

Aren't All Religions the Same?

**A Sermon Preached by
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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:1-4, 10-14

[Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. [Jesus Christ] himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in [Jesus Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:15-20

When I was in my first semester of college I took a required course for called—not so creatively -- “Philosophy and Religion.” In this course we were introduced to the most influential philosophers in history and the major religions of the world. It was a survey course, which meant that we only had time to study each religion very briefly; miss a day and you were a few centuries behind. Because we couldn’t go deeply into any one particular religion, our professor encouraged us simply to note the many striking similarities between the practices and beliefs of the great religions.

We discovered some things that blew our naïve minds wide open. Most of the world’s religions teach about angels or other divine messengers, not just Christianity. The prayer beads of Moslems and Roman Catholics are strikingly similar. From a distance it is almost impossible to distinguish between the prayer chanting of Orthodox Jews and traditional Moslems. Many of the formal prayers of the major religions are virtually interchangeable. All the ancient religions – and many of the modern ones – seem to have some form of initiation ritual that indicates one belongs to that belief system. Stories of ancient floods and virgin births are common, too. All this led some of the students to conclude, as our professor had, that deep down there is essentially one religion and each culture has merely given it a slightly different twist.

This is not an uncommon conclusion today. In the past decade the content of the religion section of bookstores has really changed. Alongside Billy Graham and Rick Warren you’ll find stacks and stacks of books from practitioners of alternative spiritualities. One of the most popular authors among spiritual seekers is Deepak Chopra. His best-selling books have treated a number of subjects, and he has been quoted saying, “Christ-consciousness, God-consciousness, Krishna-consciousness, Buddha-consciousness—it’s all the same.” NW One of the fastest growing religious movements in the world is the Baha’i Faith, which claims to see the essential unity in the major religions and tries to bring them all together under one roof. We have a Baha’i community right here in Carlisle.

I can understand why Chopra and Baha’i are so popular. We are comforted when a person or a faith comes along that affirms what unites rather than what separates. It gives us a way to avoid uncomfortable tension or outright conflict with neighbors or family members who worship on other days, in other ways, or not at all. With this mindset we can always say,

“Deep down the differences don’t really matter, do they? What’s the big deal? Pass the remote; the Steelers are playing.”

I hear a lot of comments like these, mostly from people who are not practicing members of any particular religion. The other thing I hear from them is, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you believe.” When people say this to me, I’m never sure if they’re asking me, telling me, or looking for reassurance. If they’re looking for reassurance, I can’t give it to them. What we believe matters. You can believe a light bulb is on. You can believe it sincerely; you can be a really nice person and believe it, but if the light bulb isn’t *really* on, you’re sitting in the dark.

The people behind the September 11 attacks were certainly sincere in their beliefs. They were likely the pride of their families. But they were sincerely wrong. Truth matters. What we believe matters, because wrong belief about something is going to lead wrong living. Who would want to base their one and only life on wishful thinking or something worse?

When I first became a pastor it was rare for me to run across someone who didn’t at least *claim* to be Protestant, Catholic or Jewish; rightly or wrongly, they would have been embarrassed to admit otherwise to a pastor. Now the fastest going religion in America isn’t Mormonism or Islam or Conservative Christianity, its secularism. And secular atheists no longer feel the need to apologize for their disbelief, not to me or to anyone.

At the risk of prompting some uncomfortable conversations, I’d like to point out some of similarities and differences that I see between Christianity and other religions, including atheism (which I think is a kind of faith, too). But first a disclaimer: I am not, by any definition, an expert in other religions. If I’ve said something inaccurate today, please correct me (maybe not during the sermon, but sometime soon; I want to learn; as I said, truth matters; let’s get this right).

The Word of God

Jews, Moslems, and Christians all believe that God has been revealed in something that each faith calls “The Word of God.” Jews identify this word with Torah, a single book containing the first five books of our Old Testament. Moslems believe that Allah, God, dictated the Koran to

Muhammad, and that the Koran is “The very word of God” dwelling among us.

Christians, of course, have a holy book, too: The Bible. But for us the Bible is the *witness* to the Word of God, which is, who is, a person, Jesus Christ. Remember John Chapter 1:

The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

For Christians the fullest expression of God is not a book but a being – a human being, called Jesus.

Moral Standards

The major religions each teach some version of the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Hindus say that this rule applies in different ways depending upon your social caste. Jews say that it applies equally to everyone. But Christians have a higher rule, don’t we? It is what one pastor calls, “The *Platinum Rule*.” (Rev. Frank Harrington) Jesus taught us that we should love not just as we would wish to be loved (which, depending upon our self-esteem, could be a pretty low standard), but as he loved, laying down his life for us. And Jesus said we should do this not just for our family and friends, but for our *enemies* as well. That’s a pretty big jump up from the Golden Rule, isn’t it? For Christians, Jesus Christ’s life is the standard of morality, not the Golden Rule.

Salvation

All religions teach that there is a way to be delivered from the pain and hardship of this life. For Hindus this is achieved through knowledge, works, and devotion. Buddhists believe that we are delivered from this world, a world of suffering, by ceasing all desire or by our own works as enlightened selves. Teachings vary within Judaism. In one sense salvation comes simply as a result of being part of God’s covenant with Abraham and his offspring, the Jewish race; in another sense it comes through obedience to the Jewish Law or through bettering society through good works, or *mitzvot*. (CGWR)

Don't Christians pretty much teach the same thing? In a word, No. We teach that the way to salvation, the way to true freedom, is not through what you know, or what you do, or even through how pure a person you are. And it's certainly not through renouncing our yearnings for a better life. And salvation isn't some kind of genetic birth rite or a reward for obedience, like our parents who give their kids \$5 for each "A" on their report card. We believe that a person – not a program -- is the way to eternal life (John 14). To know true peace in this life and the next we don't need rigid obedience to rules; what we do need is a relationship with Jesus Christ. With that relationship comes everything else.

Christians believe that the Word of God, the standard of morality, and the Way to salvation are all found in the same person: Jesus of Nazareth, who is a person who really lived and breathed and died on this earth. Almost no one disputes that, not even atheists. In the end, every thoughtful person on earth has to make sense of this Jesus. As C.S. Lewis said, either he is who he said he is and who we proclaim him to be, or he is not. If he is the Son of God, then he is of ultimate importance to every person who ever lived and ever will live. If he is not who he claimed to be and who the church teaches him to be, then all this is a waste of time. The one thing we *can't* say about Jesus is, "it doesn't really matter who he is."

Jesus

Moslems believe that Jesus was a miracle working prophet, but not God's son. They will grant that he was the "anointed one," but not that he is the way to salvation. They allow that he was born of a virgin, but teach that he was spared death on a cross. Islam teaches that God would neither have a son nor allow a prophet to die so cruelly. (NW)

If Jews discuss Jesus at all, they usually see him as "an admirable Jew," a prophet, teacher and reformer. And they are careful to distinguish between the faith *of* Jesus (one form of traditional Judaism) and faith *in* Jesus (which is Christianity). (NW)

Buddhists see Jesus as a spiritual brother of Buddha, a bodhisattva, a perfectly enlightened being.

Hindus might call him a “self-realized saint who reached the highest level of ‘God-consciousness.’” Hindus have no problem calling Jesus God’s son, because they believe there are thousands of gods and all people have “the innate ability to become divine themselves.” (NW)

According to one author (Ken Woodward, NW) in the end, Jesus’ death on the “cross is what separates the Christ of Christianity from every other religion.” The idea of God entering personally into human history, of God suffering for our sakes, of God dying at the hands of humanity – these are bedrock beliefs that make Christianity different from every other religion. As St. Paul said,

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1 Corinthians 1: 23

Next Steps

So how can we proclaim the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in an age when many of us count among our friends and neighbors Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Moslems, Wiccans, Pagans, and atheists? How do we keep from being offending or obnoxious?

We can begin by reaffirming the many beliefs and practices that we have in common, and noticing the subtle nuances among them. Just as Catholics and Protestants have learned much from each other in recent decades, Christians can gain insights into our own faith by studying other faiths. Common ground is a great place to begin.

It’s just not a helpful stopping place; we need to go deeper. Along the way, we can be humble. To say that we believe that Jesus Christ is “The Way, the Truth, and the Life,” [John 14:6] isn’t to say that Christianity as currently practiced in America is “The Way,” much less Presbyterianism itself. We don’t have to claim to have all the answers, but we think Jesus Christ does.

Let’s not confuse humility with timidity. We can be tolerant and tenacious at the same time. We can’t allow our desire for unity and our fear

of conflict to make us give up the most important thing of all, the one truly unique thing in all of recorded history: Jesus Christ.

Why not?

Because truth is a life and death deal. If you haven't noticed, it's a pretty scary world out there sometimes. Marriages are ending. Kids are dying. Sometimes hope is really hard to find. How are people supposed to make sense of it all? People are willing to grasp at anything, even a life rope with what may well be a whole lot of nothing at the end.

We can do better than that. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection explains sin, accounts for suffering, and gives real hope for the future. We can give hurting people a true story that makes sense of their story. That's truth people can base their life on.

What do you believe about Jesus Christ? Now may be a great time to go deeper in your faith. There's too much at stake to hang out in the shallow end of the pool forever.

After we sing our hymn I want to invite you to read aloud with me the words of the Nicene Creed. For members and those already committed to Jesus Christ this will be a chance to state what we believe about him.

And if you are a seeker here this morning looking for truth, listen to what we believe. Study all the world's religions, and you'll never hear anything quite like it. We think we you will find that there is a sweet peace in being able to say these words with all your heart, and mind, and soul. Amen.

This sermon was based on information in

The Compact Guide to World Religions (CGWR), Dean C. Halverson, ed. (Bethany House, 1996) and "The Other Jesus," *Newsweek* (NW), March 27, 2000, pp. 51-60, by Ken Woodward. Each of these makes excellent reading.

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