

One Way Or Many?

by Richard Ochs

Aren't all religions pretty much the same? Are they not simply variations on the grand theme of man striving after God? These are questions which often confront the Christian, especially on a college campus. And it usually does not take too long in a discussion on this subject before it is stated or implied that the Christian is either ignorant or narrow-minded in his conviction that Christianity is unique among the religions of the world. After all, who can say what is right or wrong in religion? Some beliefs may be better or worse for a particular culture, but to hold that one religion is binding upon all men of all times—how bigoted!

In stark contrast to this Christian exclusiveness, there stands the concept that the various religions are all pointing to the same thing. Just as there are many paths by which to climb a mountain, so there are many ways that lead to God. This is by no means an uncommon belief. Multitudes hold to a nebulous idea of the unity of all religions. In fact, some religious movements openly advocate a syncretism (merging into one) of all beliefs.

A representative expression of this thought is found in the words of Swami Vivekananda of India. Speaking before the World Congress of Religions in 1893, he closed his address by saying, "May He who is the Brahma of the Hindus, the Ahura Mazda of the Zoroastrians, the Buddha of the Buddhists, the Jehovah of the Jews, the Father in heaven of the Christians, give strength to you to carry out your noble idea." Now on the surface this sounds very gracious and open-minded. All men are striving toward the same thing, but they simply call it by different names. But is this the case? Is the Brahma of the Hindus really the same as the Heavenly Father of the Christians? Nothing could be further from the truth!

Not The Same

Though there are many varieties of Hindu thought, the most influential school of Hinduism teaches that God is an undifferentiated, impersonal oneness. (We must always be careful to call the Hindu god "It", not "He", since the Hindu god is by definition impersonal!) In philosophy this is called monism, but whatever it is called, it certainly is diametrically opposed to the Christian belief in a Personal Trinitarian God.

Examples could be multiplied from the major and minor religions of the world. For instance, it's pretty hard to equate frog worship with the worship of an infinite-personal Creator! It just isn't true to say that these religions are actually pointing to the same thing. The very fact that such words as polytheism (many gods), pantheism (all is god), and monotheism (one god) are applied to the various religions shows that they have radically different concepts of reality at their hearts.

Not All True

From this it follows that the world's religions cannot all be correct. Though a person may hold that they are all false, he cannot logically hold that they are all true. In the words of philosopher Bertrand Russell, "It is evident as a matter of logic that, since they disagree, not more than one of them (the world's religions) can be true."

Of course, this does not mean that there are not at least some elements of truth in all of the world's religions. (Even a broken clock will give the right time twice a day.) Nor does it mean that there are not some common elements in many of the religions. Such things as a priestly hierarchy,

a ritual of worship, and moral patterns of expected behavior are almost universal. What it does mean, though, is that in back of these common surface elements there lie some fundamentally different views concerning God and how man can be right with Him.

Perhaps one more example will serve to illustrate this point. While it is true that there are some superficial similarities between Islam and Christianity, still at their heart there are basic teachings that are irreconcilable. In the Bible Christ is set forth as the Divine Son of God who became man in order to reconcile sinful men to God through His atoning death on the cross (John 1:14; Mark 10:14; Colossians 1:13-22; 2 Corinthians 5:19). The Koran (Islam's sacred book), on the other hand, states that Christ is not God's Son but merely a prophet (see Koran, Ch. 4:172; Ch. 5:73-78), that He did not die on the cross (Ch. 4:156-162), and that atonement by one man for the sins of another is impossible (Ch. 6:165). The views expressed on this fundamental issue are contradictory—either Christ did or did not die on the cross. The Bible and the Koran cannot both be giving true information about Christ.

Christ's Exclusiveness

It is in the area of the Person and work of Jesus Christ that the glaring contrast between Christianity and all other religions is most clearly seen. This is due to the fact that Jesus made such unique and spectacular statements about Himself. These statements have an aura of exclusiveness about them that cannot be missed. "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." (Matthew 11:27) "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. For not even the Father judges any one, but He has given all judgment to the Son, in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him." (John 5:21-23) "I and the Father are one." (John 10:30) "I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, but through Me." (John 14:6) "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." (John 14:9)

Think for a moment of the founders of the other religions saying the things Jesus said. Would Buddha or Confucius or Mohammed have made such statements? Would any but Christ have spoken of such an exclusive identity with the Father or have placed himself squarely in the center of true worship? C.S. Lewis expressed his view of the matter in these words: "If you had gone to Buddha and asked him 'Are you the son of Brahma?' he would have said, 'My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.' If you had gone to Socrates and asked, 'Are you Zeus?' he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, 'Are you Allah?' he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, 'Are you heaven?', I think he would have probably replied, 'Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.'" Read again the words of Christ quoted above and look them up in their context in the Bible—they are remarkable in their exclusiveness. Truly, "never did a man speak the way this man speaks." (John 7:46)

The words of the early followers of Christ echo this exclusiveness. Peter, speaking to the Jews concerning Christ, says, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Paul, recognizing that there is only one true gospel (gospel means "good news"—the good news that Christ's death has provided the way for sinful man to be reconciled to God), uses the strongest possible language against those who would proclaim any other gospel. "But even though we, or an angel

from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:8) And the Apostle John speaks in very exclusive terms when he writes, “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” (I John 5:20)

Syncretic Presuppositions

In the light of such statements, those endeavoring to syncretize all the world’s religions face a dilemma. They must either change Christianity into something neither Christ nor His apostles would have recognized, or leave it out of their system entirely. Unfortunately, the former course is often taken.

Though they claim an unbiased and open-minded attitude, some very dogmatic personal religious beliefs are evident in those who would remake Christianity in order to syncretize it. First of all, they believe that God has not given a reliable and clear revelation of Himself to man. That is, no one really knows what God is like. Though it may on the surface sound as if the syncretists are claiming that every religion is basically true, in actuality they are claiming that every religion is basically false. No one really knows which way is right; we are all groping after an unknown God.

Second, the advocates of syncretism suppose that sincerity of belief is all that matters. Since no man really knows what God is like, the object of one’s faith is of little importance. Only believe what you believe with all your heart, and all will turn out well.

Third, since most religions have some concept of the “Golden Rule” (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”) incorporated into them, the person who tries to live in accordance with this will surely be acceptable to the unknown God. In short, the syncretic doctrine proclaims the necessity of faith in something (almost anything will do) and of trying to live a good moral life.

To these dogmas the syncretist Christianity gives a very plain and uncomplicated answer—God has told us what He is like. He has proclaimed Himself in the grandeur of the universe around us and in the moral law within us. More specifically, God has given mankind a written record which tells of who He is and how man can be reconciled to Him. By sending His Son to live and die in time and space and history, God has shown unmistakably that true religion is not man seeking God, but rather God seeking man. At the heart of Christianity there is no Eightfold Path or Five Pillars, or any other system of moral conduct by which man seeks to make himself appear righteous before God. Rather, Christianity proclaims the eternal significance of an historical event—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. This event was determined by God before creation, brought to pass two thousand years ago, and has since been proclaimed throughout the world.

The message is simple: God forgives sin on the basis of the death and resurrection of His Son. There is no other way.

Believing something doesn’t make it true, nor does not believing it make it false. Faith is only as valid as the object in which it is placed; sincerity alone can guarantee nothing. (Proverbs 14:12) Founded upon the reliable testimony of God, Christians will continue to joyfully say to all men everywhere, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” (Acts 16:31)

