

“Are all religions equally valid?”

“Jesus answered, ‘You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.’ Pilate said to Him, ‘What is truth?’” (John 18:37b, 38a).

Most of us have probably heard some version of the ancient parable of the four blind men who encountered an elephant and tried to figure out what it was by feeling the various parts of its body. One felt the trunk and concluded that it was like a snake. Another felt the animal’s massive side and thought that it was like a wall. A third man wrapped his arms around its huge leg and said that it was undoubtedly similar to a tree. The fourth, grasping the elephant’s tail, declared that it was surely something like a rope. This parable has been used for centuries to make the point that truth is relative and dependent upon the perspective of the individual. However, what it actually teaches is *the danger of partial truth* because all four men were wrong! They were actually feeling an elephant—not a snake, a wall, a tree, or a rope.

We are living in a world that is incredibly diverse religiously, a fact which becomes more obvious day by day. As we think about the wide range of religions present in the world, we need to ask, “Are all religions equally valid?” There is no question that each of them contains some elements of truth and perhaps offers some helpful perspectives and promotes some worthwhile practices. However, are they all equally valid?

Post-modern pluralism would quickly answer, “Yes! All religions have the same degree of validity, and none is superior in any way to

any other.” Post-modern thought is characterized by the claim that the only truth is “personal truth”—that is, something is true if it is true for the individual. It proclaims that there is no such thing as “universal truth,” which is always true and valid for all. Applied to religion, this thinking means that any religious belief is equal to any other, entirely a matter of individual preference. Further, we are told, to say that one religion has more validity than another is to be guilty of bigotry. As a result, the belief that all religions are equally valid is widespread. This notion is known popularly as “religious pluralism” and is regarded by most people today as a good thing.

WHAT DOES “VALID” MEAN?

Before we can adequately address the question of validity, we have to be clear about what we mean by “valid.” First of all, validity in religion means that it is based on truth (or reality). Second, in order to be valid, a religion would need to lead us to know God and to engage in some sort of relationship with Him. Third, “equally valid” means that all religions have the same eternal value, that they are of importance not just for this life, but throughout eternity. If this is what we mean by “valid,” then the answer to our question is obviously “No, all religions are *not* equally valid.”

WHY IS IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR ALL RELIGIONS TO BE VALID?

First, the claim that all religions are equally valid is actually a claim that all are equally *invalid*—that there is no truth to any of them. Why? The only way that all religions could be

equally valid is if none at all were valid, for the simple reason that they all make conflicting truth claims. It is logically impossible for opposite beliefs to be true: All can be wrong, but all cannot be right. In *Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling With Questions People Ask*, Adam Hamilton made the excellent point that a Muslim would not be honored by being told that his religion is equally as valid as Hinduism; at best, the Muslim would conclude that we do not understand his faith very well.¹ Why? Because their conflicting claims of truth cannot be reconciled.

Critics of Christianity often characterize followers of Christ as being narrow-minded and exclusive in our thinking, because of the claims to absolute and exclusive truth made by Jesus (as in John 14:6). The truth, however, is that all religions have conflicting truth claims. For example, whereas the cross of Christ is at the very heart of our faith, Muslims deny that the crucifixion happened at all. Likewise, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all claim that there is only one true God, while Hindus claim that there may be as many as 330 million individual gods—and Buddhism declares that there is no personal god at all. Even atheists have their claims to exclusive truth because they are certain that everyone who believes in any sort of god is wrong!

Obviously, there is no way that all of these conflicting points of view can be correct; as a result, they cannot be equally valid. This point applies equally to various religious practices, as well as to religious beliefs. To claim that all religions are equally valid would be to declare that all religious practices are equally valid. This would mean that an “honor killing” is equally as valid as Jesus’ teaching to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Likewise, the ancient Hindu practice of suttee (burning a widow alive on the funeral pyre of her husband) would be on the same level as taking care of orphans and widows (James 1:27). Who would be willing to make such a claim? What may sound good in theory is quickly revealed to be perverse when applied to specific beliefs and practices.

Clearly, all religions are *not* equally valid.

¹Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling With Questions People Ask* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 22.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT CHRISTIANITY?

The claim that our Christian faith is valid is not in any way a claim that Christians are without faults or a denial that we often fail to live up to the high calling of life in Christ Jesus. Then what is it that makes Christianity “more valid” than Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, or any other religious belief?

The answer, quite simply, is *Jesus*. Of all the religions of the world, Christianity is the only one which has a Savior. All religions have some things in common (such as worship, prayer, and a concept of morality), but only the Christian faith has a Savior who makes possible eternal life and offers it freely to everyone. Judaism is a messianic religion without a messiah. Muslims regard Muhammad as a prophet who left his followers with an instruction manual (the Qur’an) to use in saving themselves. Hinduism’s goal is eventual extinction, not salvation, “achieved” through one’s own efforts (the accruing of *karma*) after numerous lifetimes of trying. Buddhism’s goal is much the same, ending with the disintegration of the individual and his being absorbed into the “world soul,” in much the same way that the smoke from a blown-out candle is dissipated into the air. Only the Christian faith offers the hope of eternal life with the God who made us, because of a Savior who went to the cross and died for our sins. Based on the power of His resurrection from the dead, Jesus promises that those who follow Him will eventually conquer death too. Only the Christian faith gives a completely realistic portrayal of the human condition—that we are sinners in need of redemption—and then tells us that God has provided that Redeemer to give us exactly what we need.

The question of validity is not about us: It is about Jesus.

CONCLUSION

If all religions are not equally valid, what should be our attitude toward people of other religions? Although we boldly declare that only faith in Christ has any validity, that does not mean we should exhibit an air of superiority toward people of other religions. That is not what Jesus taught. Rather, He taught us to love everyone—even our enemies. There should be no prejudice or sense of superiority, but rather

the effort to be good neighbors to those around us, regardless of what they believe. Likewise, we should always respect others, which is not the same as respecting what they believe. We should respect them as human beings created in God's image, and respect the fact that many of them are honest and sincere about wanting to do what is right. Then, as opportunity arises, we should use every possible means to let the light of the gospel shine on them. Perhaps their religion has given them some degree of insight toward truth (such as the existence of God and respect for Jesus).

We can begin with that and point them to what we know of Christ and bring them the rest of the way to God.

What we should *not* do is assume that they are "okay" simply because they are religious. Saul of Tarsus and the centurion Cornelius were both devoutly religious men, but both needed to be brought to the Savior (Acts 9; 10). Our religious neighbors are no different. They need exactly the same thing that we all need: cleansing by Jesus' blood. All of the validity of our faith lies in that one great truth. ■ Tommy South

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