

WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE THAT ONLY ONE RELIGION IS TRUE? JOHN 8:21-24, 14:1-6; ACTS 4:8-12

There's a story of a Sunday School teacher asking his class this question: "What is faith?" One young boy responded, "Believing something you know isn't true." Faith – which might be another word for your religious beliefs – is often seen as believing in something that's nice, or good, or helpful, but not necessarily true. I believe many people in our culture would answer that question like this: "Faith is believing something I'd like to be true or I hope to be true, but I'm not sure is, in fact, true."

This is the first Sunday of the Christian season of Lent – a forty day period of time that leads up to Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Day. Over the centuries, Christians have observed it in different ways. In most cases, Lent is a time of preparation, reflection and meditation leading up to and including the celebration of the central story of the Christian faith – the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Now, it's an obvious fact that most people in the world are not Christians. Why is that so? Quite simply, everyone is not convinced that the Christian faith is true. In fact, many believe Christianity is false. They have doubts, questions and objections. So this Lenten season, I want us to consider seven objections to the Christian faith that we hear quite often in our own culture.

Why? Well, the Bible implies that we need to understand the culture in which we live and the objections that are raised against Christianity so that we can be better equipped to answer questions and respond to those objections. The Bible says, "... 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 Pt 3:15 NIV) If one of our primary tasks in being a follower of Jesus is helping other people to become His followers, then we have to understand where they are coming from so we can respond to them in ways they understand. And notice carefully the spirit or attitude that we need to have as we do so – "with gentleness and respect." Very few – if any – people ever become Christians because we have implied that they're dopes for not believing the way we do! We live in a rude, crude, and "in your face" culture. That's all the more reason to explain patiently, lovingly, gently and respectfully why we follow Jesus to those who question us about our faith.

But there's yet another reason. From time to time along life's spiritual journey, we need to think through these objections to the Christian faith. The truth is that we ourselves often have incredibly profound doubts about Jesus – what to believe about Him and what it means to follow Him. Yes, doubt can be a sin, but not always. I believe God can use doubt to help us work through hard questions and ultimately come to a deeper and more informed faith. Doubt can force you to figure out what you believe and why. God can use your doubts to encourage you to own your own faith in Jesus more fully. My hope is that as we ask and answer these questions, our faith will get stronger and be more alive by Easter Day. So,

let's get started with this question. Why should I believe that only one religion – the Christian faith - is true? In trying to answer that question, let's try to ask and answer three questions. Here's the first one:

IS CHRISTIANITY EXCLUSIVE?

The first answer to that question is that Jesus certainly believed He Himself was and is the only way to a relationship with God. Two Bible passages will suffice for today. The first is John 8:21-24. What's going on here? Well, the relationship between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders of His day was rapidly deteriorating. When Jesus says to them here that He is going to a place they cannot come, He means Heaven. They scratch their heads and wonder what He means. The only place inaccessible to them – at least to their own way of thinking - was hell. They couldn't possibly end up there. Jewish theology at that time taught that if you committed suicide you were consigned to the deepest, darkest part of hell. So they speculate here that maybe Jesus is going to kill Himself and thereby end up in a place where they cannot possibly go.

Jesus' answer is another example of His use of the great "I AM" statements throughout the Gospel of John. For instance, "I am the Bread of Life... I am the Good Shepherd... I am the Resurrection and the Life." But here Jesus doesn't attach a predicate. He just refers to Himself as the I AM in the absolute sense: "... if you do not believe that I am, you will indeed die in your sins." So what is Jesus' saying? "I am God in your midst. If you do not accept who I am, you cannot receive the gift of life I am offering to you right now. If you persist in rejecting me, you will be doomed to an eternity without God." By implication, Jesus is also saying, "If you do believe in Me, then you will live. When you believe in Me, you enter into a personal relationship with God Himself."

Let's look at something else Jesus said in John 14:1-6. Clearly, Jesus sees Himself here as the only way to God. The way to God isn't about keeping a set of moral rules; it's not about observing religious rituals; it's not about believing certain doctrines. The way to God is a Person - Jesus. Jesus is completely exclusive here. Jesus sees Himself as the truth about God. Again, ultimate truth isn't a concept, or a philosophy, or mastering a body of knowledge. Truth is a Person. Jesus sees Himself as the life of God. Again, real life isn't a concept, or a mass of chemical reactions or a biological force. Life is a Person. Without that Person, there is no life. Since only God has life in Himself, when Jesus claims this for Himself, He is calling Himself God. Jesus claims to be God here and claims to be the exclusive way to God, the exclusive truth about God and the exclusive provider of God's life.

The second answer to our question is that the first Christians certainly believed salvation was available only through Jesus. Let's look at Acts 4:8-12. Jesus has been resurrected and has ascended back to Heaven. The Holy Spirit has come down from Heaven and the Church has been birthed. Two disciples of Jesus,

Peter and John, had been thrown into prison for preaching about Jesus and for healing a crippled man. The next day they appear before the Jewish Supreme Court – the Sanhedrin – to answer to the charges against them. Very quickly, Peter moves from defense to prosecution and ends up preaching to the Sanhedrin – the same group that had condemned Jesus to death just a few months previously. His message? It is only through this once despised and executed, but now risen and glorified, Jesus that true salvation is possible for any and all. To repudiate Him is to miss out on God's deliverance.

Is Christianity exclusive? The answer is "Yes!" And the third answer to that question is that to be faithful to Jesus is to believe in His superiority and exclusivity. When Christians assert that Jesus is only way to God, they aren't suggesting that they think they're better than or smarter than anyone else. Christians are exclusive because Jesus Himself was exclusive. Christians are exclusive because the earliest followers of Jesus were exclusive. You can't be faithful to Jesus and affirm anything else. I'm fully aware that there those who call themselves Christians who deny Jesus' superiority. They believe there might be other ways to God, but their own, personal way is Jesus. All I can say is that such a position is hypocritical. It might be well intentioned or an effort to appear humble, but it's a denial of basic Christianity.

Christopher Hitchens recently died of cancer. You might recognize him as the noted atheist who authored the bestselling book *God Is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything*. Since the book's publication in 2007, Hitchens toured the country debating a series of religious leaders, including some well-known evangelical thinkers. At one stop in Portland, Oregon, Hitchens laid down some seriously good theology. He was interviewed by a Unitarian minister, Marilyn Sewell. The following exchange took place near the start of the interview:

Sewell says, "The religion you cite in your book is generally the fundamentalist faith of various kinds. I'm a liberal Christian, and I don't take the stories from the Scripture literally. I don't believe in the doctrine of atonement (that Jesus died for our sins, for example). Do you make any distinction between fundamentalist faith and liberal religion?" Hitchens responds: "I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you're really not in any meaningful sense a Christian." Sewell wanted no part of that discussion so her next words are, "Let me go someplace else."

That little snippet demonstrates an important point about religious "God-talk." You can call yourself anything you like, but if you don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross for our sins and then rose from the dead, and that He is the one and only way to God, you are not "in any meaningful sense" a Christian. Talk about nailing it. An outspoken atheist grasps the central tenet of Christianity better than many Christians do. Well, another question now:

WHAT CAN YOU SAY TO YOUR CULTURE?

Without a doubt, it's considered unenlightened and outrageous in today's culture to make exclusive religious claims even in personal conversations. And even some religious people have bought into this perspective. A Jewish rabbi, Schmuley Boteach, says the following: "I am absolutely against any religion that says that one faith is superior to another. I don't see how that is anything different than spiritual racism. It's a way of saying that we are closer to God than you, and that's what leads to hatred." No atheist or secular humanist could have said it any better! We need to hear what our culture says about religion and exclusivity and then offer some observations about those claims. Let's boil it down to three statements that I'm sure you've heard in one way or another many times.

Here's the first one. "All religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing. Therefore, it's arrogant to insist your religion is right." What's questionable about that observation? First, it's an arrogant opinion itself because it presents as absolute truth a claim that is unprovable and not universally accepted. Most people in the world don't hold the view that all religions are equally valid. The two largest religious groups in the world – Christians and Moslems – don't believe all religions are equally valid. Secondly, its assumption that all religions basically teach the same thing is just flat out wrong. Our views of God are different. Buddhism is essentially atheistic. Hinduism believes in many gods. Yes, Islam, Judaism and Christianity all believe in one God, but Christianity teaches that God is a Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Both Islam and Judaism reject the Trinity. Islam accepts Jesus as a prophet, but denies that He is the Son of God. Judaism and Christianity believe in God the Father, but Judaism does not accept God as being the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our views of salvation are different. Every other religion is essentially an effort to gain a relationship with God or get into Heaven through one's own personal effort and moral behavior. Only Christianity teaches that your salvation is made possible through the actions of another – Jesus Christ. Our views of Heaven are different. The Hindus' Nirvana is not the Islamic concept of Heaven which is not the Christian understanding of Heaven.

Third, the statement reveals assumptions about God, truth and religion that are equally religious and exclusive. In short, the statement contradicts itself. After all, what is religion? Religion is simply 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. Any set of faith assumptions about the nature of things is an implicit religion. When you insist that doctrines, beliefs or teaching do not matter – or that differences between them don't matter – that is a religious perspective. The statement offers a specific view of God which is considered more enlightened and superior than the beliefs of most other religions across the world. How is that any less arrogant than those who hold a different viewpoint?

Here's a second statement that you will hear people in our culture offer in various forms: "Each religion sees part of spiritual truth but none can see the whole truth." A common parable or story is used to illustrate the supposed truth of this viewpoint: the blind men and the elephant. Several blind men were walking along and came upon an elephant that allowed them to touch and feel it. The first man felt the elephant's trunk and thought it was like a snake. Another blind man felt the elephant's leg and concluded that it was thick and round like a tree trunk. A third blind man felt the elephant's side and was of the opinion that the creature was large and flat. Each blind man could feel only part of the elephant. None could envision the entire animal. In the same way, it's argued, the religions of the world each have a grasp on part of spiritual reality, but none of them can see the whole elephant or have a comprehensive vision of the truth.

What's the problem with this perspective? First, of all it's arrogance masquerading as humility. To claim that truth is much greater than any one of us can grasp is to claim a kind of knowledge about truth itself which is superior to everyone else. What ability or vantage point does such a person possess to make such a claim? Furthermore, the story of the blind men and the elephant backfires. The story is told from the point of view of someone who isn't blind! How could you know that each blind man only sees part of the elephant unless you claim to be able to see the whole elephant?

Second, its assumptions about the nature of truth are questionable at best and nonsense at worst. Truth is exclusive by its very nature, isn't it? Two plus two is four. It excludes all other possibilities. By the same token, to deny that truth is exclusive is to make a claim about truth that is itself exclusive. How is that not just as arrogant as people who argue that truth is absolute? As Christians, we believe Jesus is the truth whether or not you believe in Him. He doesn't become true because you believe in Him, nor does He become less true because you refuse to believe in Him. Truth isn't determined by figuring out the majority view in some opinion poll or taking a vote.

Here's a third statement you've no doubt encountered. "To insist that one faith has a better grasp of the truth than others is intolerant. What matters is to believe in God and to be a loving, good person." Again, what's the problem with this perspective? First, it is an exclusive religious statement in and of itself; therefore, it's contradictory. Apparently, any claim to have exclusive knowledge of spiritual truth cannot be true. But that objection is a religious belief in and of itself. It assumes God is unknowable or that God has not revealed Himself in any definitive way. That is a faith assumption itself that you cannot prove. Furthermore, in the name of being tolerant, one must be intolerant of any religious belief that claims to have an exclusive grasp on spiritual reality. Two, it fails to recognize that all of us are exclusive in our beliefs about religion but in different ways. Is it really any different to claim that one religion is right than to claim that one way to think about all religions – that all of them are equal, for instance – is right?

The second part of that quote is clearly a religious belief. It sounds good. What's wrong with it? It assumes wrongly that morality is the test of whether something is true or not. Many people look at the moral substance of someone's life and conclude on that basis whether someone will end up in Heaven or not. Let's face it! You can find many people who don't believe in Jesus who live better lives and more moral lives than people who do believe in Jesus. But Christianity says that Jesus didn't tell us how to live so we could change our behavior and somehow merit or earn salvation. Instead, He comes to forgive and save us Himself. We aren't accepted by God because of our moral performance but instead upon Christ's work on our behalf. In fact, Jesus didn't come into the world to make bad people good, but instead to make spiritually dead people spiritually alive! If this life were only about morality, then how you live would be the most important thing of all. But that isn't Christianity. Christianity says no matter how well you live, you can never live up to the standard and character of God. Your only hope is Jesus Christ. Well, we could go on and on, but here's a final question to ask and try to answer.

WHY BELIEVE CHRISTIANITY IS THE ONE TRUE RELIGION?

Why do so many people still reject Christianity? Christianity is a reasonable, logical account of reality, but that doesn't mean you can provide conclusive, empirical, "in a test tube or a science lab" kind of proof for Christianity's claims. By the way, to demand that of Christianity or any religion is unfair. Not even scientists operate like that. Let's face it. Some people just don't find Christianity's teaching and beliefs convincing personally. They can find rational reasons that make sense to them at a personal level to avoid or escape the logic of the Christian position. But for other people the issue is not intellectual hang ups. It's a matter of human pride and a stubborn unwillingness to believe. After all, Jesus calls you to die to yourself. He violates your sense of being in charge of your own life. He challenges you in the area of purity. To truly understand what it means to follow Jesus is to make a very profound, life changing choice. It's not an easy choice and it shouldn't be.

Why believe Christianity is the one true religion? For me, there is really only one good answer. The Christian faith provides the best answers to life's questions. I didn't say Christianity provides all the answers. There are still lots of mysteries and unanswered questions. I don't even deny that other religions might be able to provide some good answers. There is some truth in other religions. There are attractive features in other religions. However, I believe that when you compare and contrast what Christianity says about who God is, about what it means to be human, about why sin and evil are present in the world, about God's remedy and how we can respond, about the future with the beliefs of other religions, Christianity provides the most coherent, most satisfying, most reasonable answers. I don't think it's even close.

Penn Jillette is one half of Penn and Teller, a duo that has been headlining Vegas shows for years with comedy and the art of illusion. He's the big, tall one with long hair in a pony tail. Penn Jillette is an atheist. He's never been shy about his disbelief in God, often writing about his conviction in articles and best-selling books. Yet in an on-line video blog that can be found on YouTube, Penn shares a story about the time a gracious Christian businessman gave him a Bible as a gift. Penn goes on to use the story as an opportunity to point out that Christians who don't evangelize must really hate people. Here's the direct quote from his video blog:

"I've always said, you know, that I don't respect people who do not proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that, uh, well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward—and atheists who think that people shouldn't proselytize, [saying] "Just leave me alone and keep your religion to yourself"—uh, how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize them? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed beyond the shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming to hit you, and you didn't believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there's a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that."

Penn Jillette is exactly right. The biggest problem is not that non-Christians don't believe Christianity is the one, true religion. The biggest problem is that we Christians don't seem to believe our faith is the one, true religion. Oh, we may believe that intellectually or as a point of doctrine, but do we believe that in our everyday, walk around lives? Who are you praying for to become a follower of Jesus? Who are you building a relationship with that needs Jesus? Who have you spoken to lately about his or her need to receive what only Jesus can give? Isn't that the place where we discover what we really believe?