

ARE ALL RELIGIONS THE SAME?

Acts 4:12

Critical Searching Inquiries Series

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I remember a visit I had a few years ago with a young woman who is a college graduate. In the course of our conversation she began to talk about how she doesn't see much difference between the different world religions like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and most all the rest.

She told me that she believes we are all worshipping the same God in simply different ways and she believes that each of these religious roads are essentially leading to the same place—to the same spiritual oneness with God or heaven depending on what one prefers to call it. She believes each religion has their own truth and that you can find your truth in whichever of these paths you choose.

Now this thinking, of course, is definitely popular among many of those who consider themselves the “enlightened” thinkers of today. In fact, this thinking is very prevalent on many college campuses and is the attitude of many young adults. It is a way that many are choosing to survive in our pluralistic and religiously diverse society.

So the question we are going to focus on this morning is, “Are all religions the same?” Are they all simply a different form or expression of the same thing? Are we all worshipping essentially the same God and are they all heading toward the same place?

In beginning to look deeper at these questions I want to first of all lift up the truth that inside each and every person there is a longing, an emptiness, a hole that is yearning to be filled with God. Inside every person there is a spiritual nature that longs to worship and reach out to something greater than oneself.

For this reason basically every culture and people who have been studied have always had a form of religion, or some form of worship or focus on a deity, or various deities. As anthropologists have studied long-lost tribes and as archeologists have studied ancient civilizations they have usually found that each one has some form of belief in a spiritual realm.

This affirms, of course, our belief as Christians that no person is a blank slate when they are born or that people are just random blobs of protoplasm. Rather, we believe that each person is a special creation of God and that each person is created with a spiritual inner soul that longs to be in relationship with the everlasting God.

So it certainly follows that every culture and person will reach for a way to fill up this need. And if Christianity or one of the major religions are not in that culture they will develop their own. People are prone to find some way to connect with that which is bigger than they are.

The well-known church father, Augustine, said these words, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” God has placed in every person that restlessness for him. And this has certainly led to many of the different religions and philosophies to come into being.

Another reality with the many and various religions in our world is that many of them do share some similar teachings with Christianity and with each other. In fact, most religions have some form of “love your neighbor as you love yourself,” as well as some good virtues upon which to live one’s life. And they have some really good people who are members.

The reality is that there may be some good wisdom and truth in these other religions. In other words, it is not that these other belief systems are devoid of anything good or that they are necessarily evil. In fact, there are certainly things that we can learn from these people and religions, things which can help make us more loving and compassionate.

So if people have a built in need to worship and there are truths in each religion then aren’t all religions the same? The reality is no they are not the same. Even though they may be focused on some of the same goals and may hold some similar truths they are not the same. It is not simply comparing apples to apples.

The important factor that makes them different is Jesus. Acts 4:12 states, “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.*” How we are saved eternally by God is what makes our beliefs different.

As we study the other religions of the world their focus is not on a personal God. In fact, their god is often distant, often vengeful, often living in statues or things. The focus is not on a god who one can know in an intimate way or on a god who cares about and knows them by name.

In contrast with all these other religions Christianity is based on the truth that our God didn’t stay an obscure figure off in the clouds somewhere, but rather he came to earth in a little baby in a manger and he gave up his life for you. God became flesh so we might know him as a friend.

It is because of Jesus that we know that our God is gracious and forgiving. It is because of Jesus that we know we can pray to God as a loving father. It is because of Jesus that we know there is a place reserved for us in heaven. Jesus helps us know God in a real and personal way.

A second major difference between Christianity and other world religions is the motivation with which to serve God. In the other religions there is an emphasis on all the things that a person needs to do to be right with their god. They need to pray bowing a certain way 7-time a day.

They need to do certain rituals in order to appease their god or to prove that they are worthy followers. They need to try to use transcendental meditation or yoga technique to try and achieve spiritual oneness with the infinite. They need to pray that in their reincarnated life, they may be in a better place than they are in this life.

The emphasis in all these religions is “do.” Every aspect is focused on what they need to do to attain their own salvation, their own nirvana, their own godly being. It is centered completely on the person, the individual being the master of their own destiny.

In our Christian faith, on the other hand, the focus is not on “do” but on “done.” The good news is that our God through Jesus has done it all for you and for me. Jesus died on the cross, and rose from the grave, to pay the complete price for all our sins and failings. Jesus satisfied all the requirements so you can be completely free.

This means that none of us are saved by what we do, or by how righteous we are, but rather are saved only by the grace and love of God in Jesus. We cannot earn our own way to God. We cannot achieve our own spiritual goodness. It is all a gift of our loving God, to simply be received by faith.

So the reason we as Christians worship God is out of praise and thanksgiving for his wonderful love. The reason we love our neighbor as we love ourselves is because Jesus has first loved us. And the reason we seek to follow his commands, and to live moral and upright lives, is out of love for him. It is not a have to, but a want to.

The Christian life is one that is filled with freedom and joy. It is one that celebrates and values each person and life. It is one that values the freedoms of others and works for justice and peace for all people. The Christian life is one which cares for the hungry, the needy, the oppressed.

In a world where some religions dictate that they are to rule the government, and that all who believe contrary to their beliefs should be denied rights, Christianity is the religion who reaches out in love to all people. There are Christian missionaries all over the world bringing medical care, food, and clothing to people no matter what their background. All in the name of Jesus.

My friends, I know that it is popular today to promote that all religions are the same, or that it really doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something. And I know that we need to be tolerant and understanding of whatever way people choose to worship or live their faith—and protect that freedom in the US.

And yet the thing we need to remember is that these religions are not the same as our Christian faith and they are not simply another expression of the same thing. Without knowing Jesus and his amazing love they do not know God in the same way. And they do not know the freeing power of our gracious God.

So while we certainly respect, and care for, and are good neighbors to people who are of other religions, don't you think we should also want to share with them this amazing message of Jesus? Don't you think we should want each person to know that our God is a personal God who loves them, and has done it all that they, too, might have eternal life as a gift?

I know today, my friends, that even among Christians there is often the attitude that we should keep the message of Jesus hidden away, or that we should simply avoid witnessing to these people. And yet we need to learn from Jesus himself.

Jesus taught us to love, to listen and to be a friend to all people. And he taught us to also be aware of the opportunities we might have to walk across the room and share our story with someone else. Don't argue religion or philosophy. Simply share what Jesus is doing in your life, and the love and freedom you have found in him.

My friends, many people worship a god, or gods, or manifestations of our God. He placed that need in our hearts. And yet only in Jesus do we know the true face and true nature of God. May you get to know Jesus better each day, so you will be set free to worship and live for him in all his beauty, and in all his glory.