



## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM & THE EXCLUSIVITY OF CHRIST: JOHN 14:1-6

1 "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way to where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

If you ask a non-Christian what is the most troubling claim that a Christian makes, in most cases it will revolve around the exclusivity of Jesus. That is, the idea that Jesus is the only way to God—and without him—there is no eternal salvation. In fact, yesterday, I was reading that two major surveys, one by the *USA Today*, the other by *The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life*, stated that 52 to 57 percent of evangelical Christians now believe that eternal life is not exclusively reserved for those that accept Jesus Christ as their Savior.

All this serves to illustrate that people struggle with the idea that belief in Jesus is the only way to heaven. Ex-evangelists, Christians, agnostics, people from other faiths, you name it; they wrestle with the implications of this fundamental doctrine. However, the passage we just read leaves no room for gray areas according to Jesus when it comes to the path to eternal life. No one, he says, no one, can come to the Father except through him. Ultimately, the only defense here is to suggest the text has been altered or that the biblical writer did his best to express his limited understanding of Jesus and eternal life. In another passage, Peter, one of Jesus' original disciples, reiterates this claim to his prevailing culture, when he says, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:11-12)." Consequently, though such a statement may be challenged in a public forum, biblically the claim is evident, only Christ has the authority to grant eternal life.

I have many non-Christian friends who believe such a statement is arrogant, uninformed, unenlightened, ignorant, and promotes intolerance and division among people, especially those from different religious expressions. Many people like a famous pastor in Grand Rapid Michigan, see this as a toxic doctrine that presents God as wrathful instead of being all-loving. I have actually had people tell me that if the exclusive claims of Jesus are true, they do not want to have anything to do with God.

### **The Shift: Religious Pluralism**

Today, the popular approach taken by our secular culture is to suggest that Christianity is just one path, among many, that leads to God and eternal life. Theologians, who like to use big words, refer to this as *religious pluralism*. The idea behind the term is that God is too big for the finite mind to know Him, and each religious expression, is an attempt from a cultural perspective to know God or the Ultimate Reality as best they can. In the end, our culture believes, that what God cares most about is that we obey his or her commandments and make a difference in our respective communities and in the lives of others.

Part of this prevailing mindset is the reality that we live in a changing culture. No longer is America restricted to Christian expression, it has also become a melting pot for other faiths like Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Paganism, Mysticism, etc., etc. Many argue that religious expressions are geographic in nature and we must be open to other faiths outside our prevailing culture. No one can claim to have the corner on truth because this would reveal the ultimate evidence of ignorance and narrow-mindedness.

One prominent religious pluralist is a British theologian named John Hick. Hick identifies himself as a Quaker, and claims that salvation is not founded on a set of beliefs about the atonement of Christ, but rather on the impact one has on the lives of others. In his travels, Hick has spent extensive time with other religious communities like Muslims, Jews, Hindi's, Buddhists, etc., and has experienced firsthand how a particular religious expression can and has transformed many lives for the better. Consequently, Hicks would concur that to suggest that Christianity has the corner on God is to deny how God or the Ultimate Reality has transformed the lives of other people from varying faiths. Consequently, Christianity, like Islam, Judaism, and the other expressions are humankind's best attempt to grasp the Divine in their respective culture.

### **The Ultimate Parable**

Perhaps the best visual when it comes to comprehending religious pluralism is to reflect on the parable the three blind men and the elephant. In this parable, one blind man feels the trunk of the elephant and concludes that the creature is long and flexible like a snake. The second blind man disagrees, and says it is thick and round like a tree trunk, as he wraps his arms around the elephant's leg. Finally, the third blind man disagrees with both and says, the creature is large and flat, as he presses against its side. The moral of the story, of course, is that each blind man could feel only a part of the elephant; no one could envision the entire animal. In a similar way, the Ultimate reality is beyond our comprehension, religion, like the blind men, only have a piece of the truth.

So how should we respond to this increasingly prevailing argument in our culture? An argument, I might suggest, most of us would embrace, had it not been for our faith in Jesus. Four things come to mind as we look to engage this issue of religious pluralism. 1. Respect 2. Belief 3. Transformation 4. Humility

### **1. Respect**

There is nothing more important than for a dialogue like this to be done with humility and respect. It is important to realize that when you claim Christ holds the truth to eternal life; you will come across as someone who is narrow-minded and thinks they are more enlightened. People will perceive you as arrogant to some degree and not very tolerant of the religious expressions of others. Some might even consider you dangerous and an obstacle to promoting world peace. Consequently, the worst thing you can do is to make this discussion personal and make someone feel marginalized for not holding to your position.

I know a young woman who has failed in this area several times and has lost the respect of her family members. Inevitably, her tone rises and she usually concludes by telling them they are wrong and will eventually end up one day in a place that is exceptionally hot. This kind of approach is the complete opposite of the posture that we are supposed to take as Christians.

### **2 Peter 3:15-18**

15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, 16 having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

Three key words here are holy, gentleness, and respect. In your heart, honor Christ as holy. Remember, this is his message, not yours. Make sure that others see that your awe for Christ is more important than defending your argument. Secondly, make sure your disposition is one of gentleness and respect. We must respect others and recognize that every person, despite philosophical and religious differences, is made in the image of God. Each person, the agnostic, the atheist, the moral, the religious, is valuable to God and they always feel that way.

Peter goes on to say, even if you persecuted for your beliefs, make sure you continue to respect them so that your behavior will not be something that will add fuel to the fire. As Christians, we must make it our aim to communicate the message without becoming defensive. We are not here to win an argument, we are here to share the hope that we have in Christ in a respectful way to God's image bearers.

## **2. Belief**

Secondly, others must realize the very thing they accuse you of, making an exclusive truth claim, is exactly what they are doing if they are honest. Here is what I mean. Let us use the example of the elephant and the three blind men. The main flaw in the parable is that it is shared in a way where the storyteller has privy to the truth. In other words, while the blind men do not see the whole picture, the narrator does. The story comes from someone who is not blind to the truth. How can you know that each blind man only sees part of the elephant unless you claim to be able to see the whole animal? How can you possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless you yourself have the superior, comprehensive knowledge that you just claimed that none of the religions have?

The other argument you will hear is that what Christians believe is inherently cultural. In other words, the reason we believe Christianity is based on the fact we were born in a region where the predominant religious expression is Christianity. Had we been born in Morocco, we would be Muslims, had we been born in India, we would be Hindi, had we been born in Thailand we would be Buddhists.

Suppose we concede that point for arguments sake. In retrospect, the same can be said for the religious pluralist. Had he or she been born in Cambodia, they would most likely be of a religion that represents their country, in this case, Buddhism. The point is simple; one cannot say all religious truth claims are historically conditioned, except the pluralistic one I am making now. The reality is that we all make truth claims and we have to be able to step back and recognize what we deem as enlightened or true, is in essence someone else's personal belief.

By now, the flaw is obvious. Skeptics believe that any exclusive truth claim in spiritual matters cannot be true, but again, this rejection itself is simply a religious belief. It assumes God is unknowable, or that God is loving and would never condemn any sincere person for their religious convictions. If we are honest, such truth claims are un-provable and faith assumptions. Other faith assumptions include, the world would be a better place without religion, there is no such thing as absolute truth, and that people would get along better if they just adopted their particular view, like religious pluralism. In the end, this does not prove that Christianity is right, but what it does is even out the playing field because it reveals the very thing Christians are accused of, namely having a claim to religious truth, is the same thing that is true for our prevailing culture.

## **3. Transformation**

Thirdly, we must not be ignorant into thinking that one's religious belief, or commitment to do good to others cannot transform lives. We cannot assume that only people who adhere to Christianity are transformed and can make a difference in our culture. As mentioned earlier, John Hick uses this argument to validate his belief of religious pluralism. Other religious expressions have played a key role in transforming the lives of others so that they are influential in their community.

I know Muslims that have been transformed and do wonderful works by giving alms to others. I have met Buddhists who are serious about denying pleasure and have become better people. I have met atheists who make generous contributions to financial institutions so people can receive scholarships.

There are people in other religious affiliations who give more of their resources than we do. There are people of religious faiths who are more devoted to their devotions than us. There are people of other religious orientations who are not Christians but are kinder than us. Many do a better job at loving people more.

What we cannot do is assume that they are not genuine, or that they are trying to trick us into believing their religion, or that it is up to us to prove we are better as people than they are in this life. The reality is that people

have benefited in their spiritual endeavors. Does this prove religious pluralism is true, of course not. What it does reveal is that life is better when we seek to live more selflessly.

In the end, where we get in trouble is when we try to compare ourselves to others and try to show them by our lives we have been more transformed than they have. In reality, we must understand we will never convince someone that Christianity is true based on the good works others see in our lives. Instead, people must understand it is not based on what we have or will accomplish, but rather on what Christ has accomplished on the cross. This brings us to our last point.

#### **4. Humility**

I was recently engaged in a Bible study in a coffee shop with a man named Travis, who accused our group of being ignorant and self-righteous because we read in John 1:1 that stated Jesus was God. Later, we looked at John 14:6 where Jesus stated that no comes to God except through him. He responded by saying, that Christians like us, are frustrating to talk with because we are so arrogant and close-minded. He ultimately concluded that he was a better person than many Christians were, and that he believes God would accept him in heaven on his own merits.

As I listened, it dawned on me that Christians should never convey such a self-righteous demeanor. In reality, there is nothing in our accomplishments, or in our intelligence, or in our devotions, or whatever else, which would warrant God finding favor with us so we can have eternal life. The fact of the matter is that we are completely dependent on the accomplishments of Christ, like his sinless life, his death on the cross as our substitute, and that after three days God raised him from the dead. My Christian faith is completely dependent on believing in the accomplishments of Jesus, not my own. In reality, a person like Travis should become aware that he is more self-righteous than we are because he believes he can earn heaven, apart from Christ. We must share our faith with that kind of dependent humility.

In the end, we have to avoid going around in circles when it comes to debating the exclusivity of Christ. We are never going to convince someone by trying to win an argument. However, as mentioned, we could actually alienate ourselves from being an effective witness for others if we become defensive or belligerent. You probably never convince the other person that the exclusivity of Christ is true. Likewise, they probably will never will convince you that religious pluralism is true. In the end, one conversation is just a step in the process to get each other thinking outside their respective paradigms. The goal really is to point out that if they are honest with themselves, and we are honest, we both hold to beliefs that cannot be proved.

In the end, the only way a person will believe the claims of Christ is if God shows them to be true. Nevertheless, in order to do this, it is wise to lay a good foundation. Do not become defensive, do not come across as arrogant, share about Jesus, and make sure they understand that you are completely dependent on Christ when it comes to eternal life. Let us give others a reason to consider the message of Christ and trust the Holy Spirit to do the rest. With Travis, the great thing was that despite his ridicule, despite his discrediting us, he came back to join us for another study. He mentioned he was down on his luck and that he had been thinking about us throughout the week. He did not change his views, but he felt comfortable enough to seek us out for fellowship. Had we acted differently the first time, had we become defensive, had we marginalized him, he would have never come back to join us. We are grateful we treated him with gentleness and respect.