

THE ARROGANCE OF FAITH

How Can Christianity Say It is the One True Way?

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

What Is Truth?

At last count there were at least 19 major world religions.¹ While Christianity is still the largest at 33% of the world's population, Islam is now nearly 20%, Hinduism 13%, Buddhism 6%. We are talking here of staggering numbers of people sincerely committed to encountering the divine through their particular tradition. How, therefore, can it not be pure arrogance for Christians to say that *theirs* is the one *true* 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."** Pilate famously replied, **"What is truth?"** (John 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.

It is not just the governors of culture who feel this sentiment today. Even some church-goers doubt the exclusivity of any one religion's claims. Some of these people 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? 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. Isn't it clear that we need multiple religious angles if we are 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 production, so conditioned by the particular cultures and power structures 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 says in John 14:6, **"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except by me"** or with the words of the Apostle Peter in Acts 4:12, **"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven... by which we must be saved."** How is this not simply the arrogance of faith?

Confessing the Truth

I think we have to begin by confessing that people of Christian faith *have been* enormously arrogant 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 was we were ignorant of the full content of our own tradition and operating almost entirely on hearsay about theirs.

It ought to humble Christians everywhere that when Jesus sought for examples of **“great faith”** (his words), he found the examples in a Roman soldier (Matthew 8:10) and in a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:28) – people utterly outside his band of current disciples or his own faith tradition (Judaism). As the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13 that in God's eyes **“the most excellent way”** is a love that is patient, kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not insisting upon its own way. If you have traveled much through this world, then you know that it is not only Christians who exhibit the humble, persevering love that our own Scriptures teach is God's way.

I recognize that it may be upsetting for some of us to hear this, but I am convinced that if followers of Jesus Christ are going to be effective witnesses of their Lord's gospel in this pluralistic world today, then they are going to have to recover an awareness that the Kingdom of God extends even beyond the bounds of the Church's walls. They are going to need to look for the fingerprints and light of God in and through people whose doctrines and traditions may be very different from ours.

Do All Religions End Up in the Same Place?

Having said this, I think it is also important that we ask how rational or informed it is to say 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.’ But I say to you, God is not a place or an experience or a feeling. 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.”²

I would never say to my child trying to find the way home from school, “Go down any road or climb on any bus; they all wind up at home.” Could my child find the way home FROM any road or bus? Well, if he had a good guide, roadmap, or flexible bus driver, thankfully, YES! But could that child get woefully, maybe even dangerously lost by going down certain well-paved, well-travelled roads? Sadly, the answer is also YES.

Before an admirable spirit of goodwill leads us to blithely bless people toward outcomes true love would not wish someone, it seems important for us to know something about the different roads that are out there. 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 ontological 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 believe 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 purpose in it? You'll find that Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism answer these questions very differently. You'll also find that the cultures that grow up where those religions have flourished are quite different. Which offers the best hope of getting people to higher ground?

Are All Major Religions Partly True?

Maybe all religions do NOT lead to the same mountaintop after all. But are all major religions partly true? I, for one, think so. Genesis 1:26 teaches that humanity was made in the **"image and likeness"** of God. Stained by sin as our perceptions are, all human beings retain the capacity to recognize God. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has **"set eternity in the hearts"** of humanity. The Apostle Paul said in Acts 17:28 that it is in God that all people **"live and move and have [their] being."** Romans 1:20 says that **"since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been seen."**

If there is a universal God, don't you think we should expect to see some universality among the various religions? That's why 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 more faithfully than I often do.

It is also true that most major religions agree that you get to God by following 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. Does any of this sound familiar? It should. You can find some parallel between all of these sorts of religious steps and the spiritual disciplines embedded in historic Christianity.

The View from the Mountaintop

But there is one crucial truth that you will not find in any other world religion. In Christianity alone, you meet the radical idea that humanity cannot reach the mountaintop by its own effort. Here alone do you hear that the mountain of God, the true height of His holiness, is so great 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. And if you think about it, this makes sense.

One of atheist Richard Dawkins' principal objections to belief in God is that historical religions seem to so trivialize the concept. If there actually were a God, says Dawkins, a being capable

of making and sustaining a Universe like the one science shows we have, then this God would surely be infinitely larger than the puny imagination of conventional religion. And here, Dawkins is correct -- only he is apparently ignorant of the fact that he has actually stumbled into the center of historic Christian theology when he makes this point. **"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts,"** says God in Isaiah 55:9.

If you want to know what makes Christianity different... If you want to know why Christians believe there is one true way... then listen to these words of Jesus, recorded for us in Matthew 18:12-14. **"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."**

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 the other religions, He 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 posits 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. He laid himself out on a Cross and bled and died. The penalty that perfect holiness required for heinous sin, God took upon himself, so that humanity would not have to. Why did God do this? Because **"God so loved the world"** (John 3:16) that He was **"not willing than any of these little ones should be lost."**

How can Christianity say it is the one true way? The answer is: It can't. Christianity is the culture created by imperfect followers of Christ. Christianity is a wonderful worldview. But IT isn't the one true way. But Jesus is. He is the way into the heart of the heavenly Father from Whom all of us came. His sacrifice heals the broken communion with the God of perfect love that is the source of the problems this world suffers. His heart, mind, soul, and strength is the answer to the deepest longings of every person on earth. And His way of living leads us to the purpose for which we were made, the way of love this world needs to rediscover.

¹ Their source: David Barrett et al, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

² Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message* (Nashville TN: Word Publishing, 2000), pp.6-7.

THE ARROGANCE OF FAITH

Discussion Guide

1. On the scale below, rate how well you feel you understand the beliefs of the major world religions.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Largely Clueless Know the Basics Could Teach a Class

2. Which of the following views of the relationship between religion and truth best describes your orientation. What's behind this for you?
- All major religions are essentially true.
 - Each major religion is partly true.
 - All religions are fundamentally false.
3. What do you think or how do you feel about the claims of Jesus and Paul described in John 14:6 & Acts 14:12? (below)
4. How do you answer the Four Worldview Questions?
- Where did we come from?
 - What is the cause/root of our problems?
 - How can things be repaired?
 - What is my purpose?
5. To what extent would you say that are you still trying to "climb the mountain" of God through good deeds, acquisition of knowledge, religious rituals, etc.?
6. If you are doing so at all, does this come from a desire to REACH God or justify yourself before him –OR—is your journey more of a RESPONSE to his grace?
7. What do you personally find most encouraging or significant about the Christian faith?

John 14:6 (NIV)

⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Acts 4:12 (NIV)

¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Matthew 18:12-14 (NIV)

¹² "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? ¹³ 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.

¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.