

WHAT ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS?

I. Introduction.

A. My religious neighborhood.

Ours is a multi-cultural world. Not only the world "out there", across the ocean, but the world next door is a world vastly different from the one familiar to me. But it is not just the ethnicity, language, food, politics, dress, customs, and rhythms of life that are strange. It is especially my neighbor's worldview and his **religious beliefs** that are so hard to understand.

*At the turn of the third millennium, religious loyalties are at the root of many of the world's ongoing civil wars and political violence.... However much this would have surprised political analysts a generation or two ago, the critical political frontiers around the world are not decided by attitudes toward class or dialectical materialism, but by rival concepts of God. (Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, P. 163)*

B. The Christian's challenge.

The presence of various religions in the world poses a real problem for the follower of Jesus. This challenge comes in numerous forms.

1. The theological challenge.

Since Jesus claims to be the only true path to God (John 14:6), the theological challenge posed by the presence of alternative worldviews is great. How to explain the presence of these other religions? Various suggestions have been made.

- a) **Demons.** Perhaps Satan inspired them. He is the master con artist and knows how to disguise himself as an angel of light (II Cor. 11:14). This is part of his global strategy to seduce and destroy. In this case, the "god" or "gods" worshiped would in fact be demons. (I Cor. 10:20)
- b) **Human searching for God.** Perhaps other religions are simply (!) human attempts to find God. They show man's aspiration for Ultimate Reality.

But man's condition is so depraved by sin that even his religious aspirations are twisted and perverse. John Calvin said that man is an "idol factory." Perhaps the ultimate idol he has created is religion. (Note well, this can be true for "Christian" expressions of religion as well as for other religions of the world such as Buddhism, Islam, etc.). According to this understanding, "religion" is not so much an attempt to find God as it is an attempt to **resist him!** *...they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator... (Romans 1:25)*

- c) **God.** Maybe God is bigger than we think! Perhaps God has indeed spoken to "other sheep" (John 10:16) and revealed Himself through nature or even through other "prophets." Such a religion would contain elements that were not just neutral but positively helpful... from God himself.

2. The personal and historical challenge.

In the interaction of Christians with followers of other religions, Christians are often confronted with the many examples of those who professed Christ but failed to live up to **their own standards**: the Crusades, the Inquisition, Jimmy Swaggart, Ted Haggard, etc. Often we are reminded of "Christian" nations where crime rates are high and immorality is rampant. How can we preach a Gospel of love and explain the slavery, racism, and acts of ethnic cleansing that have occurred in countries with Christian majorities (South Africa, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, the Southern United States, etc.)?

3. The challenge of compromise.

In an age of **tolerance, pluralism, relativism, and multi-culturalism**, Christians are often invited to soften their rhetoric and compromise the exclusive claims of the Gospel. Can we all just get along? How can we be so arrogant in claiming that Jesus is the only way? Can't we accept the legitimacy of other ways of knowing God?

4. The evangelistic challenge.

A Christian living among other religions soon discovers that few of the methods of evangelism he has been taught at church "work" among those who practice other faiths. When he tries to share his faith, it is as if he is speaking **another language**.

C. The globe at a glance.

The chart on page 10 shows the breakdown of the world's population according to broad religious identities and the number of Christians living in that context.

II. What does the Bible say about other religions?

A. Other religions are **a test**.

*"If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder,² and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods, which you have not known, and let us serve them,'³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is **testing you**, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deut. 13:1-3)*

The presence of other religious options means that we are confronted with a choice. Apparently God wants us **to choose**. There is something about the act of making a personal decision that pleases God.

B. Other gods are **nothing**.

At times, the Bible speaks of other gods in mockery, underscoring their non-reality. Those who worship such gods are worshipping nothing!

- ¹⁵ *"Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these **vain things** to a living*

God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. (Acts 14:15)

- ⁴ *Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one."*⁵ *For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. ⁷ However, not all possess this knowledge. (I Cor. 8:4-7)*
- *Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵ They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶ They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. ⁷ They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. ⁸ Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them. (Psalm 115:4-8)*

C. Other gods are **demons**.

At other times, the Bible speaks of the demonic nature of other gods.

¹⁴ *Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.... ¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to **demons** and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. (I Cor. 10:14-20)*

D. God commanded his people to have **zero tolerance** for other religions.

- *"You shall have no other gods before (besides) me. (Ex. 20:3)*
- ² *You shall surely **destroy** all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. ³ You shall **tear down** their altars and **dash in pieces** their pillars and **burn** their Asherim with fire. You shall **chop down** the carved images of their gods and **destroy** their name out of that place. ⁴ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way. (Deut. 12:2-4)*
- ¹⁸ *Then all the people of the land went to the house of Baal and tore it down; his altars and his images they broke in pieces, and they killed Mattan the priest of Baal before the altars. (II Kings 11:18)*

E. Other gods **cannot save**.

- *Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor **idolaters**, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (I Cor. 6:9-11)*

- *But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, **idolaters**, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.* (Rev. 21:8).

F. Other religions sometimes contain **redemptive analogies** that can point men to God.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. (Acts 17:22-23).

G. False religion can contaminate **true religion**.

- *⁴ And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to **the LORD**." (Exodus 32:3-5).*
- *²¹ "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. ²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24).*
- *This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they **worship me**, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. (Matt. 15:8-9).*

III. How to explain the presence of multiple religions?

Throughout history various attempts have been made to grapple with the question of how the presence of different world religions is to be best understood. Especially for Christians who believe that Jesus is the only way to God, this question is profoundly significant. In the West four basic approaches to this question have been embraced by various people at various times.

A. Atheism.

Since this position starts with the assumption that God does not exist, it naturally follows that its basic understanding of all religions would be that all of them are **equally false**.

B. Relativism.

Like the blind men trying to understand the elephant each one likening him to one thing or another (a wall, a rope, a tree, a snake...), so all religions grope to explain the indescribable. No one religion can possibly get it right. So all of them must be **relatively true**.

C. Fulfillment.

Perhaps other religions help to **prepare the way** for the Gospel even as Judaism prepared the way for the coming of Christ. Though not everything in the religion is true, parts of it are indeed true and they can be used to prepare its adherents to understand and accept the Gospel when they hear it. Certainly this was true for Judaism in a unique way, but perhaps it is also true to some limited degree for other religions because God never leaves himself without a witness (Acts 14:17; John 1:9). Notice how Paul used a pagan idol statue in Athens as the "text" for his Gospel sermon there (Acts 17:22-34). Missiologist Don Richardson writes about how pagan religions have contained some amazing "redemptive analogies" that prepared the way for Gospel receptivity. See *Peace Child* and *Eternity in Their Hearts*.

The great danger of this position is **syncretism**: a blending of Gospel truth with pagan practices and beliefs (Mary becomes a fertility goddess, honoring saints becomes ancestor worship, Holy Communion becomes magic, etc.).

D. Exclusivism.

Traditional orthodoxy and contemporary evangelicalism assert that apart from **Jesus Christ**, knowledge of God and salvation from sin are impossible. Jesus is the only way to know God.

- *And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:11-12)*
- *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)*

Note well that in its best form this position has always insisted that salvation is in Christ alone, not necessarily in "Christianity" or the Church. The distinction is very important!

TABLE TALK

1. Describe an experience you have had in talking with or trying to witness to someone from another religion.
2. Is it really possible to have "zero tolerance" for the lies of false religion and at the same time show love and respect for those who believe such lies?
3. Has it been easy for you to accept the reality that Jesus Christ is the only way? Talk about your spiritual journey in coming to this belief.
4. Have you ever been called a bigot? Intolerant? Hateful? Were the labels accurate or inaccurate? Describe.
5. Why has tolerance and relativism won the hearts of so many in the West today? Why do so many people want so desperately to believe that all religions are equally valid and that all roads lead to God?

IV. A brief look at the religions of the world.

It is not our purpose to survey all the religions of the world in this short lesson, but perhaps it will be helpful to examine two of them: Christianity and Hinduism. These two religions help us to understand the most fundamental religious alternatives that confront our world today. They help us better understand the basic difference between **the East** and **the West**.

For my own part, I have sometimes told my audience that the only two things really worth considering are Christianity and Hinduism. (Islam is only the greatest of the Christian heresies, Buddhism only the greatest of the Hindu heresies....). There isn't really, for an adult mind, this infinite variety of religions to consider. We may... divide religions, as we do soups, into "thick" and "clear." By Thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of Thick religions. By Clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism, and the Ethical Church are Clear religions. Now if there is a true religion it must be both Thick and Clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly. And the only two religions that fulfill this condition are Hinduism and Christianity. But Hinduism fulfills it imperfectly. The Clear religion of the Brahmin hermit in the jungle and the Thick religion of the neighboring temple go on *side by side*. The Brahmin hermit doesn't bother about the temple prostitution nor the worshipper in the temple about the hermit's metaphysics. But Christianity really breaks down the middle wall of the partition. It takes a convert from central Africa and tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth-century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord. The savage convert has to be Clear: I have to be Thick. That is how one knows one has come to the real religion. (C. S. Lewis. *God in the Dock*. "Christian Apologetics." p. 102f.)

Let's follow Lewis' advice and examine these two options, side by side.

HINDUISM	CHRISTIANITY
Pantheistic – God <u>is</u> (in) everything	God <u>created</u> everything out of nothing
If God is in everything, then God is both <u>good and evil</u> – there are no moral absolutes.	God is absolutely <u>righteous</u> and holy and since man is created in his image, He expects us to be righteous and holy too.
Based in private mystical experiences	Based in the public revelations recorded in a book (the Bible)
Human experience validates Scripture	Scripture judges experience
Since all is one (pantheism), individuality is an <u>illusion</u> . This means free will is also an illusion... so is sin.	Each man is a distinct person who will be held fully responsible for his choices and his actions.
Since there is no sin, salvation is not needed... only <u>enlightenment</u> . We need to wake up to our own divinity.	Sin condemns us. We are powerless to save ourselves. Without a <u>Savior</u> , all is lost.
History is <u>cyclical</u> .	History is linear.
Since history is cyclical, we have multiple occasions to achieve enlightenment (<u>reincarnation</u>).	It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that, the judgment.
The ultimate human ideal: <u>mysticism</u> (a matter of consciousness).	The ultimate human ideal: <u>holiness</u> (a matter of loving God and neighbor).
Many paths lead to God. The difficulty in preaching Christ in India is that there is no difficulty.	Jesus is the <u>only way</u> to God.
Salvation is seen as liberation from the illusion of finitude when the individual is <u>lost</u> in the cosmic oneness of Brahman.	Salvation comes when one is born again and ultimately the person lives with God forever in heaven.

Before leaving this comparison, two quotes:

- In one sense Hinduism and Christianity are as far apart as two religions can be. Compare the crucifix with the meditating guru. Christ has his eyes open, his arms outstretched, and his body torn. The Cross is what happens when good meets evil. The guru has his eyes closed, turned inward. His arms and whole body are self-contained, like a sphere. His is not torn; he is one, all conflict transcended. Sin is not solved but dissolved. (Kreeft. *Fundamentals of Christian Apologetics*. p. 93)

- Of all horrible religions the most horrible is the worship of the god within.... That Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones. Let Jones worship the sun or moon, anything rather than the Inner Light; let Jones worship cats or crocodiles, if he can find any in his street, but not the god within. Christianity came into the world firstly in order to assert with violence that a man had not only to look inwards, but to look outwards, to behold with astonishment and enthusiasm a divine company and a divine captain. (Chesterton. Orthodoxy. p. 279)

V. The Uniqueness of Christianity.

The question that is begging to be answered, of course, is this: Which religion leads us to God? Which one is true? The choice is yours! Reason will help you sort through the issues of credibility but only the heart will ultimately enable you to decide. Perhaps seeing the ways in which the Gospel is unique will help you to decide.

A. A unique God.

Christianity worships a God unlike any other. Though He is **one** he exists eternally in **three Persons**. Nothing in the religions of the world is comparable to this!

B. A unique Savior.

Jesus is not just the founder of Christianity. He is the **foundation**. He did not just bring the message. He is the message. The Gospel is not just a revelation **from** God. It is the revelation **of** God. While some religions claim that gods have visited the earth, nothing among the religions of the world compares to the incarnation. Jesus Christ is fully man and yet fully God. Nothing is comparable to this!

C. A unique salvation.

Of all the would-be Saviors, Jesus alone offers salvation from **sin** (and consequently, death and hell) (Matt. 1:21). Other religions offer salvation from ignorance, bad karma, the cycle of birth and death (reincarnation), suffering, etc. Jesus alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

D. No other name.

- *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:4)*
- ¹¹ *This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:11-12)*

VI. A Christian Attitude Toward Other Religions.

A. Certainty coupled with humility.

To be certain of something does not mean one becomes bigoted, arrogant or condescending. The Christian should never be arrogant because all of his knowledge and all of his moral behaviors is a result of grace, not human effort. It is all a gift. As D. T. Niles put it, "Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (I Cor. 4:7)

Be alert to the subtle distinction in claiming "I know the truth" and saying "I know the One who is the truth." We can know something absolutely without knowing it exhaustively.

B. Tolerance without compromise.

To tolerate something is not equivalent to approving it or agreeing that it is valid. God obviously tolerates all manner of questionable human behaviors and beliefs. We should imitate His example.

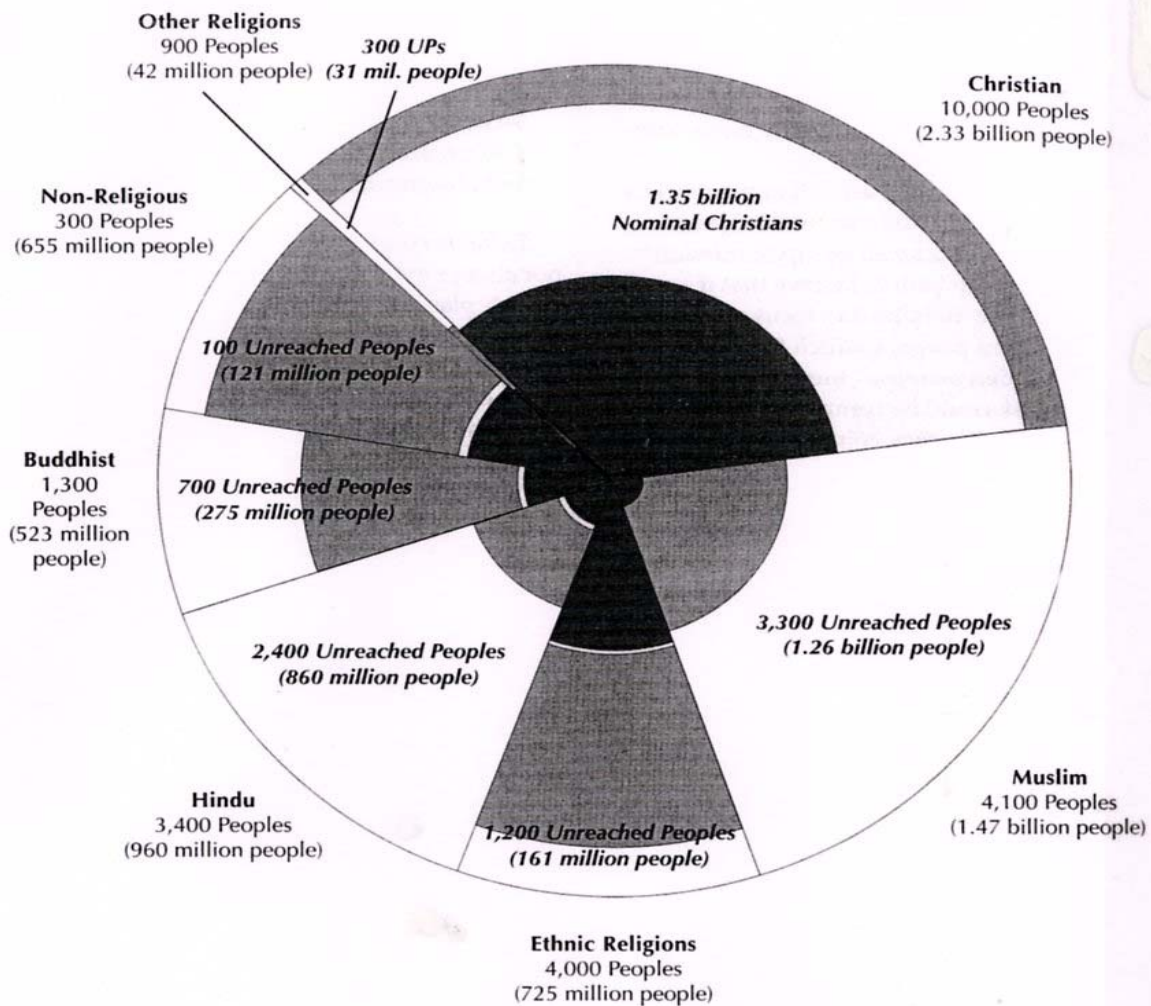
C. Love and respect.

I can love my neighbor and respect his opinions even when I believe he is wrong. I can dialogue with him and seek to understand his point of view. I can even find elements in his worldview that are valid and worthy of emulation. And yet I can still maintain my own beliefs and practices. Jesus knocks on doors. He never forces his way into anyone's life. He enters where he is invited. We do well to follow the model he set.

TABLE TALK

1. What did you learn by contrasting Christianity with Hinduism? Discuss.
2. Has it been difficult for you to believe in moral absolutes and at the same time be humble? Describe.
3. In your eyes, what aspects of the uniqueness of the Gospel are the most significant?

The Globe at a Glance



- True Christians, available as a work force, through discipleship and equipping
- Purely Nominal "Christians," needing E0 renewal evangelism
- Non-Christians making no Christian profession but living within reached groups, needing E1 outreach evangelism
- Non-Christians living within unreached people groups, requiring E2 to E3 cross-cultural evangelism

The chart is divided by the predominant religion within each unimax people.* ("Peoples" = "People Groups") All individuals in the world can be found somewhere on this diagram. Religion is seen as part of the cultural identity of the group as a whole. For instance, when a Buddhist people has a church movement established within it which seeks to evangelize the rest of the members of that people, the group is considered "reached," but still within the Buddhist cultural bloc.

* Unimax People: The MAXimum sized group sufficiently UNified to be reached by a single indigenous church planting movement.

¹ Taken from *Perspectives. Fourth Edition. "Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge" by Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch. (pp. 531-546).*

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