

MESSAGE TRANSCRIPTS

Series: Answers

Part 3 Don't All Religions Lead to God?

Tim Armstrong, Senior Pastor

Weekend 10.24-25.09

I want you to think with me about this scenario. Say you're out to lunch with a friend and you get into a conversation. The conversation moves to religion and in the course of that dialogue your friend says to you well, I believe in Jesus Christ but I believe that there are many ways to God. What do you say next? What is your response? Do you let it just kind of hang out there in the air or do you see that as an open door to take the dialogue to the next step? Do you even know what to say or do you believe that all religions lead ultimately to God?

That's what I want to talk to you about this morning as we continue our series that we've called Answers and really the premise behind this entire series is to give you answers so that you're able to make a reasonable defense for why you believe what you believe. And I tell you, of all of the things that our culture is into if you really want to understand it's viewpoint, listen to their view of religion, of God. It is this predominant philosophy that all roads lead to God which permeates our culture. It's call the mountain analogy. The mountain is light. God is at the top of the mountain. All the roads illustrate the different religions, different concepts of how to get to God and the predominant thought is it really doesn't matter what road you're on. They're all leading to the same place. Is that true? How do we confront that concept?

It's called Religious Pluralism. If you'll look in your notes you'll see the definition. It is the acceptance of all religions as equally valid. In other words, they all have an element of truth. There's a validity to them that puts them on an equal and level playing field. If you look in an online encyclopedia, such as wikipedia they go on with the definition. Religious Pluralism is a world view that stands on the premise that one religion is not the sole, exclusive source of values, truth and supreme deity. That's the mindset of our modern culture. Religious Pluralism.

Now, the opposite of this is Religious Exclusivism and you might already understand the definition. It's just the concept. It's the belief that only one particular religion is true. That is Religious Exclusivism. Again, going to that same online encyclopedia, wikipedia says in it's most extreme form Religious Exclusivism teaches that only the members of one religion or sect will reach heaven while all others will be doomed to eternal damnation. Now, admittedly, Christianity is clearly exclusivistic. With what you know about Christianity you have to understand that this encyclopedia is talking about us. In fact, exclusivism is the classic, Christian doctrine. Jesus Christ, himself says I'm it. I'm the door. I'm the way.

Let me just take you on a quick journey through a couple of scriptures. John, chapter 14 as an example. Jesus's own words about who He is; about himself. John 14, verse 6. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. What's that sound like? That sounds like an exclusivistic statement, doesn't it? But look at the text closely. There is a definite article and that article is in the original language and it

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gives it even a more powerful sense. He says, I am THE way. I am THE truth, THE life. No one comes to the Father except through me. He doesn't say I'm a way, I'm a truth, I am a life. He says, I'm it – that's it. This is very exclusivistic. This is what causes many to call us as believers intolerant. We're not necessarily being intolerant. We're trying to be true to what our God tells us in the scriptures.

Turn over to Acts, chapter 4. You'll see another example of exclusivity in scripture. Acts, chapter 4, verse 12. This is about Jesus being the stone that was rejected. The builder which has become the cornerstone. Verse 12 is, that was verse 11. Verse 12 is what I really want you to see. And there is salvation in, what's it say? No one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Turn over with me to 1 Timothy, chapter 2. Again, another scriptural example of exclusivity. 1 Timothy, chapter 2. What do we read? For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. So it doesn't take much to realize in our scriptures we are exclusivistic in our theology. We believe there is one way.

But imagine, go back to the scenario. You're in this conversation with someone and they say, well, that's fine for you. I'm glad that works for you. I believe there are many roads that lead to God. How do you respond to your pluralistic friend? Well, that's what I want to help you with. I want to help you think logically through religious pluralism because this is the premise. This is my concept is that most people who are religious pluralists in our culture today really haven't put much thought behind what they believe. It sounds good. They've heard it espoused by other people and so they go with the flow. And, what I've experienced is if you'll just dialogue with them and in really a sense of gentleness and kindness and just use simple logic they'll arrive at a completely different viewpoint, really in just the course of one conversation. It's not even that complicated.

Let me give you three things to help you in your conversation with your religious pluralistic friend. The first thing is when we're thinking logically is just to help them understand is world religions are not the same. They're vastly different. If you place them all on a level playing field they don't look anything alike. One will be monotheistic. Mono meaning one. Theistic meaning God, meaning one God. That's Christianity. We believe in one God while at the same time another world religion will be polytheistic. Poly meaning many. They believe in many Gods or pantheistic. Pan meaning all. All is God. There's an invasion of the divinity, the spirit of divinity in all things. That's pantheism. You put them side by side they're not the same. One religion will say God is imminent. In other words, He's beyond this world. He's out of touch. We can't really understand Him. The other one will say, no. He is imminent. God is transcendent, rather. He's outside. God is eminent. Means He's close. He's personal. He's revealed Himself. They're not the same. Another will say, well, man's ultimate problem is sin. Well, another world religion will say no. Man's ultimate problem is ignorance. He needs to be educated. At the same time another world religion will say man needs to be enlightened. They're not all the same. They're different. See my point?

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Just take for example the comparison of world religion and they're view of God. As an example Christianity views God as personal. He's close. We believe in a personal. We just sang to a personal God. We sang about the attributes of a personal God; that he's a good God. That He's a merciful God. That He's a God that saves. That's not a transcendent view of God. That's an imminent view of God. We believe God is close.

But now, if you take Islam on the other hand they don't believe God is personal but rather, God is impersonal. In fact, it grates me to no end when I hear people say well, the Islamic god and the Christian god are really just the same god approached by two different means. Nothing could be further from the truth. The god of Christianity, the true God, Yahweh is nothing like Allah. Allah is a vengeful, self prideful, gloating god that loves to reek judgment not on it's people but Allah views that people are subjects. They're nothing similar. God, in the tradition of Islam is so not personal. He's distant. And if anything he's cruel. The two don't make any type of comparison one to another.

Move over into Eastern religion. Hinduism for example. Now we're not even talking about single deity but the idea of a non-personal, eternal source. We're going to talk about Hinduism in a moment. Buddhism, which is very similar; another Eastern concept is God is non-personal. He's diffused. He's diffused into the environment. He's diffused into everything; every living and non-living thing has a divine essence; completely different concept from our view of Christianity or our view of God.

Or we come to the world religion of Judaism, for example. Again, there's the approach that God is personal but He's a non-close god. I like what Harold Netland says. He says, careful examination of the basic tenets of the various religious traditions demonstrates that far from teaching the same thing the major religions have radically different perspectives. And this is what we need to bring up when we're in conversation with our pluralistic friend. That the concept that all religions, basically are the same really isn't logical.

The second thing to help them understand is that world religions have different ethics. Now listen here. The religious pluralists love to say, we heard it illustrated for us in the street interview, that basically all religions come down to one common denominator, one common theme. That's called religions reductionism where you just reduce everything to one, usually it's the idea that man is good for the ethics or that God is love or something like that. The problem is that the world religions have completely different ethical views and they tend to live themselves out through their people. Let's compare, as an example, Hinduism verse Christianity. Hinduism operates on the concept of himsha. A himsha is the idea that there is a divine presence or divinity permeates all things. All living matter has some kind of divinity to it. That's why when you go over to India you see cows and other wild beasts and animals just kind of freely roaming the country side and the city. It's because they think it would be travesty to destroy one of those animals. Why? Because that animal has a divine essence to it. That's all why a Hindu is a vegetarian. They're not doing

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it for any kind of sense of health wise. They're actually allowing their food to walk around with them because they see it as a divine essence. Not only that but they see this continuation of life. This continual perpetuation of life and so they don't want to eat a cow. That might be Aunt Betsy you know. They can't do those kind of things. That tell them that their ethic is set up by their religious views. It goes one step further. They're whole concept of the environment is the idea that it is permeated with this divine essence and so that changes the way they use the earth. Listen, Christianity in comparison has a completely different ethic. We believe in one divine source and that this source is a person and that we are not God. We believe that this divine source has a name and is an individual. It's not just that it's permeating throughout all of us and all of creation. Which, by the way, we have a completely view of the environment.

But to press a hot button right now as Christ followers, Christians, theologically we are not environmentalists. Environmentalism is a movement that has been started by this New Age philosophy, Eastern concept where we must now sustain the environment and the world and elevate it as if it is our job to maintain it. That's not our job. That's always been God's job to maintain the universe. Our job is clear. We're not environmentalist. We're conservationists. Big difference. We're called to manage the earth; to govern the earth and it's so easy. If we're not careful, we don't understand what we believe we can slip into the mindset of the present day culture. See, our ethics are vastly different.

I'll put along side of Islam, for example. We were talking about Islamic scripture a moment ago. Well, in Islamic scripture Allah endorses the killing of infidels. That's a different ethic than Christianity. By the way, Allah has a low view of the value of human life. Do you realize in Islamic scripture it gives permission for the male headship, the husband of an Islamic home to eat or even murder his wife? Do you realize the whole concept of the Jihad is the devaluing of human life and yet this is something that Allah elevates. You know, when you fly a plane into a building there's no regard, not only for the lives of the people in the building but for your own life flying the plane. All built on a religious ethic. Christianity in comparison is know God is love and that human life has value even unborn human life has value to the point where even if there's an enemy we're called not to some religious Jihad; not to the annihilation of the infidel because they don't believe like we believe but rather, we're called to do what? We're called to love our neighbor; love our enemies; love those who might persecute us. Completely different world view so when you attempt to meld all the paths going up the mountain into a single road it just doesn't work.

Kenneth Sample says this: Attempts to reduce all religions to their lowest common denominator usually succeed only in distorting them. That's exactly right. Distorts the religion individually.

Thirdly, world religions are just logically irreconcilable. When you look at world religions logically there are no comparisons. They are logically irreconcilable. Ronald Nash says anyone who would become a pluralist must first abandon the very principle of logic that

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makes all significant thought, action and communication possible. Think about what he just said. That if you're a Religious Pluralist you've abandoned logic. And you know, what I think is going on is that, like I mentioned most people who are Religious Pluralists by nature, in their thinking, in their philosophy probably haven't gone through the concepts logically and that if you help them to do this naturally they'll start to see that their concepts lack in logic. But you know what else it will do? It will open a door. It will open the door to have them start to wonder, well, what is the way? How do I know the road to God? This is your opportunity to talk about the way, the truth and the life.

Now, immediately they might say well, you know, I'm just not sure if I buy in to Jesus Christ. I don't know if I buy in to the scriptures. What do you do then? Well, this is when I like to take the approach by Barry Leaventhal who's the dean of a southern Evangelical seminary. He says we need to logically present the facts about Jesus. Just logically lay out why we believe what we believe. Logically lay out the facts about who Jesus is. Now, think about it. We just logically thought through Religious Pluralism. Let's logically think through the claims of Christ.

Now, what do you know about Christ? We know that Jesus himself said that he is the author of salvation. We know that He said that He was God. That He's God incarnate. We know that Jesus Christ claimed that He would rise from the dead; that there would be a resurrection which, by the way, is the main tenet of Christianity. So, if we can't have a sense of partnership and understanding the scriptures let's at least logically move through, historically what has happened since the life of Christ. Set it up this way. Help them understand it as if you were presenting a case. There's four exhibits you can give them.

First exhibit. Historically you can not deny the fact the disciples died for their beliefs. That the disciples died for what they believed in. Now, you might say well, of course they did. We would expect someone who was a follower of Jesus to die for their belief system. But you remember the story. Remember what happened? Jesus goes to the cross and where are His disciples? They're nowhere to be found. They've fled. Right? They were afraid for their own lives. In fact, they all gathered together as one band up in the upper room and that's where they were post-crucifixion. They spent three years with Jesus. Jesus told them I was the Messiah. I'm the way, the truth, the life. I'm going to come back from the dead. They weren't waiting around to see that. They were held up in an upper room. They were afraid that the authorities that had done that to Jesus were going to come out and find them and do that to them. And suddenly everything is over. It's done. They're trying to slip away into obscurity. And yet, just a few days later they're out on the street proclaiming Jesus Christ. What happened in that interim of time? From one moment being ardent followers to being fearful followers to now back to being ardent followers. What happened? Well we know because we have the scriptures. Jesus appeared to them in the upper room. He appeared to them and He was alive. They saw him die. They knew he was dead and now He's saying to his disciples if you don't believe I'm really who I am stick your finger in the nail-scarred hand. What do you think that would do to a person in that upper room? It

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would change your entire life view in an instant, in a moment you would no longer be afraid about your own life. You're thinking I'm going to follow this guy because this guy comes back from the dead. He's God. And so they go out to the street corner and they begin to proclaim it and just a few hours before they were frightened for their life, frightened for persecution and what do we know about them? They all get persecuted, right? All but one disciple becomes martyred for their faith, dies for their faith. John was the only one. He's imprisoned on an island of Patmos until his nineties. Lives a horrific life. We can say that all of the disciples suffered for their beliefs. What happened?

I like what Barry Leventhal says. He says men may live for a lie but to think that thousands will die for the same lie requires a stretch of the imagination. Hypocrites do not become martyrs. So, you just start logically. Disciples died for their beliefs.

Number two, exhibit number two. The conversion of skeptics. Historically we know that listen, thousands of Rabbis, Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes became followers of the way. They abandoned Judaism and became followers of Christ. There was a great conversion of people who were skeptical. Who are the two most well known skeptics of scripture? James, the half-brother of Jesus and Paul. That's right.

James. Let's look at James. He's the half-brother of Jesus. Skeptic through the entire life of Jesus. Jesus dies and for some overwhelming reason he now throws his life into following after his half-brother. What happened? Well we know that scripture tells us that Jesus appeared to him. Changes his entire life view. Now he becomes the recognized leader of the largest church, the church in Jerusalem and he himself is martyred for the faith.

Paul. What do we know about Paul? Paul, who was Saul was the persecutor of the church. That's what he felt was his divine mission and he says, you don't have to turn there. 1 Timothy he says, formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, insolent opponent. What does that sound like? But, he says, I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.

F.F. Bruce, New Testament scholar, great asset to the church, sadly died recently wrote it is reasonable to believe that the evidence which convinced such a man of the out and out wrongness of his former course and led him so decisively to abandon previously cherished beliefs for a movement which he so vigorously opposed must have been a singular, impressive quality. The conversion of Paul has long been regarded as a weighty evidence for the truth of Christianity.

Walk through history. You find all types of skeptics who become believers.

Exhibit number three. Now, I think this is a powerful one. And that is changes to the social structure of Judaism. When you go to Israel today and you go to Jerusalem you don't find a temple anymore. There's no high priest. No one is sacrificing animals. It's not necessarily because they embrace Jesus as the Messiah but because of the Jesus and His life their

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system today was radically altered. In fact, after the resurrection of Christ many of the Jews who had practice Judaism their whole life, who had become believers in Jesus Christ changed radically. It upset the balance of Jerusalem and what was going on there. All these Jews who became believers no longer sacrificed another animal. They no longer kept the dietary commands of the Mosaic Law. They no longer felt that it was necessary to separate themselves from Gentile. They no longer kept the Jewish Sabbath. These were sacred beliefs that they never would have abandoned. These were beliefs that they felt that God had given to them and their people. And that to go against them was a sure way of the damnation of their own personal souls. And yet historians tell us three weeks after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ ten-thousand Jews became followers of Jesus Christ. Changed the system and it continued from there. It moved up rapidly and to this day there has been an impact in Judaism that is unexplainable. How do you explain that?

The fourth exhibit and the last one. Listen, don't miss this. Some of the greatest evidences for a man who lived two thousand years and the power that He exhibits to this day is your life. Your life was transformed. We're not talking about some mythological figure that lived in history. We're talking about a real person who has made real changes in our lives, in your homes, your family, your marriages, the way that you go about, perceive life. All that is changed. Don't miss the fact that you have an incredible impact through our story alone.

You know as these doors of these people who were once Religious Pluralists begin to open to the truth of Jesus Christ it might well be because of your life and I think that blows our minds – it should blow our minds that the eternal God, the God that we worship so chooses to use us in the proclamation of His message. Listen. Peter said it this way: In your hearts, honor Christ the Lord as holy always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. See, we are people of hope. That's what Religious Pluralism, the world that we know do not have. We have a hope in His name is Jesus Christ.

Do all roads lead to God? Yes. They do. Scripture tells us every knee will bow before God but there's only one road that leads to salvation. And that is in Jesus Christ. You see, proclaim Him boldly. Proclaim Him logically because people have a desire to know the way. Now this is the thing. We all know people who are Religious Pluralists. We all have conversations. We've all stumbled into them at one time or another. You know what I've been praying for you this week? Is that God would bring these people into your path and that somehow these conversations will be initiated so that you can tell them what you now know.

Let's pray about that. Let's pray for those people in your life that you might have an opportunity to just logically help them understand who Jesus Christ is. Let's bow our heads – pray for those people. Those people who are coming to your mind right now.