.

To use a different analogy, sharing Jesus is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. There is nothing special about us. We simply share with others what has been of great help to us ... because we care.

One more thing, if we believe Jesus is the Lord and Savior of all, and that he is the way to God, what are we to say about the ultimate destiny of those who have never really heard the gospel or who have never heard it in a way that would lead them to faith? Will they be excluded from heaven? To that I say: I am in no position to judge. No human being is. Only God can judge the souls of humanity. All I can do is point others to Jesus, who says that he is the way and the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him. I leave the destiny of others to God. And God is perfectly fair and just.

Let me close by saying this: It is not Christianity that saves us – it is *Jesus*. It is not a body of teaching, it is not a particular worldview, it is not a philosophy - it is not following the principles of the Christian religion and going to church that makes us right with God. It is not religion at all, but a relationship with a Person. And he longs to have fellowship with every human being. His love is wildly inclusive. He wants everyone to be saved.

The religions of the world are humanity's attempt to ascend to heaven, reaching up to the divine. But what's difference about the gospel is that in Jesus, God in heaven has reached down to us, coming to us in such a way that we could experience and grasp his love. Like the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to go looking for the one who has strayed, so Jesus seeks after every human being, looking to bring them home. If you have been wandering around in the spiritual wilderness, lost and confused by a thousand one different spiritual paths each making their own claims and promises, wondering how you can meet God and find meaning and purpose for your life, you can do no better than to allow yourself to be found by Jesus, who has been after you for a long time. Turn to Jesus, *he* is the way, the truth and the life; *he* is the way home to the Father.

ⁱ Quotes in *Christianity Today*, (April 1, 2002): 45

ⁱⁱ James R. Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* p.208

ⁱⁱⁱ Edwards, p.209

^{iv} Edwards, p.234