

“How Does Christianity Fit with Other Religions?”

First in a Series *The Most Asked Questions of the Faith*

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Script: Matthew 2:1-12; John 14:1-7

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Epiphany is the feast day we observe at the end of Christmas. It marks the Wise Men or Magi coming from the east to worship and offer gifts to Christ. They followed a star which they believed marked the appearance of a new religious incarnation and they were right. After a long journey filled with dangers, they offered their praise and gifts to the toddler Jesus, and then “left for their own country”! They went back home. Home to their old lives... their old religions.

Which brings us to our question of the day: *How does Christianity fit with other religions?* The old answer was of course that we saw Christianity as the sole path of truth, that all other religions were delusions, and that they were bound if not for hell, then to be put on ice in some after-life warehouse until Christ would be offered to them. The old answer saw truth as simple, singular, and of course centered on us.

But that is not an answer which is consistent with Christ, the whole of Scripture, nor adequate for our world situation any longer. It was possible to conclude this when we lived far from those other religions and were ignorant, but now we live across the street from the Muslim, Buddhist, the Jewish and Hindu, the Native American and will find them as our neighbors (and as son and daughter-in-laws) more and more. We cannot write them off as ignorant or lost— especially when we see the depth of their faith, and the transformation of their lives, with what Diana Eck calls a *holy envy*... an “appreciative love one has towards the mysteries of another faith.”¹ Live beside a person of another religion who practices it with seriousness and you begin to see the similarities— the values of peace, honesty, compassion, humility, family— the practices of giving charity, prayer, study of Scriptures, worship, meditation, even monasteries and religious orders. And when you study each tradition you find that once you dig under the surface— when you get down to the deep mystical esoteric level and the spiritual work called for there, all living religions are describing essentially the same thing.

So how do we think about our relationship with these people of other faiths, and maintain our Christian identity? There’s two ways that I would like to suggest thinking about this issue.

Christ in all Cultures/Religions:

The first is to take seriously the theology of the Gospel of John, and our Christian faith:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³**All things came into being through him**, and without him not one thing came into being...

The Word, the Christ is imbedded in all creation. There is nothing that exists that doesn’t already have the imprint of Christ within it. We see the fullest revelation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth— when he become flesh and lived among us, but this is not the extent of the incarnation. It was the Word of God that led those magi to the Christ child. God is active in all creation. All peoples... all cultures. That is the assumption of the early church.

So when we come to that passage in the Gospel of John where it says: **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,”** we must remember who the “Me” is— he is speaking of himself as the eternal Word/Logos of God. The Word of God is imbedded in all cultures, in these Wise Men we remember today, in other religious impulses, and traditions. God *is* there. Some of the Native American tribes relate to the Great Spirit via the buffalo, which functions on many levels in the way we think of Christ.

Jesus hints at this connection when he teaches the parable of Goats and Sheep that when we serve the “least of these thy brothers and sisters”, we in fact are serving Christ. From Jesus’ first sermon on we find him pointing out the faith of the outsiders, and of God’s love for them. Jesus saw faith, not “isms” like Judaism or Zoroastrianism. He loved all, and praised the faith he saw in the Roman Centurion, the Syrophenician woman, the Greek Cornelius, the Good Samaritan. In his first sermon he pointed out the faith found in those outside the faith of Israel. This upset the congregation so much they tried to kill him (see Luke 4). [I’m hoping for a better outcome to this sermon by the way]. And we find Peter offering in his great sermon to the crowds that “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every place, people who fear him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34).

Many Dwelling Places— A variety of religious ends:

The second way I would like us to think about this is still more complex, so hang in there with me. Jesus said to his disciples:

¹“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are **many dwelling places**. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14:1-3).

Many dwelling places. Jesus is saying there are different places within the sacred, multiple religious ends, and that those who relate to him, relate to God in that place. It is “in Christ” that we find our life in God. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians writes that it is God who “made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...” (Ephesians 2:5-6). Our address in the heavenly places will be “in Christ.”

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity proclaims that there is a multiplicity within God— there are various parts of God, yet also existing in oneness. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct segments of God, yet bound within a unity. There is a non-personal, a personal, and a communal part of God. There are probably other parts of God we could never imagine.

What we as Christians call Salvation is to find ourselves within that communal part of God— the dwelling place, where we relate to God and God’s other creatures. Orthodox Christian theologian S. Mark Heimⁱⁱ suggests that there are various parts of God that are religious ends— but not the same ends.

He would disagree with Gandhi who once said that “Religions are different roads converging to the same point.” Rather, he would say that religions are different roads that lead to different places within God. In other words, when we get to “heaven,” it won’t be a mountain top where we meet the Muslim, the Hindu, but a place different from where they are. The Buddhist will find “heaven” (their salvation), in the non-personal, non-conscious part of God they call nirvana. The Muslim, in a personal relationship with God, shaped by the values and practices of their tradition.

Heim suggests that religions have practices and beliefs that lead us to fulfillments in this life, beyond this life and ultimately within God. The Hindu Scriptures offer this view:

"Howsoever people approach Me, even so do I welcome them, for the paths people take from every side are Mine."

I find there is some truth to his assertion that our paths, our practices lead us to religious fulfillments. As the Bible puts it, we "reap as we sow." If we offer ourselves to a Christian religious path of peace, compassion, justice, love— combined with prayer, worship, sacraments and disciplines of giving and service— we will find our spirits shaped Christ-like. We will find a transformation of ourselves.

For us as Christians, salvation is not a one-room apartment in heaven or a cloud just for ourselves— it is communion with God, Christ, and all God's creatures. It is finding a wholeness and completeness within Christ that unites Self, God and others. That is what my heart longs for— that is salvation for me. It would not appeal to the Buddhist whatsoever. When the Book of Acts proclaims (4:12) that "there is salvation in no one else" it is speaking the truth— there is a wholeness and fulfillment with God and others that is possible only if I relate to God through Christ. There I will find communion. "No one comes to the father but by me" —if I want that communion relationship with God, then Christ is my savior, my way, my truth, my light.

We may agree with the Dalai Lama, for instance, when he says, the

"Liberation in which 'a mind that understands the sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the sphere of reality' is a state that only Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of moksha or nirvana is only explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved only through Buddhist practice."

So that is another way of thinking of other religions— as different paths to different religious ends. We go where our vehicle takes us. The image that came to me regarding this is experiencing the BWCA. Let's say we have four persons who believe heaven is in the BWCA. One person believes the best way to get to that heavenly spot is with a canoe, while another thinks it is best done on foot hiking the Kekekabic Trail. Still another thinks the only way to get there is on Cross Country Skies. One person wants to go it alone and so takes a kayak. Others believe you need a whole group to get there & it is no fun alone. They all take different routes— Lakes, portages, rivers, hiking trails. Some nearly fast as they travel, others put on a feast. Some have the latest equipment, Kevlar canoes and high-tech clothing... others believe the only way is with a Rendezvous re-enactment of 18th Century canoes, Voyager style. These groups have different practices, equipment, and stories around the campfire, but at times they cross paths on a portage or canoe the same stretch of a calm lake side by side. They all find their heavenly destination in the BWCA, but it is not the same lake. It is as different as Crane lake is from Gunflint... a lush green boreal forest on the Canadian shield...to a frozen lake in the dead of winter in a yurt.

Returning to the various religions with this understanding, the question becomes, not *Which one is true?* But the question is *What is the salvation I need or want?* Which salvation for me is ultimate?

There are some issues related to this for us to think about:

1. **Missionary activity. Why evangelize?** Perhaps it is not so important for us to evangelize that Muslim across the street that has a living relationship with God. But perhaps it is all the more important for us to evangelize those who don't have any living relationship with God— our neighbors, friends. The mission field is no longer those who live in far-away lands, but in our own neighborhoods, in those who live without a living-relationship with God. Which leads me to the next issue:

2. Is it possible to be going nowhere? If there are various paths to various religious ends, is it possible to be going nowhere? If my God is myself, or alcohol, or money, or pride, where does my soul find its end? I'm going to leave that issue until the February 3rd sermon on "Heaven & Hell and the Afterlife." Stay tuned. Suffice it to say that we *can* place ourselves outside the party of God's love and life, as the elder brother did in the parable of the prodigal son. God may come and plead with us to give up our pride, our bean-counting of our own goodness and join the party. But we can say no. And that leads me to the next issue:

3. Salvation is offered— but must be accepted.

While salvation is offered to us, it must be accepted. We must trust in God's loving acceptance of us, rather than our own goodness. Life (and the after-life) then becomes a journey of sanctification in our Wesleyan theology— becoming more whole, more holy. God needs our consent in this process... our cooperation, our Yes.

4. KKK & Media perception of other traditions.

Let us be careful in our judgments of other religious traditions. The media depictions we have of the Islamic faith lead us to believe that the majority of them and their beliefs are violent and intolerant. The al Qaeda movement, however, is as representative of the Muslim faith, as the KKK is of Christianity. Let us gain accurate information on other faiths. Let us develop relationships with people of other faiths. This is a good time to plug our "*Faces of War; An Interfaith Perspective on Religion and War.*"

And remember that they may fulfill the beliefs, practices and exhibit the core values of their religious tradition as imperfectly as we do our Christian faith. It is a call for us always to consider ourselves ambassadors of the faith and live up to our Christian beliefs in everything we do.

5. Rise of fundamentalism & violence. Finally, as our American culture becomes more diverse, we will find a growing movement within our Christian tradition to respond in fundamentalism. When a group is threatened, one response is fundamentalism, a hunkering down religiously, culturally, politically. Yet, if we see Christ within them, or at least their belovedness in God's eyes (as Jesus taught us to), perhaps we won't feel so threatened. This is important because, as we all know, fundamentalism at its dark fringes (in all religions) leads to violence, religious wars... remember the Klan, the Taliban, the Crusades and Inquisitions. Those expressions of religion are far from the Spirit of Christ.

Conclusion: For me, this way of understanding God in the vast diversity of the world's experience is liberating. I can genuinely honor and respect people of other faiths, perhaps even be shaped by their experience of the holy, and at the same time witness to the truth of Christ without apology.

It also helps me see my own faith more clearly— and give myself to it more fully. I realize I need the kind of salvation that Christ offers me. I want it. I long to find communion with God, with others, and my truest best self. I long to be complete and whole in Christ. That is where my life is to be found. That is why Christ is my savior. None other will do.

ⁱ Diana Eck, *Encountering God; A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, p. 85.

ⁱⁱ S. Mark Heim, "The Pluralism of Religious Ends; DREAMS FULFILLED", *The Christian Century*, January 17, 2001.