

## ***Question 6 – Don't All Religions Lead to God?***

Many people are spiritual today but they see it arrogant to say that there is one way to God and any other way is false. Yet this is what Christians say; Jesus himself said it in declaring that no one comes to the Father except through him.

The relation of Jesus to other religions is one we all must deal with. If there is one God why are there so many religions?

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## I. Definitions and Declarations

### A. “Religion”, “Denomination”, “Cult”

1. Religions are broader– Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.
2. Denominations are divisions within a religion – Christianity is divided into Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and numerous Protestant denominations (Methodist, Baptist, etc.)
3. \*Cults are divisions within a religion, but divisions such that most within the religion see the group as outside: Methodists and Presbyterians accept each other as Christians but question whether Mormons are part of the Christian faith
4. This study is about different religions, not denominations or cults

### B. Exclusivity of Jesus

1. Christians assert that Jesus is the only way to God. At the same time, we admit that Christians have taken that point and used it as a weapon, so we begin with the following:
  - a. To say Jesus is the only way to God is not to say Christianity as an institutionalized religion is perfect, or even the “best” religion – it is to say that the person Jesus opened the way to God for all people
    - i. It does not mean that a specific “Christian” person is a better human than a specific “Muslim” or “Buddhist” person
    - ii. Christianity, as being the religion dedicated to following Jesus, is closest to truth (for Jesus is truth) but that does not mean it is perfect in all knowledge and teachings
      1. Illustration: God has created the “territory” and every religion is trying to make a map of the “territory” – the map Christianity provides is closest to the real territory, but it is not exact (when Christians have thought it was, they usually get arrogant). Other religions have maps with some good and bad in them (see below on “Good of Other Religions).
  - b. To say Jesus is the only way to God does not mean Jesus is blocking the path for people who want to get to God, as if he is trying to hold them back – it is to say that Jesus is welcoming all who seek God to find God through him.
    - i. Jesus is cheering people on, not holding them back (it is GOOD news!)
  - c. To say Jesus is the only way to God does not mean that those who claim to follow Jesus get to say who has access to God – Jesus is the way, his followers are not, and we must be careful who we declare “in” or “out”
    - i. Let’s just say it is not our place to decide who is “in” and who is “out”
  - d. Our point is to show the uniqueness of Jesus, not to argue, point-by-point, the merits of Christianity vs. some other religion

## II. Isn't It Intolerant to say there is only one way?

A. Those who say it is intolerant to say there is one way usually say all paths lead to God

B. *Option One: All Paths lead to the Same Destination*

1. It is intolerant to assert one religion is the true religion; and this claim has led to much bloodshed, war, violence, etc.
  - a. We *should* be tolerant of those of other religions, and should never force religion on them...but religions are a matter of truth so it is not intolerant to speak of right and wrong
2. Problems with Option One:
  - a. Religions make truth claims that contradict – both cannot be right
    - i. One God (Islam, Christianity, Judaism) vs. many gods (Buddhism, Hinduism)
    - ii. Islam believes one God, Allah, created the whole universe from nothing while some Hindus believe Brahma is an impersonal God who permeates all things while other Hindus believe in millions of deities (Krishna, Vishnu) who are manifestations of Brahma.
  - b. Religions disagree on what happens at death – both cannot be right
    - i. Islam says you die and are judged by Allah and then face either heaven or hell; many Hindus claim we live (and have lived) over and over again (reincarnation) – following death we are reincarnated into a new life based on our karma (how we lived our previous life)
  - c. Religions may be similar in some ethical teachings (variations of the Golden Rule are found in numerous religions) but differ in many others – to understand a religion on its own terms is to look at the things that agree and disagree with other religions
3. All religions claim to be about truth – not just about preference
  - a. Two statements: “Penn state beat Iowa 27-7 on Saturday Oct. 6” and “Penn State lost to Iowa 27-7 on Saturday Oct. 6” – one is true and one is false
  - b. Religious claims are not preference (like your favorite ice cream) they are claiming to be really true (like who won the game)
  - c. There are “matters of truth” (like who won the game) and “matters of taste” (like your favorite ice cream...this leads to...

B. *Option Two: All Paths do not Lead to the Same Destination*

1. This option takes the claims of each religion (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism) seriously; the only way to say all are the same is to radically reinterpret them
2. The following claims are clearly matters of truth (either true or false) not taste
  - a. Jesus Christ was a Jew who lived in Palestine during the early part of the first century.
  - b. Jesus was executed by Roman soldiers on a cross about 30 A.D.
  - c. Jesus rose to life three days after his death, and appeared to over five-hundred witnesses.
  - d. If true, Jesus is unique. If not, Christianity is a waste of time.
3. Problem – “But people of other religions are so sincere!”
  - a. Answer: I may sincerely think the sulfuric acid is water, it will still kill me when I drink
4. Problem – “Even if one religion is true it is impossible to know which one.”
  - a. We have reason and criteria to judge religions: (1) logical consistency, (2) adequate factual support, (3) experiential relevance, (4) consistency with other fields of knowledge, and (5) moral factors – informed decisions are possible
5. It is our duties to study, pray, think, and listen and in all this to be humble as we seek an answer to the question. The question is not “which religion is correct?” It is simply, is Jesus really the Lord and Savior of the whole world?

C. \*Adapted from “Do All Paths Lead to the Same Destination” by Keith Johnson

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### III. The Good of Other Religions

#### A. Summary of Other Religions

1. There is neither time nor space to summarize the various religions in the world (take Religious Studies 001). All we can say here is that the study of religion is rewarding and you will be impressed with much of the depth in the religions. (See Bibliography for sources)
2. List of Religions – many ways to group the world religions
  - a. Indian religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism
  - b. Chinese and Japanese religions – Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism
  - c. “Western” religions (though founded in middle east) – Judaism, Christianity, Islam
  - d. Tribal religions – found among primitive people in Arctic, Australia, Africa, etc.

#### B. CS Lewis’ quote on the good of other religions (*Mere Christianity*, 35)

*“I have been asked to tell you what Christians believe, and I am going to begin by telling you one thing that Christians do not need to believe. If you are a Christian you do not have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all those religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view. But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong. 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”*

1. A Christian admits the truth when found in other religions
  - a. Many religions speak of loving and caring for others – similarities in ethics
  - b. One God – found in Islam, Christianity and Judaism
  - c. All religions speak of something greater than us
  - d. Some form of Incarnation – Hinduism and Christianity
2. When religions disagree we admit the disagreement, hold to Biblical truth (with humility), and stay open to vigorous dialogue and debate (which includes listening and talking)
  - a. Islam says God cannot have a Son; Christian’s foundation is on Jesus as Son
  - b. Hinduism and Buddhism believe in some form of reincarnation; Christian’s believe you live once and then face judgment

#### C. Other Religions as Preparation for Jesus?

1. The first Christians were Jews and in them we see the idea that the Old Testament Jewish religion was a preparation for Christ – Jesus was the awaited Messiah
  - a. Peter’s sermon – Acts 2:14-41
  - b. Stephen’s sermon – Acts 7:7-53
  - c. Philip and the Ethiopian – Acts 8:26-40
  - d. Paul’s sermon – Acts 13:13-43
2. Something new had happened in Jesus – the Jewish-Christians retained some of their old beliefs and practices but the arrival of Jesus the Messiah caused them to modify others. There is change and continuity.
3. Early Church Fathers saw Greek philosophy as a preparation for Jesus
  - a. Just as Jewish scriptures prepared them, so Greek ideas (Socrates, etc.) prepared them.
  - b. Justin Martyr’s *Second Apology* X: *“Socrates...cast out from the state both Homer and the rest of the poets, and taught men to reject the wicked demons and those who did the things which the poets related; and he exhorted them to become acquainted with the God who was to them unknown, by means of the investigation of reason...no one trusted Socrates so as to die for this doctrine, but in Christ, who was partially known even by Socrates (for He was and is the Word who is in every man...”*
    - i. Socrates was good and taught the truth of God; the Word was in Him
    - ii. Yet he did not die for anyone as Christ did

- c. Clement of Alexandria's *Exhortation to the Heathen VI*: "For into all men, whatever, especially those who are occupied with intellectual pursuits, a certain divine effluence has been instilled; wherefore, though reluctantly, they confess that God is one, indestructible, unbegotten, and that somewhere above in the tracts of heaven, in His own peculiar appropriate eminence, whence he surveys all things, He has an existence true and eternal"
    - i. All are in God's image and all who seek get some knowledge of God
    - ii. *Exhortation to the Heathen VII*: "For if, at the most, the Greeks, having received certain scintillations of the divine word, have given forth some utterances of truth, they bear indeed witness that the force of truth is not hidden, and at the same time expose their own weakness in not having arrived at the end"
  - d. Clement's *Stromata I.I*: "For, like farmers who irrigate the land before hand, so we also water with liquid the stream of Greek learning what in it is earthly; so that it may receive the spiritual seed cast into it, and may be capable of easily nourishing it up"
    - i. *Stromata I.V*: "Accordingly, before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training to those who attain to faith through demonstration...For this was a schoolmaster to bring 'the Hellenic mind,' as the law, the Hebrews 'to Christ.' Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ"
    - ii. Just as the law prepared the Jews for Christ, philosophy prepared the Greeks
4. This is an attitude we should have towards other religions
- a. In what ways have other religions prepared the people for Jesus?
  - b. What good is in the other religions that can be kept and built upon?
  - c. What must be jettisoned to make way for Jesus?

## **IV. The Uniqueness of Jesus**

### **A. Jesus is completely unique among all people**

1. *Jesus pursues a relationship with us*
  - a. Other religions focus on what you must do (good works, meditation, etc.) to get to God/supernatural. Unlike other religious leaders who say do this to earn love, Jesus says he already loves you the way you are – God comes to you
2. *Jesus claimed to be God*
  - a. This has similarities in some ancient religions of gods taking human bodies or in Hinduism where there have been many appearances of Krishna – the difference is that only Jesus is the incarnation of the one true God (not one of many gods); only in Jesus do we see the best representation of our one God
3. *Jesus rose from the dead and remains alive today*
  - a. Other religious leaders are still dead (Muhammad, Buddha, etc.). Some ancient religions believed in yearly resurrection; every spring when winter ended that signified the god came up from the underworld. The difference is that Jesus was a human, died, and rose once in the body.

### **B. Interesting facts about uniqueness of Christianity**

1. *Translation of scripture*
  - a. Jesus' words were immediately translated from what he said (in Aramaic) into Greek (what everyone spoke). Later it was translated into Latin and though the Catholic church held Latin as a special language, eventually it was translated into German, English and other languages people spoke. Today it is still continually translated.
  - b. The symbolism is that Jesus comes to you in your language – you do not need to learn some God-language to be a Christian
2. *Christianity moves as it weakens and strengthens in different places*
  - a. Christianity has shifted from culture to culture: Christianity's center of strength has shifted from Middle East (Jerusalem) to Rome (Greeks and Romans) to northern Europe to western Europe to America and today to the global south
    - i. It weakens in one place and strengthens in another
    - ii. Only major religion not practiced much in place of its founding (Jerusalem)
    - iii. (See Andrew Walls "Culture and Coherence in Christian History" in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 16-23.
3. *Christianity is always in dialogue with culture*
  - a. Christianity does not carry one specific culture with it – it works with each culture to form a unique expression of faith
  - b. Compare a Jewish Christian in first century with a philosophical Greek century in the 4<sup>th</sup> to an American Christian today and a charismatic Christian in Africa - diversity
  - c. What holds it all together?
    - i. The worship of the one God of Israel
    - ii. The ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth – life, death, resurrection
    - iii. That God is active where believers are
    - iv. That believers constitute a people of God transcending time and place
    - v. Importance of the Bible
4. *Christianity is open to indigenous names for God*
  - a. "God" is not the name of God; Christians do not make people accept a foreign God – instead Christians find the most powerful God and say that is who Jesus' father is.
  - b. As opposed to Islam who says God is "Allah" and accept no other language

*“It is repeated as people separated by language, history and culture recognize each other in Christ. And the recognition is not based on one adopting the ways of thought and behaviour and expression, however sanctified, of the other; that is Judaizing, and another Gospel. Christ must rule in the minds of his people; which means extending his dominion over those corporate structures of thought that constitute culture. The very act of doing so must sharpen the identity of those who share a culture. The faith of Christ is infinitely translatable, it creates ‘a place to feel at home.’ But it must not make a place where we are so much at home that no one else can live there. Here we have no abiding city. In Christ all poor sinners meet, and in finding themselves reconciled with him, are reconciled to each other” (Walls, 25).*

**\*John 14:6** – Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

- Jesus is the Way because he is the Truth and the Life
  - “Truth” and “life” remind us of John 1:1-18 – Jesus is the “word” of truth, grace, life and light – Jesus is the embodiment of God
- Thomas asks how to get to where the Father is where Jesus is going – Jesus answers to follow him (his way) – Jesus is how you get there
  - What is the “way” of Jesus? – suffering and triumph through humiliation
  - The way is to cling to Jesus, to live like Jesus lived – to be people of self-sacrifice
- Jesus is the only Way to the Father (see also Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5)
- Matthew 7:13-14 – Two ways a person may walk – one leads to destruction
- Christians called following Jesus “the Way” – Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22

### **Conclusion**

\*All religions have good in them, but since they contradict on truth we can say not all are equal paths to God. Christians can lift up this good and see religions as a preparation for Jesus. When Jesus is brought in the good will stay, the bad will leave and the religion (and people) are transformed. Jesus is unique: only Jesus died for humanity, no other religions figure did; only in Christianity does God come to you and love you as you are, other religions command you to do the work. As followers of Jesus we strive to demonstrate the uniqueness of Jesus everyday. But we do it humbly; in our discipleship as Jesus enters our lives the good will stay and the bad will leave.

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