

SESSION 2 NOTES

How Can You Say There Is Only One Way to God? What About Other Religions?

Opening Thought

If you put three swimmers on the Coast of California and ask them to swim to Hawaii, the Olympic swimmer might swim 500 miles before she dies. The second swimmer might be a good swimmer, and swim 25 miles before he dies. And the last swimmer does not know how to swim very well and swims only one mile before he dies. So you might say that the Olympics swimmer is 500 times better as a swimmer than the third one. Who is more dead? Nobody can get to Hawaii on the basis of their own swimming ability. The Bible says we are supposed to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Nobody gets there. The unique message of Christianity is that you “get there” not because of your own effort, your own good works, but because you put your trust in what Jesus did for you on the cross.

The Objection

People say that since there are so many ways to find God, Christianity is only one among many valid options. The other religions of the world have millions of adherents, producing much wisdom, character, and happiness; so Christian should not claim to have the best faith or the only true faith.

Video Notes — <http://youtu.be/V9wA8ZiKtN4>

Questions for Discussion

1. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Lesslie Newbigin writes,

In the past thirty years Europeans have become accustomed for the first time to the presence in their midst of large numbers of people of other faiths. It has not taken long for them to discover that many of these Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Muslims are devout and godly people. ... Since the inter-religious issue is usually compounded by the inter-racial issue, and since we are aware of the racism which infects us so deeply, there are the strongest emotional reasons for regarding religious pluralism is something to be accepted and welcomed. ... In a world threatened with nuclear war, a world facing a global ecological crisis, a world more and more closely bound together in its cultural and economic life, the paramount need is for unity, and an aggressive claim

on the part of one of the world's religions to have the truth for all can only be regarded as treason against the human race.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith writes in his book *Religious Diversity*,

At the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: "...we believe that we know God and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong."

Discuss the implications of these statements. Why do you think people today are so insistent that all religions are equally valid?

- *The similarity of many religions* — Many Christian groups (e.g., Protestants, Roman Catholics, and some of the cults like Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons) have similarities in their doctrines and ethics.
- *A concern for unity*** — Many people believe that to ever have peace in the world, we have to defang religion. They believe that religions in general erode peace on earth and lead to strife, conflict, and division. Christians must admit that this has often been true.
- *The experience of exclusion*** — Many people have felt coerced, excluded, and exploited by profession Christians. Religion tells people that they have the truth and that this is the right way to believe and act—that can make people feel superior, leading them to caricature others, separate from them, exclude them, think of them as less important, and even justify their marginalization, exclusion, or oppression. Again, Christians must admit that this is often true.
- *The question of truth* — Generally speaking, people are looking for truth, for answers, and the plurality of options can be confusing and discouraging. If all religions are valid, then it doesn't matter what I chose, and I don't have to worry about carefully researching it for myself.

** This is why graciousness should always be a distinguishing characteristic of Cross Impact (cf. Matthew 11:28-30; 2 Timothy 2:24-25; Titus 3:1-7).

2. Following are four objections that are raised Christianity's claim to be the only way to God. How would you handle each objection?
 - a. "All major religions are equally valid, producing much wisdom and happiness, and basically teach the same thing."
 - We can agree that much is true and virtuous about other world religions, and that there is enormous consensus among religions on what constitutes ethical behavior.

- This objection, however, is not as open-minded as it may first appear, because it does not listen to what the other religions are actually saying. In reality, there are tremendous differences between the various religions. They have sharply different views of reality, and consider those views to be nonnegotiable—core beliefs that are necessary for people to find salvation. Furthermore, there are major differences between how Christianity and other religions view Jesus—whereas other religions insist He could not be the unique Son of God, Christianity says that not only is it true, but that it is necessary for salvation (i.e., “the process by which you can know that your relationship with God is the way it should be”).
 - So, this objection doesn’t deny that there are actual differences between the various religions, as much as it does deny that those differences matter. This perspective, however, does not take seriously the belief and practices of those religions. This position claims to be promoting religious tolerance, but only after it requires every religion to deny its distinctives or to say the distinctives do not matter.
 - Religious pluralism, then, is not a tolerant attitude toward all religions, but a new religion itself that essentially asks every other faith to remake itself in the image of religious pluralism. In other words, it refuses to acknowledge the true diversity of world religions—often in the name of promoting diversity.
- b. “Lots of good and intelligent people differ with the Christian viewpoint, so it is arrogant to claim the Christian beliefs are the only true ones.”**
- We must admit that the Christian church has never lacked for truly arrogant people. Truth claims attract arrogance and moral absolutes attract moralists.
 - If a research scientist claims she has discovered the cure to some fatal disease, but sounds arrogant in tone when she publishes articles and gives lectures, many people will probably resist her arrogance and be moved to try to prove her wrong. But does her arrogance prove that she is wrong in what she says? Is it arrogance of a research scientist to declare, in any tone of voice, that she has found a cure that no one else has found? No! Likewise, it is not necessarily arrogant for any person to say that they have discovered a spiritual cure that no one else has found. They may be wrong, but they are not necessarily arrogant.
- Furthermore, the religious pluralist has to consider the implications of the arrogance charge for their own faith-position. Lots of good and intelligent people differ with them; so, in their argument, when they become aware of that, it is arrogant for them to continue to claim that their perspective (i.e., religious pluralism) is the only true one. The person who says, “It is arrogant to persuade others to your religious position” is actually doing the very thing he is forbidding—at the moment he is forbidding it.
 - Finally, we can add that, “if Jesus Christ is who he said He is—the Son of God from heaven, bodily raised from the dead, our original creator—then of course it would be just one way to God. Our souls would need Him or they would shrivel eternally. The fact is that our bodies need food or they will shrivel physically, and that’s not narrow-minded to say—that’s just the way it is. Likewise, if Jesus is who He said He is, then our souls would need Him to be eternally full. If Jesus is who He said He is, then we would have to say He’s the only way to God; if Jesus is not who He said He is, then it is certainly arrogant and narrow-minded.”
<http://youtu.be/BGX1fHWU1TA>
- c. “You can’t hold people responsible for rejecting Jesus when they have never heard of Him.”**
- The video discussion host affirms biblical truth—(1) that God is just and merciful, (2) that it is necessary to believe in Jesus in order to come into a saving, personal relationship with God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), and (3) that God initiates belief (Ephesians 2:8-9; John 6:44; Philippians 1:29).
 - However, when considering the implacation of that truth for those who have never heard, he then sneaks out through the back door (so to speak) by quoting Deuteronomy 29:29 and concluding that we’ve only been told some things (on a “need to know” basis—<http://youtu.be/BGX1fHWU1TA>).
 - He then offers a possible theory for how this problem is solved, and while he admits that he doesn’t believe it, it’s not a good theory in light of what the Bible teaches about election (another discussion entirely ☺). His reason for offering this possible theory is to show that “there might be a way for Jesus to be offered as the only way and at the same time there be some method by which God is still being just and merciful.”

- In evaluating what the video discussion host does here, I don't think we need to take his approach. And, we can be certain that not only "may" there be a way for God's mercy and fairness to be seen in this quandry, but that God's Word indicates there *is* a way, as shown below.
 - We can admit that this is a hard question (not in the sense of difficult to answer or understand, but in the sense that its answer may not be what we want to hear). However, the Bible does give us some help with it:
 - Romans 1:19-20; 2:1-3, 14-16; 10:18 cf. Psalm 19:1-4, 7-8; Acts 14:17 — God has given man enough revelation already (i.e., in the order of the universe, the general goodness of creation's provision, the universal sense of conscience or moral self-judgment, and the universal judicial sentiment [<http://bit.ly/1rSfGTE>]) to sense (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:11) and seek the eternal (cf. Acts 17:27-28). Scripture suggests that to the one who responds to the light God has already given by seeking more light, God will give more light (cf. Acts 8:26-39; 10:1-48; Psalm 119:130).
 - Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8 — Jesus' disciples, committed to making disciples, are the solution to this problem. We are supposed to go and preach that all may hear (cf. Romans 10:13-17).

d. "Nobody can know whose religion is true, so Christianity can't claim it is the only true way."

- This claim may reveal simple laziness (i.e., I don't want to take the time to discover whether one is more rational and resonates better than the rest).
- The main problem with this objection is its claim to have an astonishing amount of spiritual knowledge. Whereas the admission, "I don't know which religion is true" may be a statement of humility, "No one can know which religion is true" is a dogmatic assertion that presumes the very "religious certainty" you just doubted anyone had. Only if you have complete knowledge can you be absolutely skeptical about religion and truth claims.

3. Some would argue that the religious pluralism objection is itself a religious belief, claiming to be more true than opposing beliefs, and as such is subject to all the criticisms it levels at traditional religions. Explain.

- The religious pluralism view is a *belief*. It cannot be empirically verified.

- The religious pluralism view is a *religious* belief. It is a belief about the nature of spiritual reality, and is quite a detailed description of that reality. Its proponents, for example, assert that the ultimate is unknowable and therefore do not believe that there is one God who accepts people because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That is a series of beliefs in and of itself about the nature of God and spiritual reality—complete with its own explicit dogma.
- The religious pluralism proponents want to *persuade* those opposing them. They believe the world would be a better place if more people thought (i.e., believed) like them.
- So, religious pluralism is a religious belief that claims to be a better or more accurate or preferable view of spiritual reality than other views. Their position is unusually inconsistent. They say no one should claim that their understanding of religion is more right and superior to others, yet they maintain that their understanding is superior to others.

4. One of the participants said in the video discussion,

I think problems arise whenever one group believes it has the exclusive domain on truth or the exclusivity hold on truth. I think when you believe that you have the firm hold on truth it leads to extreme behaviors at the detriment of others who may not believe what you do—it leads to intolerance.

People often say similar things when the topic of religion or truth claims comes up. The words *exclusive*, *divisive*, and *intolerant* are a common feature of these statements. How would you respond?**

- Christians can again humbly admit that this is often true—that those who represent the Christian position are not always particularly respectful of those who disagree. Church history is filled with terrible intolerance.
- Two people who hold contradictory positions are not necessarily hostile. Instead, everyone has a view of spiritual reality that is exclusive and thus in contradiction with someone else's view. Irreligion is exclusive, and even people who say nobody has the truth are making a truth claim—so, you cannot avoid truth claims.
- The pluralistic approach does not in itself promote unity between faiths and cultures. Its idea that truth is relative and that every person has a right to construct his/her own religion is grounded in a highly individualistic way of thinking that many cultures do not share. Therefore, instead of being unifying and diverse, religious pluralism is ethnocentric, promoting one particular cultural worldview as superior to others.

Great quote from page 32 in *The Reason for God Discussion Guide* on Christianity, its gospel, and intolerance:

- “At the heart of the Christian’s view of spiritual reality is a Man who gave His life in sacrifice for people who did not believe in Him, a Man who died asking for forgiveness for the people who were killing Him. Therefore, Christianity is an exclusive claim, but it is the most inclusive exclusive claim because it wants you to exclusively believe in this Man who died for His enemies, and asks you to love and care for yours.
- So, does the message that Jesus is the only way to God necessarily lead to intolerance? Christians can only become intolerant to the degree that they misunderstand the heart of the gospel—namely, the good news that Almighty God Himself came to serve us and die for us, so we could be saved not because of our right beliefs and behavior, but by the gift of His unmerited grace. That message, rightly grasped, cannot lead to coercion or intolerance. The gospel has within it deep resources for humility and respect. It is up to Christians to prove this assertion with their lives.”

Concluding quote from page 33 in *The Reason for God Discussion Guide*:

- “The fact is that anyone’s main identity-factor—that which gives them a sense of significance—can be a basis for exclusion and oppression. Overt absolutes say, ‘What makes me special is that I have the truth’—and that leads to feeling superior to and to acting exclusively toward people who do not have your truth. Covert absolutes say, ‘What makes me special is that I know that there is no absolute truth and everyone is free to be who they choose to be.’ But this also leads to feeling superior to and to acting exclusively toward people who think that there is truth. But the gospel absolutist says, ‘I have the truth—but the truth I have is a suffering God, a Lamb that was slain, the One who died for His enemies, the One who came not to be served but to serve and give His life a ransom for many.’”

5. During the video discussion the host asked the participants what they thought should be done about the divisiveness of religion. One participant responded,

Has there been a time on earth where there wasn’t religion, and what would it look like if religion were absent? Would it necessarily be a better place, would it be a less divisive place? I don’t know.

Another said,

All the negative aspects of religion are usually tied to extremists, people who take it more...and more literally.

What would you have said in response to these statements? Is this how people you know would have responded?

- Statement 1 — Religion has always existed, will always exist, and will always bring the same problems it currently does. Man has always been driven by three (or more) “big questions”—“Where did I come from?” “Why am I here?” “Where am I going?”—and those can only be answered on the basis of faith. This, in essence, is what the Bible teaches in Ecclesiastes 3:11—man’s religious experiments have been and are their attempts at discovering the “eternal.” And, because of the problems we’ve already considered, with both the overt and covert absolutist, tension and conflict and divisiveness will probably always exist.
- Statement 2 — If by “literally,” he means “more imbalanced,” I agree. Fred Phelps, for example, emphasised certain passages of the Bible (i.e., those about judgment) to the exclusion of other passages (i.e., those about love, mercy, and grace, especially in how one warns about judgment).

6. Stephen Carter (who was mentioned in the video discussion) writes this

Efforts to craft a public square from which religious conversation is absent, no matter how thoughtfully worked out, will always, in the end, say to those of organized religion that they alone, unlike everyone else, must enter public dialogue only after leaving behind that part of themselves that they may consider the most vital.

Is it possible to keep all religious views private—away from the public square?

- Three approaches are being used around the world to address the divisiveness of religion:
 - Hoping and expecting that religion will thin out and eventually go away
 - Forbidding or controlling it
 - Urging people to privatize it (not bring religious beliefs into work, politics, or public discourse in general; leave it at home; *illustration*: treat it like your sports team preference)
- Carter is saying that privatization is an inequitable approach to civilian life. Religion—formal/informal, organized/personal: aka. one’s worldview or metanarrative—is a set of unprovable faith assumptions about the meaning of life, about who we are, and about what is really important for us to be doing. One’s view of what promotes human flourishing is rooted in these faith assumptions. So, there is no way we can all just get together, leave our worldview behind us, and say, “Let’s just work pragmatically and find solutions that just work for everybody.”

- One video participant agreed: “Everyone has a view of the world and it is impossible to separate that view of how things should be and what you believe politically.”
7. **One of the participants asked, “How do you pick your fundamental, your home? Is it the way you were raised? Is it your own research?” How do most people you know “pick” their religion or their home? How did you?**
- Family, mentors, friends, community, etc.
 - Research, study, testing, etc.
 - Reaction, rejection, etc.
8. **Discuss how to handle the more personal side of this topic when you run your own discussion about this objection. Was there anything from the way the video discussion was conducted in terms of tone, atmosphere, attitude, mannerisms, expressions, and so on, that you might find helpful to adopt, or not?**
- The video host defined the words “saved” and “sin” when he used them. This is helpful, because there is often great disagreement between a person’s definition of a specific word, the Christian definition of that word, and what people think the Christian definition is.
 - <http://youtu.be/BGX1fHWU1TA> (5:02) — In America, there is this prevailing perspective that we want to understand everything first before we accept Christianity. This is more a projection of our American, democratic, individualistic understanding—we want a president/governor/mayor, and not a King. This makes sense on the one hand, because human kings are flawed and monarchy was not a good approach to things. But if you have a perfect God—a perfect King who comes and suffers in Jesus Christ—then at a certain point I trust Him.
9. **God created us, we fell into sin, He has redeemed us—creation, fall, redemption. How could these three concepts give people a powerful basis to treat with respect and justice those with whom they deeply differ?**
- *Creation* — We’ve been made in the image of God and must therefore treat every human being as sacred (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9-10), regardless of what they do or have done, because they are made in His image. Furthermore, because they are made in God’s image, all people are capable of words and deeds which are wise and beautiful. Therefore, Christians will expect a lot of non-Christians to be moral, nice, self-controlled people (sometimes even nicer than some Christians).

- *Fall* — We are all sinners, including Christians. Therefore, Christians will understand that they are no different than anyone else (Romans 3:23), and so they will treat people with love and respect and a lack of superiority.
- *Redemption* — Sinners are saved by grace alone, not by any inherent or active goodness. Christianity is the one religion that says people are not saved by being better people, by being more disciplined, by praying more, by being more compassionate; instead, people are saved by sheer unmerited grace. Therefore, Christians will be marked by the same grace that saved them, showing a sweetness in disposition even as they demonstrate a commitment to their position.

Final Thought

You cannot actually be skeptical about one set of beliefs without a deep faith commitment to some other set of beliefs. You cannot avoid fundamentals and you cannot avoid truth claims. G. K. Chesterton said: “A bigot it is not the one who thinks he’s right. Every sane man or woman thinks the right. The bigot is the one who cannot understand how the other person came to be wrong.”