

Is Jesus the Only Way to God? (Pt 1)

This is the perennial question of our generation: “*Is Jesus the only way to God?*” Some ask it with disdain: *How* could anyone assert that Jesus is the only way to God? Others ask it with genuine sense of doubt. *Is Jesus the only way to God?* Only in books do we find this question asked and addressed so explicitly. So while the question may mark our generation, we are loathe to discuss the answer. Why is this question so besetting for our generation? Over the next few posts, I will address this question with honesty and sincerity.

Answering the Question Socially

If the question is: “Yes, Jesus is the only way to God” a line is drawn where we would rather things remain fuzzy. Why would we prefer this particular claim to remain fuzzy? In many cities there are an array of religious beliefs: Mysticism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, to name a few. The presence of so many different religions in cities leads many people (Christians included) to the conclusion that all religious paths lead to God. Why? When we meet people from various religions who are kind and sincere *because of their religious beliefs*, it seems arrogant to insist they are wrong. After all, their religion appears to have made them very likable, respectable people. I, for one, have met many people I would consider more generous and sacrificial than some Christians I know.

We make a theological decision based on social experience.

When people of other faiths rival Christian character, we face a tendency to affirm all religions as valid ways to God. We make a theological decision based on social experience. Rather than investigate the answer to one of the most important questions, we prefer to glaze the question with inch-deep reflections upon the character of people we meet. Understandable but not wise.

What if our generation became known for not only posing great questions but also grappling deeply and sincerely with their answers? Many Christians claim that belief in Jesus is the only way to God. Others insist there are many ways to God. In the next post, I will explore why some people insist there are many paths to God.

Is Jesus the Only Way to God? (Pt 2)

In the previous post, we observed the tendency to answer this theological question through social experience. Many Christians conclude that there must be many ways to God (or act like this) because their social experiences introduce them to kind, respectable people who do not believe Jesus is the only way to God. In fact, many of our friends believe the opposite, namely there are many ways to God, a view called religious pluralism. In the next few posts, we will examine the claims of the religious pluralist.

Over the past four years in Austin, Texas (a case study city for Harvard's Pluralism Project), I have had the opportunity to meet, know, and talk with both Christian and non-Christian pluralists. As I have reflected on these conversations, it seems that there are at least three reasons people drift to religious pluralism. They believe there are many ways to God, not just one, because it seems a more *enlightened, humble, and tolerant*. In the next three posts, let's take each of these—enlightened, humble, tolerant—and examine these reasons more closely.

What Do the Religions Teach About God?

Is the belief that all religious paths lead to the same God more *enlightened* or educated? Well, all religions teach very different things about whom God is and how to reach him. In fact, there is a lot of disagreement between the religions regarding the nature of God. *Buddhism*, for example, doesn't believe in God. Islam teaches an impersonal monotheism, Allah. The Koran states that God reveals His will, but not His person. *Christianity* teaches a personal trinitarianism, where God is three persons in relationship, Father-Son-Spirit that can be known and enjoyed. *Hinduism* is all over the map on this question, ranging from polytheism to atheism. The reason for this is because there is an absence of *definitive revelation* to clarify their "theology." Instead Hinduism has multiple sources of revelation (Upanishads, Vedas, etc.) Contrary to Islam, Hinduism has no presuppositions about the nature of God. In short, religious views of God differ. If so, it would seem far from "enlightened" to claim that all religions lead to the same God, when their views of God are, in fact, radically different. The claim of the religious pluralist contradicts the tenants of the religions themselves.

What Do They Teach About How We Reach God?

Religions not only teach different things about who God is but also how we "reach him." Buddhism suggests the 8-fold Noble Path, Islam the 5 Pillars (Shahadah, Prayer, Fasting, Charity, Pilgrimage) and Christianity the gospel of Jesus. Therefore, to say that all religions lead to God is not only unenlightened it is inaccurate. This is the thesis of Stephen Prothero, Boston College professor, in his new book *God is not One*. He writes:

"And it is comforting to pretend that the great religions make up one big, happy family. But this sentiment, however well-intentioned, is neither accurate nor ethically responsible. God is not one."

Prothero goes on to point out that just as God is not one, so also all religions are not one. They are distinct and make very different claims about God and how to reach him. In light of what we have observed regarding what religions teach about the nature of God and how to reach him, religious pluralism must be reconsidered. Subscribing to religious pluralism because it is more enlightened or a more “educated” view of world religions is not only unenlightened but also *inaccurate*.

Is Jesus the Only Way to God? (Pt 3)

In this series, we are examining the claim that Jesus is the only way to God. In our first post, we observed the tendency to answer this theological question through social experience. Many people conclude that there must be many ways to God (or act like this, a view called Religious Pluralism) because their social experiences introduce them to kind, respectable people who do not believe Jesus is the only way to God. In the second post, we examined the claim that religious pluralism is more educated or enlightened. In this third post, we will weigh whether or not religious pluralism is a more humble claim than the claim of Jesus.

Is Religious Pluralism More Humble?

Despite very clear differences on who God is and how to reach him, religious pluralists continue to insist that there are many ways to God. Why would educated people continue to insist on an inaccurate view of other religions? One major reason is because they believe it to be an act of *humility* and *love*. Very often I hear people say: “Who am I to judge someone else’s religion, to tell them that they are wrong?” This implies, of course, that maintaining Jesus is the only way to God is arrogant. I’ll be the first to admit there are angry arrogant Christians who rudely insist that Jesus is the only way to God. I’d like to apologize for those kinds of Christians. Arrogant insistence on your beliefs actually runs counter to the life and teachings of Jesus. However, just because someone is arrogant doesn’t make them wrong.

People are arrogantly right about all kinds of things—Math, Science, Religion. You probably work with someone like this. (Can you say Dwight Schreute?) The arrogantly right person always talk down to others with an air of arrogance because they have the right answer. It might not be nice, but it doesn’t mean they are wrong. And for all the Christians who are arrogant about Jesus’ exclusive claims, there are many more who have ardently considered many religions, searched out the truth, and humbly come the conclusion that Jesus was telling the truth, that is the only way to God. This doesn’t make them arrogant; it makes them authentic. They are willing to stand by what they discovered to be true. There is a humble and an arrogant way to insist on Jesus’ claim that he is the only way to God. Insisting on what

is true doesn't make you arrogant. After all, it is *Jesus* who said it, and Jesus was quintessentially humble, especially if he is who he said he was.

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The Hidden Arrogance of Religious Pluralism

When religious pluralism says that there are many ways to God, it is not humble. It actually carries an air of arrogance about it. How? Religious pluralism insists that its view—all ways lead to God—is true while all other religions are false in their exclusive teachings. Religious pluralism dogmatically insists on *its* exclusive claim, namely that all roads lead to God. The problem, as we have seen, is that this claim directly contradicts many religions like Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity. The claim of the religious pluralist is arrogant because it enforces own belief on others. It says to other religions: "You must believe what I believe, not what you believe. Your way isn't right, in fact all of your ways are wrong and my way is right. There isn't just one way (insert your way) to God; there are many ways. You are wrong and I am right." This can be incredibly arrogant, particularly if the person saying this hasn't studied all the world religions in depth and makes this blind assertion. Upon what basis can the religious pluralist make this exclusive claim? Where is the proof that this is true? To what ancient Scriptures, traditions, and careful reasoning can they point?

The lack of historical and rational support for religious pluralism makes it a highly untenable view of the world and its religions. As we have seen, while it may appear to be a more enlightened and humble view on God and how to reach him, it is not. In the next post, we will consider the value of tolerance.

Is Jesus the Only Way to God? (Pt 4)

In the prior three posts ([Pt 1](#), [Pt 2](#), [Pt 3](#)) we have examined the claim that Jesus exclusive claim as the only way to God is both unenlightened and arrogant. As it turns out, it is actually the opposite. It is religious pluralism that is rather unenlightened and carries an air of arrogance. In this post we will examine the important idea of tolerance. Is religious pluralism more tolerant than Christianity?

Is Religious Pluralism Truly Tolerant?

Very often people hold to religious pluralism because they think it is *more tolerant* than Christianity. I'll be the first to say that we need tolerance, but what does it mean to be tolerant? To be tolerant is to accommodate differences, which can be very noble. I believe that Christians should be some of the most accommodating kinds of people, giving everyone the

dignity to believe whatever they want and not enforcing their beliefs on others through politics or preaching. We should winsomely tolerate different beliefs. Interestingly, religious pluralism doesn't really allow for this kind of tolerance. Instead of accommodating spiritual differences, religious pluralism blunts them. Let me explain.

Instead of accommodating spiritual differences, religious pluralism blunts the differences between world religions.

The claim that all paths lead to the same God actually minimizes other religions by asserting a new religious claim. When someone says all paths lead to the same God, they blunt the distinctives between religions, throwing them all in one pot, saying: "See, they all get us to God so the differences don't really matter." This isn't tolerance; it's a power play. When asserting all religions lead to God, the distinctive and very different views of God and how to reach him in Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam are brushed aside in one powerful swoop. The Eightfold Noble Path, the 5 Pillars of Islam, and the Gospel of Christ are not tolerated but told they must submit to a new religious claim—religious pluralism—despite the fact that this isn't what those religions teach.

The Religion of Religious Pluralism

People spend years studying and practicing their religious distinctives. To say they don't really matter is highly intolerant! The very notion of religious tolerance assumes there are differences to tolerate but pluralism is intolerant of those very differences! In this sense, *religious pluralism is a religion of its own*. It has its own religious absolute—all paths lead to the same God—and requires people of other faiths to embrace this absolute, without any religious backing at all. It is highly evangelistic! Religious pluralism is highly political and preachy. Yet, it does so under the guise of tolerance. It is a **leap of faith** to say there are many paths to God. Says who? The idea that all paths lead to the same God is not a self-evident fact; it is a leap of faith. It isn't even an educated leap, nor is it as humble and tolerant as it might appear.

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Recall Stephen Prothero's comment regarding religious pluralism: "*But this sentiment, however well-intentioned, is neither accurate nor ethically responsible. God is not one.*" He goes on: "*Faith in the unity of religions is just that—faith (perhaps even a kind of fundamentalism). And the leap that gets us there is an act of the hyperactive imagination.*"

As it turns out, the reasons for subscribing to religious pluralism—enlightenment, humility, and tolerance—actually backfire. They don't carry through. Religious pluralism isn't enlightened, it's inaccurate; it isn't humble, it's fiercely dogmatic; and it isn't really all that tolerant because it intolerantly blunts religious distinctives. In the end, religious pluralism is a religion, a leap of faith, based on contradiction and is highly untenable. Christianity, on the other hand, should respect and honor the various distinctives of other religions, comparing them, and honoring their differing principles—Karma (Hinduism), Enlightenment (Buddhism), Submission (Islam), and Grace (Christianity). In the next and final post, I will examine Jesus' exclusive claim, and the charge that his teachings in Christianity are unenlightened, arrogant, and intolerant. In particular, we will examine the unique principle of grace.

Is Jesus the Only Way to God? (Pt 5)

In the [prior four posts](#), we examined, all too briefly, the claim of Christ and the claim of pluralism: the belief in Jesus as the only way to God and belief that the many paths lead to God. Which is the better claim? We've seen that religious pluralism is inaccurate, arrogant, and intolerant. Is Christianity any better? I'd like to suggest three ways that Christianity is better from the claim of Jesus himself. He said that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Let's take each point.

Christianity Should Make Us Incredibly Humble

First, *Jesus is the Way*. What does this mean? Does it mean that Jesus is our trailblazer, clearing the other religious options aside so we can hike our way to heaven through spiritual or moral improvement. If I keep the Ten Commandments, if I serve the poor and love my neighbor, if I pray and read the Bible enough, then God will accept me. No. As the way, Jesus doesn't create a path for us to hike. We can never make it, do enough spiritual, moral, or social good to impress God. Much less love him with all our soul, mind, and strength. We can't make it up the path. We all fail to love and serve the infinitely admirable and lovable God. In fact, we love other things more, that's a crime of infinite proportions. It's against an infinite God. The sentence for our crime must be carried out.

When Jesus takes the arduous hike for us he goes down into the valley where the criminals die. He hikes down into our sin, our rebellion, our failures and he heaps them all on his back and climbs on a cross, where he is punished for our crime, a bloody gruesome death. The innocent punished for the guilty. If he doesn't take our punishment, then we must endure it—forever separation from God. If you reject Jesus, then you will pay the infinite

consequences. However, if you embrace Jesus in his sin-absorbing death you get forgiveness, and Jesus hikes not only through the valley but up the mountain to carry your forgiveness to God, where he pleads our innocence (Heb 10). This is what it means for Jesus to be the way. He hikes into the valley of our just punishment and up the mountain for our forgiveness. He is the redemptive way. He takes our place. This understanding of Jesus as the way should make us *incredibly humble* not arrogant. We realize how undeserving we are and how much mercy we have been shown.

Christianity is Wonderfully Enlightening

Jesus is also *the Truth*. What does that mean? In John chapter 1, we are told that God became flesh and was full of grace and truth in Jesus. *The truth is that God is Jesus*. This is enlightening. Christianity is the only religion where God comes down to man, becomes man. All other religions man has to work his way to God. The truth is Jesus, the truth is a person, who dies in our place, for our crimes, and in turn gives us his life. The truth is that God, works his way down to man, and dies for us. That's grace. See, the truth isn't a special prayer or a codeword we say at the pearly gates. In Christianity, the truth is essentially revealed in a Person, Jesus, full of grace and truth. All other religions God is impersonal, but in Christianity we meet God in Jesus. The truth is a Person who dies for us. *Wonderfully enlightening*, moving.

Christianity Should Make Us Persuasively Tolerant

Finally, *Jesus is the Life*. As if it wasn't enough to be our way, incredibly humbling, and the truth, truly enlightening, Jesus caps it off by offering us not just his death but his life. What life? Later on in John, Jesus says he is the resurrection and the life, and that whoever believes in him, though he die yet he will live" (11:25). He does down into the valley to take our death, and raises up from the dead to up the other side of valley where he prepares a new place for us to enjoy life with him forever. The hope of that life should break into the lives of Christians today, making us *persuasively tolerant*. We tolerantly extend people the dignity of their own beliefs. We don't minimize the differences between religions. We honor them. The life of Christ produces in us true humility. But it also produces in us true enlightenment. We've come to grasp grace, that God works his way down to us, dies for our moral and religious failures, and offers us life. If this is true, we must lovingly, humbly try to persuade others to believe in Jesus, who alone offers the wonderful promise of the way to God, the truth of God, and life of God.

See, in the end it doesn't matter how nice or moral a person is because there is not enough niceness or morality to pay for our rejection of God. Either we must be rejected or we turn to Jesus who was rejected for us. This is the heart of the gospel. Jesus lays down his very own life for those who reject him, for his enemies, for those who don't believe in him, and offers them forgiveness. Why would we reject such a man? So you see, Jesus claim is better than the claim of the religious pluralism. In fact Christianity delivers

where pluralism cannot. Instead of being unenlightened, Jesus is truly enlightening as the God who is full of grace and truth. Instead of being arrogant, Jesus should make us incredibly humble, he created the way to God for us at the expense of his own death. Finally, instead of being intolerant, Jesus should make us persuasively tolerant, granting people the dignity of unbelief in Christ but pleading with them to believe in Christ for true life!

So, in the end, you have to decide where to place your faith. Will you place it in the unenlightened, dogmatic, and intolerant pluralism? Or will you place it in Jesus, who is the incredibly humbling way, the enlightening truth, and the persuasively tolerant life? Both require faith. Leslie Newbigin said: "Doubt is not autonomous." What he meant is that you can't doubt alone. We can't doubt one thing without placing our faith in another. You doubt Jesus and trust pluralism or your trust Jesus and doubt pluralism. You can't say "I believe Jesus is the only way" and say "I believe all religions lead to God." So, will you place faith in Jesus who is the way, truth, and life? Or will you place your faith religious pluralism? I hope you'll choose Jesus.