

# ***How can there be only one True Religion?***

*(Suitable for use within a group over approximately one hour, or for an individual's personal Bible reading)*

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**Pages 1-9: Understanding the Evidence and Strategy for Answering**

**Page 10: Questions for Discussion**

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## **PAGES 1-9: UNDERSTANDING THE EVIDENCE AND STRATEGY FOR ANSWERING**

### **1. IDENTIFY AND CLARIFY THE ORIGINS OF THE QUESTIONS**

- a. Existential (Heart)
  - I don't like wars, fights, disagreements – I want everyone to get along
  - I don't want to call people 'wrong'
  - What about my grandmother who was a Buddhist?
- b. Presuppositions (Worldview, Plausibility Structures)
  - No-one can have exclusive claims to the truth
  - To claim exclusivity is bigoted and intolerant
  - We cannot say that other religions are wrong
  - Religions are a cultural expression
- c. Evidence (Mind)
  - All religions seem to teach the same things – be good people, worship a God, etc.
  - There are so many different religions – they can't all be wrong
  - Christians are not better "people" than other religious people (John Hick)
  - Religious warfare

### **2. EMPATHISE WITH THE QUESTIONER, THE QUESTION, THE OBJECTION**

- a. Find common ground and empathise with their question – "I too wish that all religions were the same! Then we could all get along; then we wouldn't have to say if one was right and another was wrong, etc."
- b. Show the Bible also contains their question (as it often does)!
- c. Explain the Bible also feels what they are feeling
  - Don't judge others
  - God is the God of all nations
  - The foreigner is usually the hero in Bible stories (e.g. Ruth, Job)

### **3. DISMANTLE THEIR PRESUPPOSITIONS**

- a. Show that it works against their position as well – i.e., their question is a 2-edged sword.
- b. Show that their position is as much a faith-based position as yours (Tim Keller).
- c. Show that their position is largely a product of their culture (Western) (Tim Keller).

## **Presupposition 1: “We can’t make exclusive claims”**

### **Response 1**

*This is such a Western objection! It is deeply rooted in Western traditions of self-criticism and individualism.*

- Non-Western cultures don’t have a problem with saying that someone is right/wrong or that their culture and religion is best.
- A Muslim in West Africa is happy to say your religion/belief is wrong.
- Christianity is not the only religion that claims exclusivity. Every major religion does that (even Hinduism is absolutely uncompromising on three issues: the law of karma, the authority of the Vedas which are their scriptures, and reincarnation).<sup>1</sup>

### **Response 2**

*We all make exclusive claims – we can’t get away from this.*

- When we say the earth is round – we exclude those who say the earth is flat.
- When we say all religions are the same – we exclude those who say they’re not.

### **Response 3**

*When we say all religions are the same – we are saying that those who ascribe to each individual religion are wrong.*

- The illustration of blind men touching different parts of an elephant is often used. The one touching the trunk thinks the creature is long and flexible, while the one feeling the elephant’s leg believes it is thick and round. It is argued that the religions of the world each have a grasp on part of the truth about spiritual reality, but none can see the whole elephant or claim to have a comprehensive vision of the truth.<sup>2</sup>
- But the illustration backfires on its users. You are claiming that they’re blind but you are able to see the whole elephant! How could you possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless you yourself have the superior, comprehensive knowledge of spiritual reality you just claimed that none of the religions have?<sup>3</sup>

*You can’t have it both ways ...*

- Believe we can’t make exclusive claims;
- AND then not acknowledge that the statement “all religions are the same” is also exclusive.

In other words, the statement “all religious claims to have a better view of things are arrogant and wrong” is on its own terms, arrogant and wrong.<sup>4</sup> Once religious pluralists become aware that others disagree with their belief about spiritual reality, then why is it not arrogant of them to continue to hold their beliefs?<sup>5</sup>

So the problem isn’t that a claim is exclusive – because all claims end up being exclusive. The problem then becomes which claim can we choose to be the exclusive claim. The question is, which set of unavoidable exclusive beliefs will lead us to humble, peace-loving behaviour towards those who do not share our beliefs?

<sup>1</sup> Ravi Zacharias, ‘Objection #5: It’s Offensive To Claim Jesus Is The Only Way To God’, in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith. A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Questions to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2000) 209

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God. Belief in an age of scepticism* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2009) 8

<sup>3</sup> Keller, *Reason For God*, 9

<sup>4</sup> Keller, *Reason For God*, 11

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God. Conversations on Faith and Life. Discussion Guide* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2010) 29

Additionally, this isn't how real life works:

- All trains do not go to Town Hall;
- All planes do not go to London;
- All mailing addresses will not get to my brother.

The whole of life works with us knowing that certain things work because they are "true" and certain things don't work because they are the "wrong" train, plane, address.

### **Presupposition 2: "Religions are simply a cultural expression – you are a product of how you have been brought up"**

#### ***Response***

Yes, but that statement itself is a product of how you're brought up – it is a very Western claim:

- You are a cultural relativist because you're postmodern Gen Y;
- But if you were born in Morocco, you'd be a cultural exclusivist.

Are you then saying the cultural exclusivist in Morocco is wrong? Who are you to impose your beliefs onto others?

The idea that truth is relative and that every person has the right to construct his or her own religion is grounded in a highly individualistic way of thinking that many non-Western cultures do not share. Religious pluralism is therefore ethnocentric, the promotion of one particular cultural worldview as superior to others. Pluralism then does not promote unity between faiths and cultures after all.<sup>7</sup>

*You can't have it both ways ...*

- Believe that we are a product of our culture;
- AND then not see that this claim itself is a product of our own culture.

### **Presupposition 3: "All religions are different ways to the same God"**

#### ***Response***

Such an attitude reveals complete ignorance of the doctrines of other religions. Though there are some similarities, the differences far outweigh and are much greater than the similarities.<sup>8</sup> To claim that all religions are basically the same is to deny that their differences matter.

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. Most world religions have sharply different views of reality and consider those beliefs to be non-negotiable; their core beliefs are necessary for people to find salvation.<sup>9</sup>

Further, we can only say "all religions are the same" if we believe:

<sup>6</sup> Keller, *Reason For God*, 20

<sup>7</sup> Keller, *Discussion Guide*, 32

<sup>8</sup> Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1988) 146

<sup>9</sup> Keller, *Discussion Guide*, 28

- God doesn't care how we come to him;
- Or he's so impersonal it doesn't matter.

Tim Keller describes an event when a person contended that doctrinal differences between the major religions were insignificant, that they all believed in the same God. But when Keller asked that person who that God was, he described him as an all-loving Spirit in the universe. The problem of this view is inconsistency. It insists that doctrine is unimportant, but at the same time assumes doctrinal beliefs about the nature of God that are at loggerheads with those of all the major faiths. Buddhism, for example, doesn't believe in a personal God at all. This person holds a specific view of God which is touted as superior and more enlightened than the beliefs of most major religions.<sup>10</sup>

If we want God to be personal and loving then we also have a God who cares how we come to him AND we can't impose our Western pluralism on him!

#### **Presupposition 4: "To call other religions 'wrong' is to be intolerant"**

##### **Response 1**

*It all depends what you mean by 'intolerant'.*

- We tolerate others' right to believe what they want;
- And we hope that they let us do the same.

The gospel 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.<sup>11</sup>

##### **Response 2**

*True tolerance permits the right of all to be able to call someone 'wrong'.*

Do you believe that out there someone is doing what you would call "wrong"? Is it appropriate to accuse them of wrong? Is it appropriate for you to accuse one of wrong but deny me that same right?

##### **Response 3**

*Stating all religions are right – is itself an intolerant claim, because to affirm that all religions are right means we must affirm all religions are the same – which means we must impose our version of what we believe onto sincere followers of each religion.*

*You can't have it both ways ...*

- Believe that we should respect other religions;
  - But at the same time impose on them what we think they believe.
- If they say they are different from what we believe, we need to respect that;
- It is culturally imperialistic to tell another religion that we know what it is they believe.

#### **Presupposition 5: "God is unknowable – so we are free to come up with our versions of how to find him"**

##### **Response**

But how do you know this – if he is unknowable?

<sup>10</sup> Keller, *Reason For God*, 8

<sup>11</sup> Keller, *Discussion Guide*, 32

By saying this, you are claiming that every major world religion is wrong about God. You are the one who can 'see' where all the other religions are the 'blind men'.

#### **4. DISCUSS THE EVIDENCE**

##### ***Regarding... 'All religions are true'***

Yes, all religions have truth contained in them (e.g. "We should respect our parents", "We need to worship God", "Murder is wrong", Confucius: "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you"<sup>12</sup>), BUT:

1. They all have fundamentally different solutions to dealing with life now and life after death
  - Buddhism – Eightfold Path to enlightenment
  - Hinduism – Continues cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth
  - Islam – Five Pillars of Islam<sup>13</sup>
  
2. Their teachings contradict each other
  - The Bible teaches that Jesus died on the cross and rose bodily from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:1-6), but the Qur'an teaches that he did not die (and therefore did not rise from the dead - Sura 4:157)<sup>14</sup>. Both cannot be true.
  - Muslims - Jesus was not God;
  - Jews - Jesus was not God;
  - Hindus - There are multiple gods; Christianity, Jews, Islam – there is One God;
  - Buddha - Hinduism is wrong.

Therefore while there are areas of truth that are common for all religions, there are areas of fundamental difference in doctrine that cannot be reconciled or reduced to logical agreement.

##### ***Regarding... 'All religions are the same'***

Well, they do look similar superficially. Religious people of different persuasions pray, undertake rituals, attend places of worship, read Scriptures...

But the deeper you go, the more different it appears they are.

A major difference between Christianity and other religions is that other religious systems are based on a do-it-yourself foundation. Good works in other religions are the means by which one hopes to gain favour with God, and eventually achieve salvation. But in Christianity salvation is received as a free gift through the finished work of Christ, and the good works become our response of love and gratefulness. Because of this profound difference, Christianity alone offers assurance of salvation.<sup>15</sup>

Only a detached outsider calls all religions the same; the *devout follower sees her/his religion as completely different*.

So religious pluralism is not a tolerant attitude toward all religions, but a 'new' religion/worldview, that 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. 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. It asserts that the ultimate is unknowable and so they do not believe (for example) that there is one God who accepts people because of the sacrifice of Jesus. This is a series of beliefs about the nature of God and spiritual reality – a religious belief with explicit dogma (for which there is no means of proving).

*What can be affirmed is that the desire ‘behind’ wanting people to agree on religious ideas is the desire for harmony. This desire is a good one and one that people of all religious persuasion should strive for. However, this should be achievable without the (somewhat arrogant) need to simplify the religious traditions of billions of devout followers of different religions throughout the world. In a sophisticated society like Australia, true tolerance (the ability to disagree on ideas but maintain a civility of peace), should be sought after, rather than a quashing of all discussion.*

## **5. LEAD TO THE GOSPEL**

At the heart of the question, ‘Are all religions the same?’ lie 3 further questions:

1. Is God knowable?
2. Is God personal and loving?
3. Does God care how we worship him?

Christians believe that:

1. God is knowable (Heb 1:1-2; John 1:1-14);
2. God is personal and loving (1 John 4:7-10; Rom 5:8; ‘our Father’ Matt 6:25-34 + Gal 4:6);
3. God cares how we worship him (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

He cares so much that he sent his Son Jesus (John 3:16):

1. To make himself known;
2. To love us;
3. To show us the way to him.

This is what makes a personal relationship a personal relationship:

- That truth does matter;
- That we do get certain things right;
- And we respect what the other person says.

## **6. SOME SUMMARIZING THOUGHTS**

*Are you saying that other religions are wrong?*

*Are you saying there’s no truth in other religions?*

*Aren’t you intolerant to say that Christianity is the only way?*

We want to affirm that:

- There is truth in other religions;
- There is goodness in other religions;
- There is beauty in other religions.

But the heart of the question is this:

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<sup>16</sup> Keller, *Discussion Guide*, 28

*Is there a personal God out there – who knows us and loves us?  
And how do we worship this personal God?*

If there's a personal God, then *He* needs to tell us how to know him:

- We can't make up the rules;
- We can't tell him how we want to worship him.

The Bible claims that 2000 years ago, God did this by:

- Sending his Son Jesus;
- Died for us and rose again for us.

## **7. RELATED QUESTIONS**

### **1. What About Those Who Haven't Heard?**

*If Christianity is the only right way, then you're saying that billions of people will go to Hell.  
What about my grandmother who never heard?  
It would be wrong, unfair to send people to Hell because they never heard.*

#### ***Empathise***

We can't fathom billions of people going to Hell → the 'scandal of particularity'.  
Empirically, it does seem that there will be many who will die never having heard of Jesus.

#### ***Response***

On the one hand, the Bible never directly addresses this, so it is hard to be definitive on this issue.  
And on the other hand, we never really know if they never get a chance to hear.

#### ***Example***

- There are many stories of Muslims who have turned to Christ because they have seen Jesus in a vision or a dream.
- God finds other ways of telling people about Jesus that go far beyond our own understanding. He can reach into any cultural situation in response to anyone who wants to know him.<sup>17</sup>

The Bible also says there is enough information that people ought to want to come back to God.

- Paul says God's infinite power and deity are revealed to everyone through creation (Rom 1:20). Then Paul says God put the law in our hearts and our consciences that we might seek after him (Rom 2:14-15).<sup>18</sup>
- In Acts 17:26-27 Paul says that God knows where we will be born and raised, and he puts us in a position where we might seek him. We are clearly told that wherever we live – in whatever culture or nation – he is within reach of every one of us.<sup>19</sup>

However most people don't want to come back to God (look, for example, at Australia – most people have heard about God but don't want to come back to God).

Thus, God himself does not send anybody to heaven or to hell; the person *chooses to respond to the grace of God or to reject it* (although even that decision is enabled by his grace).<sup>20</sup>

If God is able to give the word of Christ in various settings – if he's not far from us wherever we are, if he is able to speak through the general revelation of creation and through our conscience – then we have to accept the fact that we are without excuse. Every human being knows enough truth to respond to. All people know enough to

<sup>17</sup> Zacharias, 'Objection #5', 226-227

<sup>18</sup> Zacharias, 'Objection #5', 226

<sup>19</sup> Zacharias, 'Objection #5', 226

<sup>20</sup> Zacharias, 'Objection #5', 220

condemn them; they do not need to hear John 3:16 in order to be lost. They are lost because they have already rejected what God has spoken to them through creation, their conscience and other ways.<sup>21</sup>

For a person asking the question, ‘What about those who have not heard?’, it is appropriate to assume the questioner holds one or both of the following two prepositions...

***Underlying Presupposition 1: Christianity can't be the only true religion.***

Response:

To say that Jesus is the only way to be saved isn't the same as saying that those who haven't heard of Jesus can't be saved.

Maybe God has a special dispensation for those who haven't heard of Jesus. For example, the:

- Infants
- Handicapped

But the Bible is clear on what happens to those who have heard and who then reject what they have heard (i.e., we have a responsibility to hear Jesus and follow him).

***Underlying Presupposition 2: God is unfair to send people to Hell if they haven't heard.***

Response:

- ‘Unfairness’ is inconsistent with God's character and what Scripture denotes regarding such.
- God takes no delight in anyone's death – no matter how evil.
- God never punishes the innocent – he would spare a whole city for one innocent person (e.g. see Gen 18).
- We don't know if any one person hasn't heard. If God is able to reveal himself in ways that are beyond our understanding then we have to accept the fact that we are without excuse.
- At the end of the day, we can never say ‘unfair’ to God – He has all understanding, but we have very limited understanding.
- He will always do whatever is most merciful, most loving (e.g. see Gen 18).
- He will always err on the side of mercy!

**2. What About My Grandmother?**

Note: This is can be a ‘trap’ rather than a serious concern.

***Response***

Point out that existentially you also struggle with this same question (it might help to share if someone close to you has also passed away without believing in Jesus).

- At the end of the day however we can be sure that God has done what is most loving and most fair. It is in His nature to give grace and mercy to those who don't deserve it.

*But more importantly → what about you? What do you think?*

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<sup>21</sup> Zacharias, ‘Objection #5’, 227



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# ***How can there be only one True Religion?***

*(Suitable for use within a group over approximately one hour, or for an individual's personal Bible reading)*

## **PAGE 10: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

### **IDENTIFY AND CLARIFY THE ORIGIN OF THE QUESTION**

Case Scenario: You are meeting an old friend from uni in the city for a coffee. Your friendship stems from first year and though you don't see each other that often you message each other on Facebook regularly. In the week prior to your coffee meeting, your friend returned from a holiday in Nepal and shows you some pictures on their Ipad. While in Nepal, your friend, a non-Christian, said they felt really 'alive' when visiting the temples.

Knowing that you are a Christian who takes your faith seriously your friend asks you, *"I know that you believe that your faith and your God are the only way. But isn't that a bit arrogant to make such an exclusive claim? What about Hinduism which seems to accept all kinds of gods? Don't you think that in the end it doesn't matter because let's face it, all religions are the same anyway?"*

1. Consider as a group the possible origin(s) of your friend's question. What are the possible:
  - a. Existential (heart) origins of the question;
  - b. 'Evidence'/intellectual beliefs held by your friend leading to the question.
2. Divide into pairs. As a 'role play' empathise with your friend's question. How does the Bible empathise with your friend?
3. From the content of your friend's question identify three presuppositions held by your friend – perhaps subconsciously – about Christianity and religious views more broadly. For each presupposition identified, construct a three point argument outlining how you could challenge each presupposition in a respectful manner.
4. Having spent time challenging the presuppositions held by your friend, he/she may be now more willing to hear some of the biblical truths regarding the question.

Read:

  - a. Heb 1:1-2
  - b. 1 John 4:7-10
  - c. John 14:6How can each of these passages function in an email you send to your friend on the day following coffee?