

IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY TO GOD?

BY TERRAN WILLIAMS

This question connects with a bigger question: What about other religions?

Introducing the world of religion

By far, most of the world is religious. Look at the statistics:

Christianity 2 billion

Islam 1.2 billion

Hinduism 786 million

Buddhism 362 million

Tribal religions 225 million

Sikhism 23 million

Judaism 14 million

(Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2002)

In my travels, and living in a religiously diverse city, I have had the privilege of befriending people of many of these faiths. So the question we are dealing with is one that I have spent much energy and time grappling with.

Who's to judge?

Many of my spiritually curious friends sincerely battle with the apparent exclusivity of Christianity. They express their concern with words to this effect:

Christians seem to greatly over-play the differences between their faith and all the other ones. Though millions of people in other religions say they have encountered God, have built marvellous civilizations and cultures, and have had their lives and characters changed by their experience of faith, Christians often say that only they go to heaven - that their religion is the only one that is 'right' and true. The exclusivity of this is breathtaking. It also appears to be a threat to international peace.

Many spiritual seekers cannot bring themselves to commit to Christ because they find its exclusive claim that 'Jesus is the only way to God' close-minded, judgmental, intolerable and arrogant.

Growing numbers of people are drawn more to a syncretistic view which says: 'All religions lead to God - just find the one that suits you - and let others find the one that suits them. Surely this is the only peaceful way forward. How sincerely you believe something is more important than how true it is. Besides, can we really know what the truth is?'

It is the claims of the Bible itself that create the controversy: 'Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). 'There is no name given from heaven by which we can be saved - except the name of Jesus' (Acts 4:12).

The Bible certainly affirms that God reveals himself partially to all people of all faiths (or no faith). After all, wherever you find love, joy, peace, truth, honour and respect you encounter signs of God's existence, whether people perceive that God is the source of such things or not. But the Bible affirms that God wants to be known more fully, and more specifically, he wants to give people the gift of salvation.

The claim of the Christian whose faith is informed by the Bible is this: Christ, it turns out, is the way to a fuller revelation of God as he really is, and the way to salvation.

Here are six perspectives that make it plausible to believe this claim that Christ alone is the way to the fullest revelation of God as he really is, and to salvation...

1) Let's own up to the fact that all truth claims are essentially exclusivist.

Christianity is often attacked on the basis of it being exclusivist. However, whenever anyone says: 'This is true,' they essentially are saying that the opposite is false. Any truth claim is by nature exclusivist.

When Buddha said, 'The Veda Scriptures are wrong' he was saying that the belief that the Veda Scriptures are right is a wrong belief. When Mohammed said, 'Jesus was no more than a prophet' he was saying that the belief in Jesus as a Divine Saviour is wrong. When the person who embraces the trendy perspective that 'All religions lead to God' they are saying that the belief that all religions don't lead to God is a wrong belief. When the atheist says there is no God, they are saying that the belief in God is a wrong belief.

So it turns out that every religion and belief system, not just Christianity, is based on truth claims and could be labelled 'exclusivist'. Although some truth claims are more culturally palatable, every one still excludes every belief that is opposite to it. If you believe something about ultimate reality (and everyone believes something about this), then you're an exclusivist.

2) We should not measure whether something is true by whether it suits us.

Generally it suits us to believe something that is popular to believe. Said another way, we tend to believe what we prefer to believe.

Historically, in the Western parts of the world many people believed in Christianity because it was popular to do so. Now, its popularity has dropped in these areas. So should Christianity be rejected now? We should not judge something by whether it is popular, but by whether it is true.

Rather than evaluating a truth claim by whether it suits us or not, we should explore the source of religious claims. Most religions have begun when someone had a 'revelation' about who God is and what he wants from us. Typically, they (or their followers) then wrote their revelation down. Over time their belief system gained more followers and momentum. For example, in France a cult of over 10,000 people follow a man who claims to have encountered God while jogging. His revelation? 'God is an alien.' Perhaps in a thousand years time this will grow to be the world's largest religion! We should be discerning in the face of the explosion of religions. We should ask questions such as, 'Is it true? Is there a chance that the founder(s) were deceived? Does the founder's life back up the revelation?'

Although Christianity is currently the world's biggest religion, it started with just twelve people. It is no more true now than it was then. The best way to evaluate Christianity is by evaluating its source: Jesus Christ.

3) An objective exploration reveals that Jesus is utterly unique when compared with other religion founders.

People will often list the world religion founders (e.g. Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus) as though they are on an equal level with one another. Yet, as we consider the claims of these 'religious founders' we would do well to compare their credentials? What makes Jesus unique?

a) Jesus alone claimed to be God.

Our church has a friend who does spiritual work in Indonesia, a Muslim country. He told us of an approach he takes when communicating with Muslims there: 'Firstly, I ask them who of you want to go to heaven? They all put their hands up. Then I ask them if they would like to know the way to heaven. Again, they put their hands up. Then I give them this advice: If you want to get to heaven, then follow someone who has been there before.' He then goes on to explain that Jesus alone claimed to come from heaven, and is therefore worthy to be trusted on eternal matters.

Not only that. Christ alone claimed to be sinless. He alone claimed to be God. He even claimed to come back one day as the Judge of the world - and that his main criteria for judging the world would be whether they embraced his teaching or not. That makes him pretty unique.

b) Jesus alone centred the whole faith on himself.

If you were to take Mohammed out of Islam, and Buddha out of Buddhism, and Confucius out of Confucianism you would still have a faith system that

was relatively in tact. However, taking Christ out of Christianity sinks the whole faith completely. This is because Jesus centred the faith on himself. He said, 'This is what it means to have eternal life: to know God the Father and Jesus Christ whom the Father sent' (John 17:3). 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12). Buddha, before dying, said in effect, 'I am still seeking for the truth.' Mohammed said in effect, 'I point you to the truth.' Jesus said, 'I am the truth.' Jesus claimed to not only give the truth, but to be the very personal embodiment of it.

This is one reason that I don't like the term 'religion' as a description of what I have found in Christ. Religion is essentially about rules, dogma and ritual, whereas what I have found in Christ is better described as 'a relationship' with Christ. Jesus himself is the truth that I personally experience.

c) Jesus alone based the whole faith on grace.

Decades ago, a conference of Christian leaders were discussing: 'What makes Christianity unique?' CS Lewis suggested their main answer: 'It's grace.' Grace is undeserved. However, all religions (that believe in God or gods) have a system of works that earn divine approval. Hindus have the law of karma. If you have sinned, then you must pay for that sin through suffering. Buddhism has the eightfold noble path. Judaism has the Torah and the 10 Commandments. Islam has the five pillars. Each has a way of earning God's acceptance through religious and moral effort. Only Christ tells us that there is nothing we can do that can make God love us more - and there is nothing we can do that will make God love us less. Only Christianity says 'you don't and can't deserve salvation and you will never deserve it. There is nothing you can do to earn it. It is a gift of grace.'

Said another way, all religions are essentially about humans pursuing God (or gods), whereas Christianity is about God pursuing us.

The essence of the religious paradigm is, 'Obey and then you will be accepted by God.' This inevitably leads to a religious experience marked by self-condemnation (when one feels that they are failing in their obedience) or self-righteousness (when one feels that they are succeeding in their obedience). But the way of Christ is very different: 'Accept God's acceptance of you in Jesus, and then, and only then, you will be empowered to deeply change.' In this paradigm, one's acceptance before God is not based on their earning it, but on God graciously giving it. This is why the Christian alone can be totally free from both self-condemnation and self-righteousness.

Listen to how Bono of the rock band, U2 articulates this point in his book, Bono on Bono:

'You see, at the centre of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics - in physical laws - every action is met by an equal or opposite

reaction. It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the Universe. I'm absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to bring an end to all that 'as you reap, so will you sow' stuff. Grace defies logic and reason. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going finally to be my judge. I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross, because I know what I have done and who I am - and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity or moral performance to get to God.'

d) Jesus alone claimed to be the Saviour of our sins.

Buddha called himself a teacher. Mohammed called himself a teacher and a prophet. Jesus called himself a teacher, a prophet and a saviour. In other words, he came to rescue us from something that we could not rescue ourselves from. Only Jesus diagnosed the human race as 'enslaved to the guilt and power of sin, in desperate need of a Saviour.' The other religions in effect say: 'Pull your life together.' Only Christ says: 'Grab the life-rope of the cross.' Other religions say, 'Do this. Do that.' Christ says, 'Done.'

The New Testament asserts that there is only one mediator between God and humans: Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). Passage after passage in the New Testament presents Christ as coming to earth, dying on a cross, rising from the dead, and through this, offering blood-bought grace and salvation to all who would want to be restored to their heavenly Father. If there were other ways to God, then Christ's sacrifice would have been in vain. To believe that forgiveness from sin can come through means other than Christ's life and death is to trivialize Christ's so-called 'sacrifice for the sins of the world'.

This may surface another question: why could God not just forgive? Why did Jesus have to die for us to be forgiven? Here's one answer. All forgiveness of any deep wrong and injustice entails suffering on the forgiver's part. If someone truly wrongs you, because of our deep sense of justice, we can't just shrug it off. We sense there's a 'debt.' We can then either a) make the perpetrator pay down the debt you feel (as you take it out on his hide in vengeance!) in which case evil spreads into us and hardens us or b) you can forgive - but that is costly and enormously difficult. But that is the only way to stop the evil from hardening us as well. Similarly, if we can't forgive without suffering (because of our sense of justice) it's not surprising to learn that God couldn't forgive us without suffering - coming in the person of Christ and dying on the cross.

e) Jesus alone started and sealed his life with the supernatural.

Only of Christ can it be said that hundreds of years of multiple prophecies (recorded for our perusal in the Old Testament) predicted his coming, and that he fulfilled them down to the most remarkable details. This certainly makes him unique.

His resurrection from the dead also makes him unique. All other religious leaders have a time and place where they died. Only Christ has an empty grave. That is why the Bible says we can personally know Christ now.

More than that, Jesus promised that after he would return to heaven, he would give the Holy Spirit to those who trusted in him, so that we could actually experience the presence and reality of Christ now. True Christianity is not just celebrating and revisiting the memory of Jesus. It is an invitation to an experiential relationship with him now.

4) Even if we believe that Jesus is the way, we still must affirm what is good and true wherever we find it.

When we say that Jesus is the truth, we do not mean that we alone have all the truth. The Bible claims that God has revealed himself to everyone through creation and through their conscience. These two faculties alone explain why over 95% of people have believed in a Creator God and have lived by a moral system of some kind.

This is why we should affirm truth and beauty wherever it is found, regardless of whether people believe in Jesus or not. This explains why many people of other faiths, or even some atheists live far superior moral lives - lives marked by kindness, sacrifice, courage and humility - than many Christians.

Every person we meet has something to teach us if we'll humbly observe and listen to them. Just because one trusts in Jesus does not mean they now understand everything, and that those who don't trust in Christ understand nothing.

So it is possible to be convinced about Christ, without being close-minded to everyone and everything else. To the contrary, faith in Christ should lead one to be both more curious about and more discerning of the views of others.

5) It is logically absurd that all religions are all true at the same time.

A popular view is to say that all religions are true at the same time, and that we must let everyone find their own way to God, since ultimately all ways get to God.

This view was espoused by John Hicks in the form an analogy about an elephant and three blind men. He said that if these men were trying to figure out what an elephant was by touch they would only pick up on some of it. The one touching the leg would say it is a tree. The one touching the ear would say it is a fan. The one touching the tail would say it is a rope. In

the same way, he claimed, all religions are glimpses into one Supreme Reality.

The problem with the analogy is that all three men were wrong! It was not a fan, a rope or a tree that they were touching. It was an elephant. The problem with Hick's theory is that it contradicts the law of non-contradiction, which says that something cannot be A and non-A at the same time.

Just consider some of the contradictions that arise if we believe that all religions are right in all their claims. For example, what happens when we die? Atheists say that we non-exist. Hindus say we re-incarnate. Christianity says we face God and are judged. They can't all happen. Either one or none are right.

Another example, what is God like? Hindus say God is an impersonal force that is really everything. Classical Buddhism does not even believe there is a God. Islam says that he is exalted but not relationally approachable. Christianity says he is separate from creation, and both exalted and relationally approachable.

They can't all be true. Only a person who is clueless about the world religions will say: 'They all basically teach the same thing.' They do not. A better approach is to compare the claims of each religion with one another, and then make your choice.

History is full of intellectual giants who took it upon themselves to thoroughly explore the different religions with the singular question, 'Is this claim true?' And many have concluded that the way of Christ is the way of truth. Three such well-known giants are CS Lewis (author of 'Mere Christianity'), Scott Peck (author of 'The Road Less Travelled') and Francis Collins (head scientist of the Human Genome Project and author of 'The Language of God').

6) Regardless of what we believe we should avoid two dangers: loveless truth and truthless love.

There is a double-pronged saying: 'Love without truth is sentimental. But truth without love is brutal.' Current western culture is largely guilty of the first one. Sadly, many Christians throughout history have been guilty of the second one.

Love without truth is sentimental. Western culture believes: 'All you need is love.' But surely questions like, 'Where do I come from? Who is God? What happens when I die? And what does God expect from me?' deserve to be answered. Our culture's attempts to be tolerant by esteeming sincerity over truthfulness basically trivializes the pursuit of truth. And if it is true that 'The truth shall set you free' then truth should be highly and honourably sought after - not trivialized.

Conversely, truth without love is brutal. There is nothing uglier than a loveless commitment to the truth. Think of self-righteousness in religious people (where they look down on those who they perceive to be less 'enlightened' and 'morally righteous'.) Worse yet, think of religiously motivated oppression and violence - such as the Crusades, the Al-Qaeda network, the enforcing of faith on a nation, and the outlawing of other faiths in a nation. (For example, in this century, multitudes of Christians have been killed in countries like India, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Indonesia and more - where only Islam is legal.)

We need both love and truth. If we become convinced that Jesus is the only way, we should also live out that conviction in the spirit of Christ, which is a spirit of grace, love and humility. Any arrogance and superiority will fail to reflect Christ adequately. Christians who seek to imitate Christ should radically protect everyone's right to think and believe differently to themselves, and should sincerely love, like and befriend such people.

One more comment on this point. A common objection to Christianity is the bad record of many Christians (and so-called Christian nations) who are judgmental, corrupt, hypocritical, violent and/or loveless. What a tragedy! But the problem with these people is not that they believed in Jesus, but that, though they claimed to believe in Jesus, they failed to reflect his character and teachings. Either they didn't believe correctly or they didn't believe deeply enough. I am convinced from experience that a more informed and deeper faith in Jesus creates in a person ever-deepening humility, love, forgiveness, curiosity, courage, hope and all the things this world so desperately needs. That's why Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement of America did not tell white Christians to turn away from their faith in Christ (which they used to justify racism) but rather to embrace a deeper, truer and firmer faith in Him.

Conclusion.

It is true that God reveals himself partially to all people of all faiths (or no faith). After all, wherever you find love, joy, peace, truth, honour and respect you have just encountered signs of God's existence, whether people perceive that God is the source of such things or not.

But the Bible affirms that God wants to be known more fully. He does care what we think about him, and how we relate to him. He wants to give us the gift of salvation. And, amazingly, he has sent Jesus, his unique Son who lived, died, rose again and ascended to heaven where he co-rules the universe with his Father, to be for the human race the way to a fuller revelation of Himself, and the way of salvation.

To believe this is not to be close-minded, uninformed, judgmental, a danger to world peace or anything like that. Rather in the light of the six perspectives mentioned in this booklet, a decision to trust in Christ - despite

the existence of however many other religions and belief systems - has great intellectual credibility.