

I'd Like to Believe But...What about Other Religions?

Luke 9:49-56 August 25, 2019

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We're continuing our series, *I'd Like to Believe, But...* We're looking at common questions that keep people from wholeheartedly embracing faith. One is the question about all the other religions. I'd like to believe, but there are so many religions out there, why commit to just one? How do you know this one is right? What if you're wrong and someone else is right? Or one might wonder with so many religions out there, aren't they all aiming at the same thing so does it really matter if you identify as a "Christian?"

We're going to explore those questions today and look at a range of options for you to consider as you believe. When I talk about other religions, I'm using the broadest sense of the term. I'm not talking about the differences between Christian denominations: UCC, Methodists, Catholics, etc. They are all part of the Christian faith. When talking about other religions what I have in mind are faiths such as Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism and so on.

Religions Offer Endless Variety and Different Ways of Seeing Life

I wonder if you've ever taken a comparative religions class. It's fascinating to dive into all the variations. There are so many differences to choose from. Some are highly superstitious, some venerate ancestors, and many worship physical objects. For some God is a being, others see God as an interior presence. Many don't recognize a "god" at all. There different moral standards. Some are highly ritualized or guided by sacred texts and others are kind of do-it-yourself deals.

Religions help people shape and make sense of their worlds, they ask the big questions of life. But many are aiming in completely opposite directions with their answers. Why are we here? Is there any hope in despair? What is the best way to view life, relate to others? There are as many answers as there are religions.

Some worship a god that they believe rewards the faithful with material wealth while others insist the goal should be to detach from all worldly things. Some have the goal of escaping this evil world and attaining heaven for others the goal is nothingness many say there's nothing after death it's all about what happens in this life.

Are All Religions Aiming at the Same Thing? “Climbing the Same Mountain?”

Yet for all the differences, there are remarkable similarities. Some folks say that all religions are taking different paths up the same mountain. Many traditions have eerily similar stories like creation accounts, flood stories, leaders who share similar journeys. Of course most religions did not pop up in a vacuum. As cultures developed their answers for the big questions, surrounding cultures and other religions influenced them. Take a look sometime at how many of our Christmas traditions were adaptations of pagan solstice rituals.

Interestingly, many religions emphasize practices that focus on breathing. It's important in our story. The root of the Hebrew word for spirit *ruach* is the same as breath. God breathed into Adam to give life. Jesus breathed on the disciples and said receive the Holy Spirit.

Many have some form or another of these things we find in Christianity. The Golden Rule; work for the wellbeing of others--especially the poor and unfortunate; focus on the present; aim for spiritual development, not material wealth; take responsibility for your actions.

I don't know how accurate the climbing the same mountain metaphor is. Maybe the same mountain range? I like to think that at the summit is a sign that says take care of each other.

Bay Shore Church has long been a contributing member of the South Coast Interfaith Council. We believe it is important that find what we can share across traditions because refusing to understand and respect each other is a recipe for disaster.

Jesus as (the *only* way or *a* way), truth and life?

There are many who claim Christianity is the only valid religion believing that everyone else is going to hell. In scripture, Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Some take this verse and one or two others to justify discounting all other religious traditions.

But that is not the majority view. Like anything else in Christianity there is a spectrum of beliefs--a whole range of opinions by very thoughtful, sincere Christians.

Some would say if you read scripture and come away feeling judgmental toward other people you've read it wrong. Salvation is not a human achievement; it is through Christ. You have nothing to brag or feel smug about. God is sovereign and has the freedom to save whoever God wants. Jesus said he has "sheep that are not of this fold." The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians that in the end God saves everyone--even those who have already died. There is a strong case to be made that scripture points to universal salvation for all people--that in the end of it all, God is going to get what God wants--the salvation of all his children.

What about all the people who have never even heard of Jesus? In today's lesson the disciples want to condemn people who were not part of the group, but Jesus would have none of it.

Perhaps what Jesus meant as being the way, truth and life is that he shows us the way. The earliest Christians were called *people of the way*. Maybe the key is in following the way of Jesus--prayer, compassion, contemplation, kindness, humility, justice, and peacemaking. Anyone who engages in these things finds the way to experience the Father, the divine presence.

The point is that religious exclusivism is not the only option for biblically oriented Christians. So, if exclusivism has turned you off from Christianity, please reconsider because there are plenty of other options.

If you get nothing else from this series, I hope you get this. There are so many things that turn people off about Christianity. Someone says, "If you want to be a Christian you have to believe thus and so." And if you don't you are outside of the tent. The truth is on any topic there is a wide range of opinions by faithful and intelligent people. Other people don't get to decide if you are in or out. You get to think for yourself and discern what works for you and your faith.

I'm in the camp that says, "I don't care what you believe, just please, don't be a jerk." One thing I know is that God didn't appoint me as anyone's final judge.

Learning other religions fosters Christian growth

I believe my faith has benefited from the study of other religions and practices.

Sometimes you find similarities or differences with other religions that make you appreciate the Christian approach. You say, "O yeah, we have something like that,

too. Cool!” Sometimes it challenges me realize some people believe so differently than me and it makes me think, “Is there anything to that?” Or, “Why don’t I believe that?” For me, studying other traditions sharpens my own understanding of what I believe and value. Other religions emphasize things that are part of our faith too, and seeing them in practice often inspires me to be more intentional about those things in my life. For example:

- Buddhists help me remember the importance of mindfulness practices, of being fully present.
- I think Hindu visions of the divine taking on many forms helps me to remember not to get too locked into a limited image of the divine.
- Islam practices of stopping to pray five times a day challenges me to be more prayerful in my practice.
- I’ve always appreciated the concept of Jainism ahimsa--doing no harm to any living thing as great witness to the sacredness of creation and commitment to peace.
- Native American spirituality helps me remember our connection with all creation where we come from, an appreciation of being grateful and not wasteful.
- My devout Jewish friend taught me how keeping kosher helps her to be intentional about her connection to God. All the rituals and restrictions keep God in the forefront of her attention. Not only is she reminded in the kitchen and dinner table, but also at the grocery store having to pick what she eats to see if it is kosher stamped.

I’ve also gained a deep sense of appreciation of how hard it is to live out any faith. In comparative religions classes there is always the study of the textbook official beliefs and practices. Normal people of every faith try to take what they can and figure out how to apply it in the world. They wrestle with how to let their values guide them and still live in the real world.

Why Christian?

I’ve studied all these religions and don’t have to decide if someone else is “right or wrong.” It is faith after all, not proof. I can say I’ve immersed myself in this tradition and for me and my salvation it works. A couple of weeks ago I challenged you to try the Bible. See if it works for you. Love god and neighbor. Be generous. Be kind. Find ways to serve. Forgive. Seek peace. Connect to something beyond yourself. Connect to that best sense of who you really are deep down.

I've been on this path for a long time. I don't always get it right, but I can highly commend it. Why Christian?

It has a cross; no bed of roses. It accounts for evil, horrible things. But it affirms evil is not the last word. When life hurts, I turn to one who identifies with pain and suffering.

We believe in a spiritual journey. The path is not smooth and it twists and turns and has ups and downs. . It is along the path where meet people. I like the idea that God works in this world through people--and basic human kindness and compassion makes it better.

I like that it's not just about me and mine but making a difference. We are called to care about everybody and be willing to make Christ-like sacrifices to make other people's lives better.

I love the community aspect to Christianity. We support each other on the journey. I think about all the people who've been part of my journey, who inspire me, and who are aware of their imperfections and keep doing the best they can.

It's important to me to attach to something that is designed to overcome divisions that separate people from each other. The scriptures say that in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave or free but all are one. What other organization is based on radical inclusiveness? Whoever you are and wherever you are, you are welcome.

I like that God not limited to a place or object or people but everywhere. The Kingdom of God is within you and among you and what we pray comes to us in real time in our lives.

This faith is built on things that challenge me to be better a better person and do things that are counter-intuitive and often difficult--to offer forgiveness, prayer for enemy, turn the other cheek, be exceedingly generous, watch out for letting your own desires overwhelm you.

This works for me. Pointy rooms filled with imperfect people gathered for worship, prayer education, fellowship, mission. People who are trying, seeking connection. Trying, seeking. And ultimately living by the great commandments

love God and love neighbor as self. Love command. Not insist on own way, not irritable or resentful or rude.