

DOUBTING GOD: SPRING 2011 SERIES
WEEK 2—IS THERE ONLY ONE WAY TO GOD?

I. DISCUSSING THE DOUBT—What is the problem with saying that Jesus is the only way?

- A. Exclusive Religion Divides**—In the same way that the previous generation viewed political ideology (mostly Communism) as the greatest threat to peace, modern people see religion as one of the most divisive factors in the world today. I would largely agree that this is the case, noting that when one group claims to have the truth and the knowledge that people are saved by performing that truth, it creates superiority. The supposed superiority leads to a pulling away, pulling away to stereotyping, stereotyping to marginalization and possibly oppression.
- B. Exclusive Religion is Arrogant.** In the West, it is widely assumed that Christianity which claims that Jesus is the only way to a relationship with God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12) cannot be true because of the belief that there can't be just one true religion. Christianity is dismissed as untrue *because of the pre-existing assumption* that all religions are equally valid and true. The only “false” religion is one that claims to be *the* truth rather than one among many valid truths.

II. RELIGION AND EXCLUSION

- A. Mountains and Elephants.** Why not just admit that all religions are equally valid and true for its participants, that each religion is simply one of many paths up the same mountain. This has often been illustrated by the parable of the 3 blind men and the elephant. Can you see the contradiction in the story? The perspective is from someone who is not blind, someone who claims to be able to see the entire elephant?

Leslie Newbigin: There is an appearance of humility in the protestation that the truth is bigger than anyone of us can grasp, but if this is used to invalidate all claims to discern the truth it is in fact an arrogant claim to a kind of knowledge which is superior to all others...We have to ask: What is the absolute vantage ground from which you claim to be able to relativize all the absolute claims these different scriptures make?

We might say, but wait, isn't it just common sense to say that these are many paths up the same mountain? The answer is no because this particular doubt is a fairly recent one in history and deeply rooted in Western values of self-criticism. If you were born to Muslim parents in Iran, this doubt would probably never even cross your mind. Can you prove that there can't be just one true religion? No, it is not empirically provable nor universally accepted. As in the elephant illustration, such a statement is a faith claim of the highest order.

- B. Inclusive and Open View.** Our modern culture usually insists that the valid view of God is an “open” view that lets people draw their own personal conclusions about him (or her). Many times, the reference that people make to God is the “loving spirit in the sky” or that God is impersonal rather than speaking in scripture or that God is loving but not wrathful, etc.. There is difficulty with this view, however, because in an effort to be *inclusive*, it actually *excludes* all people everywhere who have specific ideas about what God is like (whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.). The modern “open” view of God itself is actually *closed and exclusive*, because it says that the *only valid view of God* is the view that the “one true God” is the God who is happy to let people think whatever they want to think about him. Again, this is an exclusive faith claim about the person, nature, and reality of God: God is laid back about things! But how would one know that? Why would one bet his/her life on such a faith? **Mark Lilla Illustration.**
- C. Religion—What is it?** Religion cannot simply be belief about God or belief in the supernatural (this would leave out Zen Buddhism and Hinduism). Religion is really a “set of beliefs that explain what life is all about, who we are, and the most important things that human beings

should spend their time doing.” (Tim Keller). In other words, everyone has a worldview, a lens through which we see the world, even if we haven’t thought about it. Underlying all of our statements about what a certain person should or should not do or how a government should or should not act, are faith convictions about what is right and wrong, what is good or bad, what will lead to flourishing or detriment, what humans are for or not for, etc. Therefore, religion is a set of faith assumptions about the nature of the world in which we live. This means that attempts to simply *privatize* religion cannot work because everyone has faith claims; everyone has a religion. Everyone—secular, scientific, Buddhist, or Christian—who enters the public square, is religious.

Professor Michael Perry: “To say that religious reasoning must be kept out of the public square because it’s faith based and controversial is itself a faith-based statement which is incredibly controversial, and therefore on it’s on terms ought to be thrown out.” The real question is not “who has exclusive beliefs and who doesn’t.” The question is which set of exclusive beliefs can produce peace-loving, reconciling, inclusive behavior.

III. THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY

- A. Imago Dei.** Christians believe that all people are created in the image of God (Gen. 1.26-28) and therefore have dignity and should be respected. Those with whom we disagree will have much to teach us, so this paves the way for respectful dialogue.
- B. Humility.** In other religions, one is saved by performing the truth and doing so more admirably than others. If you’re saved by performance, then superiority abounds, but the Christian Gospel says you’re not saved by your performance. This leads us to expect that people who don’t believe as we do might very well be better than us. We’re not saved b/c we’re wise, good, virtuous, or performing the truth; we’re saved because Jesus performed the truth. This is often stated as the very purpose of our faith (Rom. 3.27, I Cor. 1.29, Eph. 2.8-9). The Gospel humbles us before others with whom we disagree.
- C. Incarnation.** One reason that Christians don’t accept the “many paths up one mountain” argument is that’s not how Christianity works at all. That illustration assumes that God is up in the sky somewhere and that every religious person is using his/her particular system to step higher and higher until one day achieving into God’s presence. But Christianity teaches that God came off the mountain. Christians believe that God did not wait for you and me to climb to His heights, to achieve anything with Him. Instead, God came off the mountain, He came down; He got His hands dirty; Despite desire for autonomy apart from Him, He loved you and me so much that, He became a man, lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. If the heart of God was to lovingly live with and pursue those who opposed Him, how can Christians not adopt the same heart toward those around us?
- D. Sacrifice.** When Christianity began to grow in the earliest days, they lived in a world of what looked like inclusive religion—everyone had their own god! Christians came along and said, “Jesus is Lord of all.” It seems that this would create division but it actually created the most inclusive society ever known. Greeks didn’t mix rich and poor, but Christians did. The Jews didn’t mix the races but the Christians did. In fact, Christianity was a scandal in the way they mixed race and class, a scandal in the way they elevated women’s rights, and a scandal in the way they cared for the poor and those dying in the urban plagues of the first two centuries. This is why Paul could proclaim that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ. How did such inclusive, sacrificial unity come about? Christians believe that ultimate reality is visible in Jesus Christ, and this ultimate reality is always about a man dying on a cross, loving people who don’t love him, forgiving people who abuse him, and sacrificially serving people who oppose him. The heart of Christianity is the cross, and on it we find a Savior who did not lash out in anger or condemnation but who lived and died in self-sacrificing love. Christians must live by and in this story. (*Teaching taken and adapted from Tim Keller*)