

“Can Only One Religion Be True?”

Date: October 7, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 1 Cor. 13:12; John 14:6

Occasion: Ask ?s series

Theme: Truth, Salvation, Ecumenism, Inter-Faith dialogue

Fifty or sixty years ago, most people knew about Christianity and Judaism, but very little about other religions. Today, our country is much more diverse and technology has allowed us to know about other religions from around the world. Now, people are familiar with Buddhism and Islam, yoga and New Age practices and many more.

For some people they take the attitude of *live and let live*. ‘Everybody can choose what they want to believe.’ For some other people they can’t rest easy with that response. For them, only *one* religion can be true. Usually they mean theirs is the one true faith.

Now, religions serve a wide variety of functions. They provide answers to the questions about the ultimate reality of the universe. Are there gods? Is there only one God? Where did the universe come from? What is the purpose of the universe? What is my purpose as an individual? Why are things the way they are? What happens after we die? What is moral? What is immoral? How should we live?

In answering such questions, groups of people find common approaches to the many different parts of life. Religion helps to build a common culture and way of life that defines many of the values, rituals, beliefs and moral standards that shape that society. Religion has shaped other aspects of culture, including ethics, law, government, education, war and peace, economics and relations between groups of people. So, Religion does more than answer the question of what happens after we die.

Many of the worlds’ religions have much in common with one another. However, they also differ widely in some of their beliefs and practices. In

our time, people are more open to learning more about the various religions of the world and they're questioning if there is only one true religion.

In their book *Ask: Faith Questions in a Skeptical Age*, Scott and Arthur Jones suggest three different approaches to the question of whether only one religion can be true. The first is called **relativism**, which states there are no absolute truths which are universally applicable. Instead, truth is relative to each individual's perspective or context. You hear it when people say something like, "That may be true for you, but it is not true for me." That's a relativist speaking.

Relativists might say that each culture has its own religion and all are equally valuable. That sounds noble, because it displays tolerance and respect. It allows people the choice for picking and choosing the best things from each religion and combining them to form one's own world view.

The downside of relativism is that it gives up on truth and is internally incoherent. To say that *Jesus is God* and to also assert that *Krishna is God* is to invoke very different understandings of who God is. If everyone is making up their own truth, is anything true?

A second response is called **agnosticism**, which means that it's not possible to know what is true. An agnostic might say, "There may be a God, but human beings have no way of knowing for certain for that God exists." When asked, "What is the true religion?" agnostics might say, "No one knows."

The downside of agnosticism is it tells religious people their claims are not verifiable and therefore they are not holding an intelligent opinion. It devalues religion by saying it's not important for us to choose among the various faith options. And third, it causes people to stop moving forward with *any* particular truth or direction. Many people today are lost and without direction because they have followed the agnostic path. They're

lost and they're not searching because they believe the truth *can't* be found.

Another approach to religion is called ***atheism***. A popular form of atheism is based on a philosophy called *materialism*. This is the claim that the material world is composed of matter and energy and this constitutes the only reality. For many people who study science, they turn to this view because for them science seems to answer many of the questions that religion used to answer, using the scientific method of proof and verify.

The downside of atheism is it leads to a meaningless and amoral understanding of the universe. The only purpose of life seems to be the survival of one's self or one's species. It can lead to the slogan I've seen on bumper stickers: "Life is a game and the one who dies with the most toys wins." It's everybody for himself or herself, survival of the fittest.

How's a Christian to respond to these world views, many of which are undermining faith today? Christians believe ***it is*** reasonable to believe in God and Christian philosophers have sought *good* explanations for why it makes sense. But ultimately it takes a leap of faith to trust that God is real and that God has been revealed through Jesus of Nazareth as testified in the Bible. Ultimately, you have to choose.

It takes faith to believe, and people come to faith in a variety of ways. Some come to faith gradually and slowly, growing up in a church. Others have a life-changing, dramatic event that brings them to faith. For some, it is the witness of other Christians, either in word or in actions. For some, it happens simply as the result of reading the Bible.

There are a lot of choices in the world when it comes to choosing a religion to follow and practice. But ultimately only one of them can be entirely true. I believe Christianity is that truth. And yet, having said that, it

feels wrong somehow. There has been so much conflict between the religions of the world, so much persecution and war.

And for this current generation in America, exposed to so many different religions, the exclusive claim of Christianity to be the only true religion, has not ignited faith but has caused many people to be offended and turn away. Christianity comes across as arrogant and judgmental.

So, if we believe that only one religion can ultimately be true, how are Christians to view other religions? In the United Methodist tradition, we start with the belief in the prevenient grace of God. We believe that every human being has received God's grace, and God is working in all of our lives to bring us toward salvation.

There are many valid and valuable beliefs and practices in other religions. Many religions teach moral values such as loving our neighbors, caring for the poor, respecting creation, practicing prayer, and working for the common good. We look at those beliefs and practices and say that God is at work through that other religion to help people come as close to the truth as possible, given their culture and history.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, approached the salvation of people outside of the Christian faith by saying that God will judge us all according to how we have used the grace we have been given. Thus, people raised in other religious traditions may be saved.

Wesley's view leads to a spiritual attitude of openness and curiosity. When we encounter a person of another religion, we should be asking, "How is God's grace at work in this person's life and practice?"

"But pastor, what about John 14:6? Doesn't it say that the only way to the Father is through Jesus?" Let me answer that. God is love, correct? Jesus is God in the flesh, correct? So when Jesus says "I am the way, the

truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” What if he meant through the way of love? Love is the way to the Father.

Christians realize that even their understanding of God is incomplete. Paul wrote, “Now we see a reflection in a mirror dimly; then we will see face to face. Now I know partially, but then I will know completely in the same way that I have been completely known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12)

And so as Christians, we hold these two beliefs in tension. On the one hand we believe that God is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ and that following His way will lead to eternal life. We also recognize that God’s grace is at work in people who practice other religions and faiths.

It means that we hold both our claims about the truth and our love for non-Christians in a productive tension. We must believe and act on both. Christians have a strong obligation to both love their neighbors and also to tell them the good news about God as revealed through Jesus Christ.

So, imagine yourself in a coffee shop hanging out, talking about whatever, and suddenly your non-Christian friend says, “Okay, I don’t want a long complicated answer, but tell me this: How can you believe that only Christianity is true, when there are all these other religions?”

You might say something like: “I believe Christianity is true. I know that believing is an act of faith, but picking any religion is an act of faith, or even picking no religion at all. I respect other religions, and I’m sure God can work through them all. But I’ve experienced God’s presence through Jesus and I can’t deny it. We all choose something and I’ve chosen to follow Jesus.” And so my friends, I pray that you will also. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Ask: Faith Questions in a Skeptical Age*, by Scott J. Jones and Arthur D. Jones, Nashville: Abingdon Press, “Can Only One Religion Be True?”, 2015; pp. 11-26.