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## Why So Many Religions?

a sermon on Romans 1.18-25

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A young man was confused. At church he heard that Jesus is the only way to God. Jesus is unique. If Jesus is who he claimed to be, then no one comes to the Father but by him. And the young man believed this. He believed in Jesus. He was a Christian. At the same time, at school he learned about all the other religions of the world. There are the big ones: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. There are also smaller ones. Lots of them, in fact. The world turns out to be a very religious, a very *diversely* religious place. The young man wondered: Does the existence of so many religions count against the Christian claim that Jesus is the only way? If Christianity is right, why are there so many other religions?

Have you ever wondered about this? Why are there so many religions? Atheism offers an answer. The atheist says all religions are wrong, and they exist, because people made them up. Religion is nothing more than people projecting their hopes and fears onto the cosmos. If you ask the atheist why people would do that, where the religious impulse comes from – after all, of all the animals on earth, only human beings are religious – you get all sorts of answers. Freud said we do it because of our fathers; we want an all-powerful Father in the sky. Marx said religion was invented by elites in order to control and exploit everyone else. Others have said it's just a coping mechanism, a way to explain and control a world we cannot explain or control.

The atheist answers prove unconvincing. If religion is about a father-figure, how do you explain Buddhism, which doesn't include a god at all? And it is true that religion has been used to control the masses and exploit people, but weren't those old kings just tapping into an impulse that was already there. That doesn't explain where the impulse comes from. As for a coping mechanism, yes, people have tried to control weather for crops or get healing from sickness through various religions. What made them think to do that? Ancient Canaanites and Egyptians, ancient Mayans halfway around the world, ancient Japanese – they had different religious systems. Yet all of them offered some kind of offering or sacrifice. Why? Where does that impulse come from?

Besides, just because people want there to be a God does not mean God cannot exist – any more than if I am thirsty and want a glass of water, therefore water cannot exist. Doesn't it make more sense to look at it the other way? The fact that I am thirsty is rooted in the truth that my body needs water and water exists. By the same logic,

shouldn't the universal human desire for God indicate to us that we need God and he exists? The atheist recognizes that human beings are religious, but is unable to offer a compelling explanation why.

There is also a liberal answer. The liberal says all religions are equally true. Each grasps a part, but only a small part, of the divine. This seems to make sense, until we actually listen to what the different religions are saying. Christianity says God is Triune – one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Islam says that is blasphemous; God is One, period. Christianity, Judaism and Islam say God is personal; he is a person, and he is good. Hinduism says the ultimate divine is an impersonal force that transcends good and evil. Buddhism, in its pure form, claims no god at all. They cannot all be right. They might all be right about one or two little points, but about the big stuff, they simply cannot all be right at the same time. So saying all religions are equally true really means they are all equally false.

Notice, by the way, that while the liberal answer appears to be the opposite of the atheist one. The atheist says all religions are wrong. The liberal says they are all right. In fact, both answers start from the common assumption that religion is something invented by human beings. Most religious people would dispute that. The Muslim believes God revealed the Koran to Mohammad. The Jew believes God lead Israel out of Egypt and made a covenant with Israel. The Christian believes Jesus revealed God to us and died and rose again. All religions claim to be rooted in truth, not just something we made up. But if they are right – if at least one of them is right – and God has made himself known, why are there so many other religions?

The Christian answer comes, of course, from the Bible. And one of the most important passages for the Christian answer is our text for today. Christianity begins with the truth that God made us. He made us in his image. He made us to enjoy fellowship with him. We are made for God as a fish is made for water. We are made to run on God as a car is made to run on gasoline. This is where our religious impulse comes from. It is hardwired into us. We were created that way.

However, the way things stand, we are alienated from God. We sinned. Our ancestors ate the fruit. And ever since then it is as if we don't know God anymore. We have turned our backs on him. As Paul says, we suppressed the truth. Although we ought to know God, we do not. God's wrath is to give us precisely what we want. We want to be our own boss? We want him to step aside? Fine! God gave us up to the consequences of our rebellion, and the result is we've lost our way. We have become futile in our thinking. We have lost God. If we are going to ever find him again, he will have to find us. He will have to make himself known to us.

So this is our predicament: We were made for fellowship with God. We are hardwired to worship God. But because of our rebellion against God, our fellowship with him is

broken. So what do we do? We feed our religious impulse the same way we feed our hunger when there is no food. I read about a guy who got lost in the Canadian wilderness. He ran out of food. In his hunger, he started to eat things that were not food, just to stop the pain in his stomach. Mostly he ate tree bark. He was eventually rescued. He had lost a lot of weight. The tree bark did him no good nutritionally. He knew it wouldn't. But he was so hungry, he had to eat *something*.

That's what happens with our religious impulse – our hunger for God – when we are separated from God. We find something to fill the hole. Some of the ancients worshipped idols or nature. Some invented gods. Today we have all kinds of religious choices, and for those not into religion, one can always worship power, sex, or money. Those are the gods of choice in our culture.

If Christianity is right about God creating us in his image to enjoy fellowship with him, and about our rebellion and Fall, then we ought to expect tremendous religious diversity, as many religions as there are languages. And that's exactly what we find.

Still, with so many religions making competing truth claims, how can we know Christianity is right? The touchstone for measuring any religion is Jesus. Of course, other religions would disagree with that, but consider: Jesus is unique. He alone among the founders of the great religions claimed to be divine. Muslims would never say that about Muhammad. Some Buddhists worship the Buddha as divine, but they do so in direct contradiction of the Buddha's own teachings. He never claimed to be divine. Jesus did. Jesus also died on a cross. If he did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is false. If Jesus did not rise, Christianity is a dangerous, pernicious lie. But if he did ... if the Father raised him on the third day, so that he lives and reigns today ... then he is who he claimed to be. He *is* the ultimate revelation of God. God has come looking for us. And, no matter how you end up answering the questions that have torn the church into different denominations, there is something to Christianity. *We have a living Savior.*

If Jesus was right, and he rose from the dead, then he is the only way to God. Not only because he said so. And he did say so very explicitly: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" – John 14.6. Not only that, but also the logic of the cross demands it. Think about it: Christianity says the eternal Son of God became human and died an agonizing death on the cross so that your rebellion could be forgiven and your relationship with God restored. God gives us mercy, but it is a mercy that cost him dearly. If our need was so great that he had to do that, how could we hope to overcome it through good works, enlightenment, or other religious works? If there are other ways to God – through Hinduism or Islam, for example, or just being a nice person – why would Jesus have to die? Why would God provide one more way that cost him so much? It just doesn't make sense. If Jesus rose again, then

his death was *necessary* for your salvation. And if it was necessary, any religion that does not offer you the Savior is inadequate.

Jesus is the measure of any religion. Does this mean that we as Christians ought to fear other religions or look down on them? Not at all. Does this mean that all other religions are empty of truth? No way. Many of the great religions have grasped an essential truth very clearly. Remember what Paul said in Romans 1. We are alienated from God, but he has not left us without a witness. Our text says, "For what can be known about God is plain to them [that is, human beings], because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse." Theologians call this "natural revelation," what we can know about God from the world he has made. Natural revelation doesn't tell us enough to find God or to be saved, but it does let us know he is there and gives us an inkling of what he is like. Therefore, because people are religious and something about God can be known, we should be surprised if no one ever got anything right in their religion.

I say we ought to respect the great religions and learn about them – and even learn from them. I say we ought to look for common ground to talk with our neighbors of other faiths, and share our faith with them. There is much truth in other religions. The problem with them is that they lack the living Savior.

Take Judaism for example. Judaism is a religion founded on direct revelation from God. God spoke to Moses and the prophets. God called Abraham and made him a great nation. Judaism is right about everything, with one exception. Jesus. Add the confession "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" to Judaism and you have the New Testament church. Judaism knows God. But it does not acknowledge the Savior.

Islam came along after Christianity. It is very different in many respects. But Muslims understand two important things well: the sovereignty of God and the importance of submission. Islam means "submission." Muslims believe God is a holy, awesome, righteous God, and therefore the only proper attitude toward him is submission. "Not my will but yours be done," we might say. They are so right about this. But again, Islam does not offer the Savior.

The big difference between Islam and Christianity is this: In Islam, God might love you, but God cannot *be* love. Christianity says God *is* love. And we believe this because we believe in the Trinity. From all eternity the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, the Spirit loves the Father and the Son. One God in three Persons who love one another. If God is triune, love can be his essential nature. If God is strictly One, he might act in ways we would perceive as loving, but he cannot be love.

I have had some Muslim friends, and in talking with them, it seems to me that the Muslim idea of grace is, God grades on a curve. God knows we are weak and prone to sin, but God is merciful, so if you get the big stuff right – like believing the Koran – he will overlook the other stuff. I find this surprising and confusing, because Muslims tend to be big on God’s justice. They are big on God’s holiness and righteousness. But if he’s grading on a curve, that’s not justice. And what becomes of his holiness? If he is as righteous and just as they say, how can he also be merciful?

That’s a big problem, one answered by ... the Savior, Jesus Christ. According to Christianity, God is perfectly just. He leaves no sin unpunished, however minor. You either pay for your sin yourself, or God nails it to the cross. On the cross Jesus died in your place. He paid the price for your sin. Because of that, God can let you go scot free. God is holy and just because he takes evil seriously and punishes sin. God is loving and perfectly gracious and merciful because he forgives you. He can be both at the same time because he paid the price himself.

Buddhism ... I have to admit, I like the Buddha. He did a better job diagnosing the human condition than anyone in history apart from divine revelation. The Buddha began life as a wealthy prince. He had anything and everything he wanted, but life was somehow empty. He went on a spiritual quest. He came to see our selfishness – our desire – as the root of human discontent. We want more and more. We can never be satisfied. The answer, he decided, is to extinguish the desire.

The Buddha was so right in his diagnosis. No one without divine revelation ever saw the human problem more clearly than he did. But he was so wrong in his prescription. He did not use the word *sin*, but he recognized we are sinful. Our selfish desires are like a cancer that threatens to destroy us from the inside out. What was the Buddha’s cure? Kill the patient. Kill the patient and you kill the cancer. Nirvana, nothingness. Transcend yourself. Escape yourself. He diagnosed the disease, but lacking a cure, he did the best he could.

Jesus offers the cure. Jesus says he can kill the cancer without killing the patient. He offers to give you a new heart, to make you a new creation. The old has to die – the sinful part of you – the cancer of the soul. But you live. You live eternally because God loves you and delights in you.

You see how all that is good and true in the various religions opens a door for you to talk to people of those faiths. You don’t have to be an expert on religions to do this. I am certainly not one. All you have to do is talk to your neighbor and listen. Ask about their faith. You will find the common ground. Should you share your faith? Should you tell them about Jesus? Absolutely! Everyone needs Jesus. He is, after all, the unique Savior – the One God sent to rescue us from our predicament. Do not be pushy.

Be a friend. Be kind and generous. Just share about Jesus and why you believe in him. Anything after that is up to God. Your friend may drop the subject or ask questions. Don't be afraid to talk about religion. And do not be afraid of people who have a different religion.

Deep down we are all the same. We are all made for God. We all need God. We are all looking for something to fill that hole, something ultimate to give us significance. We all start out alienated from God. Human nature has been corrupted, so we all have that sinful, selfish heart that says, "Me! Me! Me! Mine! Mine! Mine!" Deep down we know the world doesn't revolve around "me," but we all wish it did.

That's why we all need grace. We all need the Savior. We need forgiveness. We need a new and right relationship with God. We need new hearts. All of us. And if God has given you his grace and brought you into his family through the Savior, then you know how wonderful that is. And you ought to want others to share your joy.

So do the many religions of the world count against the truth of Christianity or the uniqueness of Jesus? Not at all! If Christianity is true, we ought to expect religious diversity. We also ought to expect God to make himself known through the preaching of the gospel and the witness of the church. We find that too. God loves this world and the people in it. All of them. That's why he commands us to share the Good News. Amen.

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