

God and the World Religions

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Let's talk today about God and the World Religions. It is an important, if not urgent matter. In the decade before 9/11 Catholic theologian Hans Kung said: "The pre-requisite for peace among the nations is peace among religions". It was true then, doubly true now.

For a bit of perspective, here are the census numbers:

Christianity: 2.2 billion

Islam: 1.8 billion

Hinduism: 1 billion

Buddhism: 488 million

Judaism: 14 million

Today we are living closer together than any time in history. We live in the same communities, go to work and school together, serve on the same boards and committees together. John Donne wrote centuries ago: "No man is an island". Rabbi Abraham Heschel said of our day: "No religion in an island".

I

Mother Teresa of Calcutta's words resonate deeply in me: "I love all religions. I am in love with my own". The more I've studied religion, the more I've met people of other religions the more I feel this way.

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of America's great preachers has taught World Religions for years at a local college. Her last book is entitled *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*. The title comes from a word of advice Harvard's Kristen Stendhal gave to those as they encounter other religions:

1) When trying to understand another religion, you should ask adherents of that religion, not its enemies.

2) Don't compare your best to their worst.

3) Leave room for holy envy. "Holy envy" is when we encounter elements of other religions which are attractive and compelling. They encourage and instruct us on our spiritual journey.

I, for example, admire the Jewish commitment to what they call *tikkun olam*, "the repair of the world", the healing of the world through justice, compassion and peace.

I admire Muslims in their dedication to prayer, one of the "five pillars" of Islam, especially their practice of prayer five times a day.

I admire in Buddhism its teaching about the suffering that comes from desire and attachment and how to alleviate such suffering in all of us.

I admire in Hinduism its affirmation of God's work in all religions and its rigorous spiritual disciplines called "yogas".

What I find attractive and instructive in other religions helps me in the practice of my own.

II

How we talk about other religions can be damaging. For example, to call Islam a "war-like religion". It has been so at some places and times in its history, but if you read the history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all three at points have been "war-like religions." We cannot equate Islam with Islamic jihadist terrorists any more than we can equate Christianity with the Klan or Christian White supremacist terrorists.

I have had close relationships with rabbis everywhere I have ministered. They have told me of children in their synagogues who have come home from school distressed because classmates have told them that they were going to hell. Of course, the Christian school mates had not learned this on their own but at home and at church. I'm quite sure their preachers had never preached on Romans 11, where Paul speaks of the salvation of all Israel and says of God's

relationship with the Jewish people: “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable”, (Romans 11:28).

So let us guard our tongues and listen and learn.

III

I believe that God is at work in all religions, has been for millennia and still is. God has been, and now is, in search of us, using all religions to bring us to Him/Herself. As we encounter people of other religions we should honor what Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sachs calls “The dignity of difference”. Lovely phrase.

As I’ve reflected on God’s work in the religions of the world, I have come up with some models to picture this. See if any are helpful to you.

Model One: *The Blind Men and the Elephant*. As the ancient story from India goes, there were five blind men, each of whom had hold of one part of an elephant. One had hold of the elephant’s side and said that the elephant was a *wall*. A second blind man had hold of the elephant’s trunk and said that the elephant was like a *snake*. Another had hold of the elephant’s leg and said the elephant was like a *tree*, the fourth had hold of the elephant’s ear and said that the elephant was like a *fan*. And the last had hold of the elephant’s tail and said the elephant was like a *rope*. All were right, and all were wrong. The problem is

that each argued that his part of the elephant was all there was to the elephant. We each have hold of part of God, but sometimes we blindly think our hold on God is the *whole* of God

Model Two: *Different Paths Up the Same Mountain*. The one god is at the top of the mountain, and the religions are different paths to the same god.

Model Three: *Separate Mountains and Different Gods*. Picture four mountains. Each religion is a different mountain worshipping its own God. The *Adonai* of Israel, *Abba* of Jesus and *Allah* of Islam are different Gods. Some argue that their God is the only God.

Model Four: *The Mountain Range*. Each religion is a different mountain, but they are all connected as part of the same mountain range. Beyond the mountains is the sky, and the sky is what Paul Tillich called “The God beyond God”. This is the God beyond every religion’s best conceptions of God. And beneath all the mountains runs a stream I call the mystical stream which runs though at the depths of every religion and is remarkably similar in all religions.

There was a precocious young man, about 9, in my last church who had decided that he was an atheist. His father brought him by to talk with me. We talked some about the differences between an atheist and an agnostic. An atheist says “There is no God”, while the agnostic is reserving judgement and says, “I do

not know whether there is a God”. I asked if he was one or the other. He said he would have to think about it. I introduced the phrase “God beyond God”, the God beyond all our conceptions of God, and how our limited conceptions of God may lead us with good reasons to give up believing in God, but there may be a “God beyond God”. His eye lit up and the wheels of his mind were set in motion. We became good friends after that conversation.

No single model we could come up with suffices, but some may be clarifying or helpful.

IV

Now I turn to the most challenging of issues: God, Salvation and the World Religions. Is God’s salvation at work in all religions or only Christianity? I begin by saying that what “salvation” means differs from religion to religion, and even within religions. But here are three common dimensions shared by many: 1) Deliverance, that is from sin, evil, death; 2) Oneness with God and all of life; 3) Wholeness, including healing and peace.

I believe that the salvation of God is broader than Christianity and the Church, that God’s saving presence and power have been and will always be at work in all religions. The God who made us all and loves us all is at work in all

religions to bring us into right relationship with God and all of life. And this will continue until, to use Paul's words, "God will be all in all" (I Corinthians 15:28).

V

Which brings me to today's texts. Jesus says not everyone who calls him "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven but those who do the will of the Father, which suggests to me that there may be many, millions of those who do not know to call Jesus "Lord", but who are doing the will of the Father, and who enter the kingdom of heaven.

And in John 10 and John 14 Jesus speaks of God's many "flocks and many "rooms" which may well include people different from us. I find comfort in this. But the most challenging words to me are his words to Thomas:

I am the Way, the Truth, the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me.

(John 14:6)

This verse is most commonly read as Christian Exclusionism, that is there is no salvation outside of Christianity or the Church. Here is how I read this text and interpret it for my life.

The Way, the Truth and the life of Jesus is broader than his historical life and the church. His Way, his Truth, his Life has been in the world since the

“foundation of the world”. It came to brilliant light in the life of Jesus. Jesus is the historical incarnation of the Christ who was with God at the beginning, in whom, through whom, for whom the world was made. He is “the image of the invisible God”, in whom we all were made. Verses in John’s gospel and Paul’s letters point this way. This is the Christ some call “The Cosmic Christ”, the Christ present in the whole cosmos to bring us to God, the Christ who is known by many names but who is the same Christ. J.B. Phillips wrote a famous little book in the 1960’s called *Your God is Too Small*. I think we could write a sequel: *Your Christ is Too Small*.

VI

One of the most beautiful passages in scripture is John’s vision of the heavenly banquet table in Revelation 7. It is said that the great Scottish poet Robert Burns said that he could not read this passage without tears coming to his eyes. Here is the vision:

...I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...singing “Salvation belongs to our God who’s seated at the throne and to the Lamb” (Revelation 7: 9-10).

Yes, “God will be all in all”, and we will all be “lost in wonder, love and praise”. At the end there will be, to use Simon Peter’s words, “universal restoration” (Acts 3:20).

This is my best and most fervent hope. And if this is our destiny and the world’s destiny, why not live like this now?