

What We Believe: Other Faiths

In the current climate which suppresses the search for truth, suppresses truth claims, suppresses freedom of speech and anything else that anyone anywhere might find offensive (except things that offend Christians), we have a difficult task talking about what other faiths believe and do. Anything we say which could be taken to put our own faith in a positive light and another person's faith in a negative light is considered bigoted and judgmental and unfair and maybe racist, so we have to make some preliminary remarks.

There are many ways to find meaning in life. Meaning is a pretty vague term that can be applied to the lives of individuals in very broad and general ways. One person finds meaning in the number of Facebook friends she has and another finds meaning in meditating on the cosmic void. When we begin to compare faiths, we are not comparing what gives meaning to a person's life, we are talking about a claim to be true. Christianity claims to be true and bases that claim on historical evidence, including archaeology and ancient documents, on the effect of Christian faith on history, and on a personal experience of something bigger than the self, the power and presence of God with us by His Spirit.

Other faiths have their beliefs and their reasons for those beliefs and that's what we want to look at today. Christianity is often blasted as being an intolerant religion because we believe it is true - Islam is hardly ever blasted, at least in the press, as an intolerant religion, but Muslims also believe they are walking the path of truth. The problem with having a discussion about this is that the number of people who want all religions to be "true" to the same extent is growing rapidly and so a truth claim seems, to an increasing number of people, to be intolerant and unhelpful. Let's look at that for a moment.

There are things that almost everyone accepts as being true. You can get away with telling your friends' kids that fentanyl is dangerous and should be avoided, not only because it's true, but because almost everyone knows it's true. You can tell your neighbor that you saw a bear in his back yard and he's not likely to call you rigid in your thinking. But if you tell someone that you believe that Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, they might have the humility to listen, but they also might flip out at your insinuation that they might be a sinner, too. And it's at the point where you introduce Jesus into a conversation that the walls go up, and, if you don't hear it, you still feel the accusation that Christians are responsible for all sorts of intolerance and witch hunts and inquisitions and crusades.

But we have to get past that, and we will only push past that initial reaction if we love people. Here's one way to get around that initial reaction: you ask them what they believe. Are they atheist or agnostic, for example? Do they not react in horror at the millions murdered by atheist regimes in the twentieth century alone? Another way is to ask them if they think the inquisition or the witch hunts represented the teachings of Jesus. We know that Muhammad was a warrior, a crusader against the Jews and the

Christians and that his method was to see people brought into his religion at the point of the sword if need be. Do they think that Jesus was that way or that He taught that approach? People are people, and it's a fascinating study to look into the psychology, the hysteria, really, that swept through the towns of New England during the Salem witch trials and that seemed to spread all the way across the Atlantic - but it was just people, people who were afraid and who did the wrong thing. In the case of the Salem witch trials, 20 people were killed ... and that was tragic ... but it was 20, not the 18 million killed in WWI or 60-80 million in WWII.

But, the argument might come back, those were not religious wars. They were simply secular battles between countries that felt they had been aggrieved in some way and needed to right some wrongs. But those wars were motivated by religious beliefs. One is nationalism, the belief that country is our first and highest calling -- even ahead of God. There was no reason for World War I and the four years of horror that it produced if it hadn't been for the belief that Austria-Hungary was in decline and needed to show its honor, that the same could be said for the Ottoman Empire, that Germany needed an excuse to show its strength to the world, that Britain had the best navy, that Russia could muster its army quickly, that the honor of the French would always be maintained.

Many things have been said about the causes of the second great war, but the religious view that created a great deal of the horror of WWII was the fruit of faith in Darwinism and the eugenics movement that was popular among intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1930's. Again, it was a belief in no God, but in humans descended from apes, that inspired this movement that was enacted by Hitler in his hatred for the Jews and resulted in the cruel deaths of millions of people in the pursuit of the master race. These are positions of faith, they are religious beliefs, even if they never mention God or have services. We just looked last week at some faith positions, some world views, that currently oppose Christianity and they include naturalism, empiricism, materialism, postmodernism and more traditional religions like Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The point is that everyone has a faith position, everyone believes in something. We're wired to believe in something that makes sense of our existence, and if it's not the God who created us, it will be an idol we replace Him with - but that's so last week.

What about the belief systems that we more usually recognize as being religious? The question we face more and more is, why can't we all get along? How many times and places have you seen the bumper sticker "coexist"? The not-so-subtle message is, "You're all in the same camp and we want you to stop fighting and to simply get along!" But the underlying message, and one you hear directly from time to time, is this, "Every religion is human's search for God, so why don't you all get on the same page and give us one simple option." The world doesn't want to have to understand the complexities and variations in the religious world and just wants a simple choice: "Am I going to be in or out?"

But that approach is both lazy and false. Not all religions even believe in a god. How does that help us get on the same page? There is no deity in Buddhism, nor is there one in Taoism, nor in Confucianism. And in Hinduism, the idea of god is of a non-

personal spiritual substance - something like the “force” in the Star Wars movies. One philosopher has explained it by saying that the founders of these religions are “not gods them-selves; they identify with no deity, no revelation, no personal or transcendent Creator of any sort.”

What about the idea that religion is all about morality, about establishing the rules by which a society can function? Again, you’re leaving out most of the Eastern religions which are not concerned with our behavior, but with our enlightenment. Good and evil, yin and yang must be accepted and kept in a sort of balance - the realization that everything is part of the Whole. If you saw the movie Avatar you saw the morality of Eastern religion: “Our great mother does not take sides. She protects only the balance of life.” Pagan and polytheistic religions are also ‘amoral’, meaning they don’t teach a moral or ethical code of conduct.

Do all religions have some form of worship, a ritual that everyone participates in? The Epicurians of ancient Greece, followed by Aristotle, taught that the gods had no interest in human affairs and wanted neither fear nor worship. Modern religions that have no worship ritual include Theravada Buddhism and Brahmin Hinduism.

So what makes a religion a religion? What do they all have in common that would be a foundation on which to build a unified religious system? According to Roy Clouser in The Myth of Religious Neutrality the one and only thing that all religions have in common is the belief in something divine, something that is eternal and that is the source of everything else. Think of it as being whatever goes back the furthest, that has existed the longest. In polytheism - the belief in many gods - the gods themselves are not the most ancient thing. They are derived from some substance, like the Greek gods who were supposed to come out of something called “chaos” and that’s the divine - the thing that has always been there and from which everything else has come.

To put it bluntly, that’s not much. The religions of the world actually have very little in common which makes it very difficult for them to work together. Let’s look at the goals, the objectives for living, of the major world religions and we can see how this plays out. To begin, I will say that a central feature of all religions is not only determining what is divine and eternal and the cause of everything else, but also what happens to us after death.

In Hinduism, the concern for the soul of a person is not in relation to God or to other people, but in relation to the all - and this is not just for humans but for all living things; plants, animals and humans. The Hindu regards the body as the prison house for the soul. There is no hope of a physical redemption for our bodies, but the hope is for an escape from the physical realm and the uniting of the soul with the eternal, the Brahman. This usually can’t be accomplished in one lifetime, and so the eternal soul continues to cycle through lifetime after lifetime, trying to escape this wheel that is controlled by karma. This escape is not achieved by good works, nor is it stalled by a person’s sins or failures, but it is accomplished by achieving a state where one acts in a disinterested way, when a person doesn’t care about the consequences of their actions

- there is no attachment.

You can quickly see that there is little in this world view that is shared with Christians, or with any monotheistic faith. Good and evil are seen differently, the nature of the soul is different, the view of life as linear or cyclical couldn't be more opposite. Yes, the Hindu wants to do good and achieve good things with his or her life, just as the Christian does, but how they go about that and how that fits within their world view is totally different.

Buddhism is the offshoot of Hinduism, having begun and grown up in India. It is the predominant religion of the Far East. Like Hinduism, modern day Buddhism has many different schools of thought. Some scholars have compared Buddhism to Christianity with its major streams of Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, but it would be more accurate to say that Buddhism should be compared to the Western monotheistic religions - Judaism, Islam and Christianity - because its divisions are so extreme.

In Theravada Buddhism, which is based on the body of doctrine approved soon after the death of Gautama Buddha, there is a narrow, rigid path that a person pursues towards enlightenment. The teachings of Siddhartha Gautama can be reduced to his "four truths"; that life is suffering, that suffering is caused by desire, that extinguishing human desire is the path to peace and that there is an eight-fold path to follow that leads to this extinguishing of desire. These steps, which include a strong moral code, concentration and the wisdom that comes from disciplined spiritual focus were thought by many to be too difficult for the ordinary person and that led to the birth of Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana is quite different from Theravada and includes worship of the Buddha, both the original person and the ideal.

The goal in these two quite distinct belief systems is nirvana, the end of the cycles of rebirth and suffering. In Theravada, this is achieved by following a narrow path while in Mahayana there are many individual paths including a sudden "gifting" of nirvana. But at the heart of both is the simple fact that, for most, you earn your salvation. And salvation is not forgiveness for sins or a restored relationship with God - it is escape from the life in the body that produces suffering.

Other Eastern religions can be more philosophical or more ritualistic, but they don't differ from the two major religions in terms of their basic world view. Shintoism, for example, has many gods and spirits, and is often practiced alongside Buddhism by the people of Japan.

Now, we swing over to monotheism - mono meaning one and theism meaning the belief in God. So the monotheistic religions are the faiths of Islam, Judaism and Christianity which believe in one God. Islam is the youngest of these faiths, having been started in the early decades of the seventh century by Muhammad, who claimed to have received by dictation the words of the eternal Qur'an. The Muslim believes in the continued existence of the soul following death. The door to heaven is opened to the person who acts in the way God desires them to act, with justice and mercy towards others. Therefore, salvation is earned by doing good works and a special gift of salvation is

available to those who lose their lives fighting for the cause of Allah. This produces a strong sense of uncertainty among most Muslims: am I saved, am I going to heaven or am I not? Here's a report from a man who was a missionary to Iran from 1919-1962:

Since many Muslims realize that they fall short of the standards ... they recite extra prayers in addition to those required for each day, and go on pilgrimages not only to Mecca, but also to other sacred shrines, in order to gain merit, and if possible, balance their account with God. But since God does not make known how the accounts of His stand, a Muslim facing death does not know whether he is to go to paradise or to hell. (William Miller)

Another striking difference between Islam and the other main monotheistic religions is the difference in character between the founders. Especially you notice the difference between Muhammad and Jesus. One was a warrior and raised armies to fight for what he believed in. The other raised men to learn the way of love from Him and offered His own life as a ransom for the sins of the world. Islam grew initially through the power of the sword and continues to act as a bully as it moves in to different parts of the world. Christians have acted that way in a few isolated cases in history, but are then drawn back to the example of Jesus and, for the most part, Christianity has spread through a demonstration of love through sacrificial service and acts of compassion in some of the most needy parts of the world.

In Judaism, although the afterlife is not a prominent theme in the Old Testament, there is hope for salvation simply through repentance and asking for forgiveness. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a forgiving God who is looking to bless His beloved people. One Jewish blogger that I read puts it this way:

We do not gain life or atonement by the faith or righteousness of Jesus. We are masters of our own fate, because the choice to do good or bad is our own.

<http://www.beingjewish.com/toshuv/salvation.html>

So, if I was a professor of a religious studies class and you were the students, my first assignment would be to ask you to write a paper on how to make all the different world religions into one without seriously changing their basic beliefs. It can't be done. Either life moves along on a timeline or it circles around and around without much chance of a landing place. Either we are capable of earning our salvation through our ability to be good people, righteous people, or we accept that we need a Savior. Either we are required to be moral or our actions have no significance. Either we are people of peace and love or we convert people by force. Either everything is part of the essence of god or there is a God outside of His creation who will judge the world. You just can't have it both ways on a whole range of these issues.

So, what is our response to the person with the 'coexist' bumper sticker or the person who says we are intolerant if we try to convert people to the Christian faith? Here are a few thoughts to chew on:

1. Trying to convert people is simply an exchange of ideas, of beliefs. I am not any more intolerant if I ask someone to consider Jesus than the person who asks me to

make all the religions into one. That's an extremely intolerant, insensitive and ridiculous demand and it's an offense to truth and intelligence.

2. Earlier in this series I quoted the opening words of 1 Peter 2:17: "*Show respect for everyone*". That's the way we are to engage people in the world, people of different faiths, different world views, different beliefs. We respect them, treat them the way we would treat anything that is the image of God, and continue that respect in our conversations with them.
3. One point I want to say clearly is that Christianity is different. All the other faiths we have looked at today and a whole bunch more that we haven't looked at, are focused on what human beings can do, either to please God or to achieve the goal of life, the nirvana, the great escape. We are different in so many ways: first, by our claim that God has come to us, rather than us finding our way to God. We acknowledge that we are sinners - as do other religions - but that Jesus paid the price for our sin through His sacrifice on the cross. We say that Christ's sacrifice was sufficient for all people, for all sin and for all time. There is never going to be a human sin that requires something more from God. He has made the way for us to receive His Kingdom through the forgiveness He gives to those who put their trust in Jesus.
4. Jesus Himself asked His followers to go into all the world and to proclaim His good news, to make disciples of all nations, to teach people everywhere the things that Jesus had taught them. We can only be tolerant and accepting of the religious views of those who are hostile to our faith if we choose to be disobedient to the command of the one we call Lord. We are not a syncretistic religion, one that absorbs the world views, belief systems and practices of other groups. We are, according to Peter:
... a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, so that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. (2:9)