

# WHY IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY?

## Questions We'd Like to Ask God | Why Series (Part 5)

Text: Matthew 18:12-14; John 14:1-7

### What Is the Truth?

There are at least 19 major religions in this world.<sup>1</sup> While Christianity is still the largest at 31% of the world's population, Islam is now about 24%, Hinduism 15%, and Buddhism at 7%.<sup>2</sup> These four religions alone comprise 5.7 billion people sincerely committed to encountering the divine through their particular tradition. So, WHY is it not pure arrogance for Christians to say that Jesus is the one true or only way?

Centuries ago, Jesus of Nazareth appeared before Pilate, the Roman governor of Palestine, and made this statement: **"I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listen to me."** And Pilate famously replied, **"What is truth?"** (Jhn 18:37-38). Pilate's question was both rhetorical and cynical. It revealed the attitude of an age that had seen so many religions and so many conflicts over religion that the idea that anyone knew THE truth seemed laughably ignorant or dangerously fanatic, but in either case totally unenlightened.

If we are fully honest, even some of us sitting here today have doubts about the exclusivity of any one religion's claims. Our opinion on these things tends to break down into three major viewpoints. Some of us believe that all religions are essentially true. The major faiths may vary here and there a bit, but since they all appear to be heading toward the same mountaintop -- union with God -- why get all bent out of shape trying to establish the superiority of any one path? Let's just be thankful that there so many people on such paths.

Another set of people hold that each religion is at least partly true. Each has a piece, but none sees all. Surely, we think, multiple religious angles are needed if we are ever to see the whole of a mountain as large as God? And then there is a third viewpoint which contends no one ought to make exclusive claims to the truth of their religion because all religions are fundamentally false. Every religion is an ethnocentric or tribal production. It is too conditioned by the particular culture and power structure it came out of, to be "true" in any general or global way.

What do you make of all this? How do you reconcile statements like you've just heard (and perhaps thought yourself) with the Jesus who plainly says: **"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except by me"** (Jhn 14:6). Or with the words of the Apostle Peter: **"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven... by which we must be saved"** (Acts 4:12). How are claims like this not simply arrogance or stupidity?

Well, I think we have to begin by confessing that people of Christian faith *have been* enormously arrogant and stupid at times. We have condemned the moral failures of other people, when there were huge logs in our own eyes. We have been brash about the rectitude of our own faith and the wrongness of other people's beliefs, when the truth is we have often been ignorant of the full content of our own tradition and operating almost entirely on hearsay about theirs.

It ought to humble Jews and Christians everywhere that when Jesus spoke of people who exemplified **"great faith"** (his words), it was a Roman soldier (Matt 8:10) and a Canaanite woman (Matt 15:28) – people utterly outside his band of current disciples or his own Jewish tradition – that Jesus lifted up. It convicts me to remember the words of the Apostle Paul, that in the eyes of God **"the most excellent way..."** (1 Cor 12:31; 13) is demonstrated by those who show a love that is patient, kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not insisting upon its own way. And, if you've traveled much through this world, then you know that it is not only Christians who exhibit this kind of humble, persevering love that our own Scriptures teach is God's way.

### **Do All Religions End Up in the Same Place?**

But having said this, how informed or rational is it to conclude that all spiritual paths converge atop the same mountain? As Ravi Zacharias, a native of India, observes: *"You hear it a thousand times and more growing up in the East – 'We all come through different routes and end up in the same place.' ...Pluralistic cultures are beguiled by the cosmetically courteous idea that sincerity or privilege of birth is all that counts and that truth [like beauty] is subject to the beholder. [But] in no other discipline of life can one be so naïve."*<sup>3</sup>

You would never say to your child trying to find their way home from school, "Go down any road or climb on any bus; they all wind up at home." Could your child find their way home from any road or bus? Well, YES, if she had a good guide, roadmap, or flexible bus driver! But could that child get woefully, even dangerously lost on the journey on well-paved, well-travelled roads. Sadly, the answer is also YES.

Have you actually *studied* these different religions that some say all go to the same place? I know we don't have time for a comparative religion course, but it seems important to observe that the differences between the way the major religions of the world define the personality of God, the nature of God, the character of the afterlife, and the path to the communion between God and humanity differ so widely as to make one wonder if we're even talking about the same mountain.

If you want to discern how much directional alignment there really is between one religious worldview and another, ask these questions: 1. Where does this belief system say we came from? 2. What is this religion's explanation for the problems of this world?

3. How does it say things can be repaired? And 4. What is our role in this? You'll find that Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism answer these questions very differently. Finally, it's also helpful to ask: In the parts of the world where a particular religion has been dominant: 5. What kind of culture has this cult produced? How has it advanced human flourishing? Which of the world religions seems to offer the best hope of getting people to higher ground? When you compare world religions, you may find that the answers to these questions are quite different.

### **Are All Major Religions Partly True?**

So, maybe all religions do NOT lead to the same mountaintop. But are all major religions partly true? I, for one, think so. The Bible teaches that all humanity was made in the **"image and likeness"** of God (Gen 1:26). As much as our perceptions have been stained by sin, all human beings still retain the capacity to recognize God. For **"God has set eternity in their hearts" (Ecc 3:11)**, the Scriptures say. **"All people live and move and have [their] being in God" (Act 17:28)**. And, as St. Paul writes: **"Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been seen" (Rom 1:20)**.

Now, given this universal foundation, don't you think we should expect to see SOME commonality among the various religions? YES! And we do. Most religions, for example, contain the basic moral code we find in the Ten Commandments. I'm ashamed to say that you can also find Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others who practice that code even more faithfully than I do.

One of the other commonalities between all the major religions is this sense that we approach God through a series of religious steps. In Judaism, you get up the mountain by following the requirements of the Law. In Islam, you get up the mountain by believing in the Oneness of God and in Muhammad as the final prophet, by praying daily and giving alms to the needy, by purifying self through fasting, and by making the pilgrimage to Mecca. In Hinduism, you get up the mountain by a series of good deeds that are accomplished over many reincarnated lifetimes. In Buddhism, which actually does not posit the existence of an independent divine being at all, you nonetheless progress up the mountain of enlightenment through steps of discipline aimed at self-negation. You can find some parallel between all of these sorts of religious steps and the spiritual disciplines embedded in the Christian tradition.

### **The View from the Mountaintop**

But here is also where Christianity is most dramatically different from other religious paths. Christianity teaches that human beings will never reach the mountaintop by our own effort. The true summit of God's holiness is so high that we could spend a lifetime doing good deeds, questing after spiritual truth, repeating the sacred rituals, and never get higher than the hill country of his majesty. If you want to know what makes

Christianity truly unique, listen to these words of Jesus: **"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matt 18:12-14).**

The Gospel message, the good news, is that the One eternal God who dwells on a mountaintop vastly higher than human imagining has chosen to come down, to search for us, find us, and reveal his nature to us. Unlike other religions, God did this not through a Prophet or the pages of a Book; God came in person. He made himself the human being, Jesus of Nazareth. Christians believe that he did that to show us that the nature of God is holiness. The Muslims are partly right about this. He has shown us that what we do in this life counts in the next. The Hindus are partly right about this. He has shown us that to enter into his life we must deny ourselves. The Buddhists are partly right here.

But what no other religion tells humanity is the MOTIVE for all of this. God voluntarily placed himself in a position to be rejected and abused by beings so inferior to him that they are as bacteria are to human beings. The penalty that perfect holiness required for heinous sin, God took upon himself on the cross, so that humanity would not have to. WHY? Because **"God so loved the world..." (John 3:16)** that He was **"not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matt 18:14).**

I know it seems a scandal to some that God didn't come up with a more general methodology for delivering human beings from sin and death – that Jesus must play a part in it. If you are on a sinking ship, however, do you quibble with the color of the lifeboat or the side of the ship it's lowered from, or even who else is in the boat? If you're running from a forest fire and find your way blocked by a great chasm, are you going to complain that the bridge you find there is 30 yards that way instead of 10 yards his way? I don't think so. If we are sensible to our circumstances, we are simply going to give thanks, as St. Paul said, reads, that **"There IS one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus"** (1 Tim 2:5). We're going to praise God that there IS a lifeboat or a bridge. Through Jesus, God has made a way to safety for you and me and his heart's desire is to bring everyone home.

Please pray with me...

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<sup>1</sup> Their source: David Barrett et al, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, *Christians Remain World's Largest Religious Group*, April 5, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message* (Nashville TN: Word Publishing, 2000), pp.6-7.