

“Wonder Out Loud--Is Christianity the Only Way?”

A while back I received an anonymous letter that's a good way to start this message today. It said in part...

I have a question...My husband and I got married in 1997. We never discussed religion prior to just lately...The following is [a question] he asked...Don't all good people go to heaven? What about the people in foreign countries that have been born and raised to worship another god? These children that grow up into adulthood do not know any different...so will they be punished in the end?...How do we know?

I know these are very foolish questions, but I don't know the answers. Maybe, just maybe, you can help me find the answers in one of your future sermons. I am just beginning my journey and thanks to you I am going to stay on the path...thank you once again.

Listen, these are not foolish questions and many people are asking them. Second, this question gets asked by a lot of people in several different ways. Some ask, **“Is Christianity the only way? Who of all the religions and various sects, holds the truth? Will only Christians go to heaven? Will God really condemn all non-Christians to hell?”**

My hope is that by the time we're finished this morning, after we've wrestled with this question, that we will have at least one possible answer. At least something that you can take home with you and to work with and wrestle with yourself this week. Because, listen, I stand up here on Sunday mornings and I try the best I can to understand what God's is saying and share with you, but I really expect you to think about this yourself—read the Bible, listen for God's voice and wrestle with these big questions on your own. Two of the resources I've used to wrestle with this on my own are Rev. Adam Hamilton and Nicky Gumbel. I lot of what I share today I've gleaned from them, but I can't say that I feel completely adequate to address this, especially in just one message on a Sunday morning. You've got to do your part too.

Before we approach the question we have to stop and apologize for who we have been as Christians in the past. When we look back and see how we have dealt with people of other religions we see that Christians have sinned in horrific ways. There have been times in our past when I believe that God's heart has been broken over the way the church has acted toward people of other faiths. The pastor recently in Florida who threatened to burn copies of the Quran. Burning copies of someone's holy book forgetting that his own holy book, our Bible, teaches, **“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18, NIV).**

Because of the way Christians have acted in the past a lot people have been pushed away from God. That's tragedy that I believe it makes God angry. When we recognize our past and confess these sins, then we can humbly ask the question that we've got in front of us today: **“Is Christianity the only way?”**

This is an important question that we'll face more and more. Because of media, and travel, and immigration, our world has shrunk and there is a strong possibility that at some time in your life one of your neighbors will be a Hindu (In fact, we lived next door to a Hindu family when we first moved to Joplin). There is a high likelihood that you will live next to, or work with, a Buddhist or a Muslim or a Jew. It wasn't that way 50 years ago. Because we are at war in the Middle East it's so easy for people on both sides to frame this as a religious war—a war about ultimate truth. The world is a changing place and this question will be in front of us more and more. So it's important that we have some way of understanding the other religions of the world.

Now we've got a few very common ways that we deal with this issue of other religions. Sometimes people say, “All religions are essentially the same. We're all basically saying the same thing. All religions are just different and equally valid ways to God and all equally true.” But let's be honest that's really more just an attempt to be nice than be truthful. Because there are serious differences between the major religions of the world.

Yes they're all similar in that we're all trying to answer the same questions, the Buddhist, the Jew, the Muslim, the Hindu. We have religious needs and we're all looking for ways to fulfill our longings and understand what God is like, but the answers that each religion provides are very, very different.

Buddhism, in most of its expressions, rejects the idea of God entirely! Hinduism in most of its expressions affirms many gods. In Hinduism there is one god above all, but there could be as many as 33 million gods. Islam, Judaism and Christianity say that there could only be one God. Christianity says that God came and lived among us in the form of his son Jesus Christ. Islam says that's an impossibility! The central assertions of our faiths are very, very different. We are not all saying the same thing.

Sometimes people make the statement that all religions are equally valid. Now I like the way that sounds--so inclusive, so loving, so understanding. But it's a logical impossibility! It simply can't be that all of them are equally valid and equally true when they are making mutually exclusive claims! In some ways we can just look around and see that not all religions are equally valid. Look at the David Koresh's, the Jim Jones's. The Heaven's Gate cult believed that a space ship hiding behind the Hale-Bopp comet was going to take them to the next human level—38 members of the cult committed suicide thinking this space ship was picking them up. We can look at some of the religious leaders, even in our own traditions, who have been mentally unbalanced or theologically in error. We can say that they did not cultivate a religion that was healthy or helpful. Not all religion is equally valid.

Some Christians would say that all other religions are completely wrong and have no truth in them. But that's not the biblical witness at all. Throughout the Bible we see that people of other faiths and of no faith get glimpses of God all around and understand God's character.

So, if these things are **not** the way to address all the different religions of the world; if these are not the way to answer the question, "Is Christianity the only way?" then how do we understand the relationship of Christianity to other world religions?

I'm going to give you a metaphor that you may have heard before, but stay with me on it because in the end it's got an interesting twist. Imagine with me that proverbial elephant and the 5 blind men. They are standing around the elephant, all trying to describe what they are feeling. They've never seen or heard of an elephant before. They have no idea what an elephant looks like. Each of these blind men is experiencing something different of the very same creature.

The one holding on to the ear says that it must be like a sea ray. The one at the leg says that it's kind of like a tree. The one at the elephant's trunk says that it's like a big snake. The one at the tail says that it's a small creature because it has a very small tail. The one who can feel the elephant's side says that it feels like a big wall! They're all trying to describe the same creature, but all of them are experiencing it from their small corner of reality with their own perceptions and their own experiences.

This is the way it is with our world religions. All of us are groping after God. All of us saying that there is something more; something real. We can feel it, we can experience it, and we know it, but what's it like? And what are we about? And what are the implications of what God is? And so we've wrestled with this through the ages. From the cave men on to our day. And God has been listening and watching through the ages. And God has longed for his people to know who he is and what he's about. He sent prophets and spoke to individual people. All along the way there have been those who have been groping and longing.

The founders of the great world religions were people, human beings who were looking for answers. All of them pointing away from themselves trying to describe God. Whether that's Hinduism's folk religions, or Moses and Judaism, or Gautama Buddha and Buddhism, or Mohammed and Islam. Do you get the picture of these people who are trying to understand the elephant that's standing there?

But Christianity asserts something significantly different from all these other religions. In essence, Christianity is saying that while the elephant was standing there listening to all these blind men trying to describe what they were feeling . . . the elephant spoke. And the elephant himself said, "This is what I am. I'm an elephant. Listen to me. This is what I'm like. This is how I act. These are the things I do. This is what I like to eat. This is who I am. Listen to me!" The elephant spoke!

The central assertion of the Christian faith is that Jesus was not a mere mortal like any other human being. He was God who came in the flesh to live among us to say; "I've heard you crying out for me. I've heard you groping after me, trying to understand me. Look at me and listen and you'll understand what I am like." He didn't point away from himself for some ultimate reality. He pointed to himself. He was born like we are; he lived like we do. He did remarkable things to show who he was and to show us what we have the potential to become.

This is the essence of the Christian faith. These are the assertions we make. That God was in Jesus bringing the world back to himself. That God came and walked among us and was just like we are, just so that we could know him and not grope in the dark in our blindness.

So let's cut to the chase. **Are non-Christians damned to hell?** You've heard Christians say that before. They have scriptures that can back that up. Acts 4:12 says this: "Only Jesus has the power to save! His name is the only one in all the world that can save anyone." Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "I am the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the father except through me." These passages of scripture are often lifted out of context and used to describe God's evaluation of all the other religions of the world. But in their context Jesus is saying, "Don't look for another Messiah, I am he!" The Apostles are saying in the book of Acts, to the Jews, "The messiah you've been waiting for is him! Don't look for another name and another face to come along and save you. He was the messiah! He was the one."

Those scriptures were **not** meant to teach God's perspectives on other religions. But other scriptures help us bring it all together. I believe that the faithful, biblical and intellectually honest approach is to acknowledge that some other religions have discovered truths about God, but at the same time we believe as Christians that the ultimate truth has been revealed through Jesus Christ. That's why we're called to be contagious about our faith, because in the end all people of all faiths will stand before Jesus, and each one will recognize Jesus as the savior of the world. And if they never heard about Jesus, or he was presented to them in a way they simply could understand, then Jesus will look to see how they lived their lives.

Paul writes this about those who do not know Jesus, but will be saved, "**Even Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right.**" (Romans 2:14-15, NLT). Paul talks about Righteousness being credited to those who sought after God with their whole hearts, people like Abraham and David, people who didn't know Jesus, but were saved by grace.

Now, no one will be saved by their works because the scriptures are clear that we are only saved by the grace of God through faith. So at that point Jesus could turn to his father and say, "Father, I would like to appropriate the saving work of the cross for this one. I give them the gift of my grace."

This view says yes, Jesus is the way the truth and the life. Yes, no one comes to the father except through him. Yes, there is no other name in heaven or on earth by which people may be saved. But in the end if they are saved it will be because Jesus looked at them, judged them according to what they could know of God's grace and appropriated his saving work on their behalf.

Christians must remember that God is calling out to all people, and at the same time God wants us to know that he is counting us to shine the light to the world, so that those of other religions might actually hear, listen, understand and long to know more about the savior you worship.

In the end I think Paul shows us how to interact with people of other religions, or no religion at all. In Acts chapter 17 I love what the apostle Paul does when he's in the city of Athens. He walks around and he sees all these different temples to the various Greek gods and goddesses. He's there to proclaim Jesus Christ; to offer life to the people of Athens. He starts to speak in the market place and they think that what he has to say is pretty interesting so they invite him up to the big league, the Areopagus, where teachings and philosophies and religions were discussed and debated.

Paul stands there and he begins to talk about Jesus. And it's a very interesting scene. He doesn't stand there and say, "You all are going to hell!" He doesn't stand there and say, "I see all your gods and they are false gods and you are going to burn for that!" No, he says, "I see that you are a religious people and

that's a good thing. While I was walking through your city I saw a particular altar with the words, 'To an Unknown God.'" And Paul gives the heart of the Christian faith.

He says, "That which you worship as unknown, I have come to proclaim. That God doesn't live in houses made by human hands. That God isn't made up of gold or silver or things the imagination can make up. But God has come to us in the form of a man to show us what he's like--to show us the way. And this I offer to you. When you know this and you have an opportunity to respond, you need to respond. God is reaching out for you. You've groped for him your whole life. Even your poets have spoken about him." And then Paul quotes their poets saying, "In him we live and move and have our being. And we, too, are his offspring.' And now that you know it, won't you respond?" He gives a powerful invitation for them to begin a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Peter writes some instructions for how we are to share our faith to those who see things differently that we do. **"in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." (1 Peter 3:15, NIV).**

We approach all people, especially people of other beliefs with Christ alive in our hearts, and we approach them with gentleness and respect.

Let's answer the question head-on before we close. Is Christianity the only way? No and yes. **No**, in that there are people around the world who are groping and longing after God and they have been wanting to know God. But because they were sent missionaries who were poor representatives of Christ, because maybe they never heard the gospel or because that in their cultural setting there was no way that it could even make sense to them. Yet, because they longed for God, God honors their faith and their desire to know him and love him.

And **Yes**, in that those desires will always be unfulfilled without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. No one else has done what Jesus did and no one else has become who Jesus is--God entering into our world, breaking into our history saying, "Here I am!" The elephant speaking saying, "This is what I am like!" God coming near to us and telling us his way and his will for our lives.

Listen, in Jesus Christ we find everything we need and everything we could possibly want. Without him people will always be left wanting. In him we find the God our hearts are groping for. And if you're here today and you have never, never said yes to him, I hope that you will do that. Because in him you live and move and have your being. And for today this is the good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor at The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources in answering this question. I am also thankful for Rev. Nicky Gumbel's treatment of this issue in his book "Searching Issues."