

Isn't Christianity Arrogant ? - What about other Religions ?

Questions People Ask About the Christian Faith

Sydney, where I come from, is a big city. I'm not talking about New York which is bigger, but it's still got about 4.5 million people spread across an area of nearly 12000 sq kilometers. Geographically, this makes Sydney a third the size of Switzerland. It's bigger than the cantons of Geneva, Vaud, Valais, Freiburg, Neuchatel and Basel COMBINED.

And pretty well in the middle of it is Sydney Airport.

Now if I asked any one of you right now how to get to Geneva airport from here, you'd give me one of two directions. You'd either say "take the lake road and turn right" or "take the freeway and, well, turn right." Right?

Well, in a city the size of Sydney it isn't that simple. No matter where you live, there are multiple ways to the airport. But here's the thing. If you live in Sydney, you have your own special way to get to the airport and nobody can convince you their way is better. Every taxi driver and every Joe Blow is convinced that his way is the best. Any alternative is just burning petrol and wasting time at traffic lights.

There may be many ways to the airport, but as far as most Sydneysiders are concerned, there is only one right way. Theirs.

I wonder if that is the same with religion.

Every now and then at Westlake we've taken the time to consider some of the tough questions leveled against Christianity. And this is one of them: aren't Christians arrogant to say that their faith is the only way to God?

The question usually goes like this: you Christians say that Jesus is the only way to God, but what about other religions? Buddhism, Islam, Shintoism, Hinduism, Mormonism, Angelina Jolism, apple-macism, Scientology. (OK, that last one was a red herring. Nobody really believes Scientology will save you). But isn't it arrogant to say that Christianity is the only way?

It's a REALLY GOOD QUESTION. And I'm going to surprise many of you and say upfront that I would be *delighted* if Jesus wasn't the only way to God. You see, I have friends who are part of another religion and seek after God. A girl who was once very dear to me made her life within Mormonism. A previous boss I liked a lot remains convinced that God can be found through spirituality and the new age movement. Cathy holds deep hopes that she will see another one of her Mormon friends in heaven one day, even if she never converts to Christianity. And I understand that. Frankly, the passion this friend has for God would make most of us look pagan in comparison. I bet every one of you has a friend who is a follower of some religion other than Christianity and if that qualified them for a place in heaven you'd be delighted.

In fact, some of you who *are* Christians hold the belief that Jesus *isn't* actually the only way. Certainly He is right for YOU – that's how God has revealed Himself to your life - but you believe that God reveals Himself differently to different people. You believe that many roads do indeed lead to Sydney Airport, even if you've chosen the one that has been shown to you.

Again, I would be delighted if that was the case. But is it?

That's what I want to talk about tonight.

We're going to look at three things.

1. "Does the Bible even say that Jesus is the only way to God?"
2. Is it even possible for many of the world's religions to lead to the same place?
3. And finally, what are the implications of what we find.

But I want to start by talking about why I think people call it arrogant for Christians to say their faith is the only way to God.

First, I think it's because most people would say that if there was a God, they'd hope that everyone would go to heaven, whether they were "religious" or not. That would include themselves! They might not want to see EVERYONE there - there are a few evil dictators and the odd Christian they'd happily not spend eternity with - but for the most part they wouldn't want to see anyone excluded. Again, themselves included. This is a fantastic motive. So when a Christian stands up and says, "*we want to see everyone in heaven too. We just believe it can only happen through Jesus*", that feels pretty unloving and closed-minded.

And here is where I think the second reason lies. These days, society puts a very high premium on being open-minded. One of the biggest insults you can hurl at someone is to say that they are close-minded and intolerant. And to some degree I think that's right. Sadly, sometimes Christians can be close-minded on stuff that we needn't be and we end up looking foolish and uninformed.

And sometimes our stand against things we see as wrong has turned in an intolerable lack of love for the people involved in those things. Hate the sin but love the sinner sometimes becomes hate the sin and sinner alike.

That type of intolerance of people shouldn't mark Christians.

But our society increasingly asks people to be open and tolerant of other's opinions, regardless of the truth of those opinions. Your opinion and my opinion are equally valid and *valuable*, even if they are in conflict *and can't both be true*. Truth becomes secondary or even inconsequential to openness and acceptance.

This is grounded in the postmodern belief that there is no absolute truth. Truth is relative. Truth is whatever is true for you. Now, if you are under 30 this IS the defining world view of your peers. It's so a part of your worldview that you may genuinely be unable to believe that there is such a thing as absolute right and wrong.

So when you hear a Christian say they believe that Jesus is the only way to God, a post-modern response is to say "*Well, that may be true for you, but it's not true for me. If God exists, I think that all religions lead to Him and it's intolerant of you to say otherwise.*"

But let me show you something. Usually when people say that Christianity can't be the only way to God, they usually offer as the other big religions as alternatives, right? Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism. Very few people genuinely believe that fringe cults like the Branch Dividians, Scientology, or people who worship cucumbers offer a viable way to God. Am I right?

And this is important because by saying that a devout Jew's religion is right but not some guy who worships cucumbers, you are already making a judgment based on truth. You are saying one feels more right than the other. And yet, by saying that a Jew's religion is more legitimate than the cucumber worshippers, you are by society's definition, intolerant.

But while society may say your position is intolerant, I say it is REASONABLE. It is right.

So the question should not be "is it intolerant" but "is it the truth"?

Now let's turn to Christianity. **"Does the Bible even say that Jesus is the only way to God?"** Well, the answer is definitely "yes".

Consider the following passages:

- **John 14: 6-7** Jesus answered, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well."*
- **John 6:40** *"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."*
- **Matthew 10: 32-33** *"Whoever acknowledges me (Jesus) before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven."*
- **Acts 4: 10-12** *"It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*
- **1 Timothy 2: 5-6** *For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men.*
- **John 17:3** *Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

And those are just some of the passages that most directly call out the fact that Jesus is the only way to God and salvation. The entire Bible is a testimony to the fact that as Hebrews says, we are all "destined to die once, and then face judgment", but that Jesus offers us forgiveness and a way back to God.

Romans 6:23 says it very snappily: *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The exclusivity of Jesus may make us uncomfortable, but we cannot understand Christianity and reject this as a foundational truth. Yes, the Bible talks about how God desires that all people be saved, but that salvation can only come through Jesus. Think of one of the most famous verses in all the Bible- *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16)

So it is an unmistakable fact that the Bible says that Jesus is the only way to salvation and the only way to God. The Bible doesn't allow the option to say that Jesus is just a way.

And again the question we must each ask ourselves is not "is it intolerant" to believe that, but "is it right"? I believe that as God's Word it is right.

But what about other religions then? Is it even *possible* for many of the world's other main religions to lead to the same God?

If we were able to sit down right now with a Muslim imam, a Jewish Rabbi, a Buddhist monk, a Shinto priest, and a Hindu guru...what would they say? I'll even throw in a Mormon bishop for good measure.

Would they say that all their religions lead to the same God?
Would they say that their religions are compatible?

The answer is no.

You see, it's impossible to say that all major religions lead to God because they conflict on so many of the fundamental beliefs about who God is and what happens to us when we die. We may have respect for people's beliefs while acknowledging that they can't all be right. As Dire Straits once sang: two men say they're Jesus. One of them must be wrong.

- Islam, for instance, teaches that there is just one God and in that is very much like Judaism. Both also believe that your state in the afterlife is dependant on how diligently you kept God's laws. But just try telling a Jew and a Muslim that their religion is the same and see the response you get. A good Muslim believes he will go to paradise, A Jew believes in what they call "The World to Come" but what that is like varies widely amongst Rabbis. Some believe it involves stages in both a heaven and hell. A Muslims says it's one or the other.
- Both of them in turn reject Christianity. Muslims believe Jesus was a great messenger from God but that He wasn't God and wasn't crucified. The Jews believe he was an ordinary man. Period.
- Buddhism is a moral philosophy that in general doesn't believe in any type of God or divine being at all. A Buddhist's ultimate goal is not a heaven but a state of enlightenment or Nirvana on earth. A Buddhist will keep being reincarnated until they live a life that achieves Nirvana. The only one to have ever truly got there was a guy called Siddhartha Gautama, or Buddha. Which begs the question, what happened when he died after reaching Nirvana? Did he start all over again as a slug? That feels like a bum deal.
- The Mormon church sees God as the Supreme Being of the universe. But rather than being perfect from the beginning as Christians believe, they say He gradually acquired that position over time by living a perfect and righteous life. Furthermore they believe that Jesus and Satan were spirit brothers and sons of God. Mormons believe that Jesus Christ will one day establish a new kingdom where our spirits will become Gods themselves in one of three levels of heaven, depending on how they lived.
- A Japanese Shinto believes in a number of deities, or Kami, but no all-powerful God. The Kami may be deceased relatives or emperors, or places like waterfalls or rivers, with limited powers. The job of a Shinto is to please and entertain the Kami, who exist mainly to help sustain and protect creation. Shinto's don't give the afterlife much thought because death and dead people are seen as pollution, so the priests would rather not think about them. Which is why Buddhists do most of the funerals in Japan.

- The Hindu believes in one supreme being but then anywhere between 330000 and 330 million other deities that control all parts of our lives. Salvation comes after repeated reincarnation and is hard to explain but involves the return of the soul to a mystical astral plane. Please don't ask me any questions about it afterwards, because I really struggled to understand that one!
- A Christian will point to just one God in triune form (Father, Son, Spirit) who created all things including you and I. We believe in a heaven and a hell, and that none of us inherently deserve heaven because we humans are kind of messed up. But Jesus is uniquely able to forgive our sin and leads us into heaven. Unlike all the other religions, getting there has nothing to do with what we have done, and everything to do with what Jesus has already done on the cross. In fact, Christianity is the only religion founded on grace and forgiveness.

Now that is an unbelievably simplistic look at some very complex beliefs but I share it to show that the major religions cannot all lead to the same God because they have incompatible views of who that God is and what He saves us to. As much as they might respect each other, our imam, rabbi, monk, priests and guru would tell you that their religion is the only way to God or salvation and that the others are not compatible.

And that is why the people who are the quickest to say that all religions are the same are usually those that don't follow any of them. With all due respect, their tolerance usually shows their lack of understanding about what the world religions are about.

So here is where we are at:

1. The Bible does indeed say that Jesus is the only way to God.
2. Even people who say that is an arrogant and intolerant position will themselves rule out other religious alternatives – and that is reasonable and right to do so.
3. The major world religions conflict on fundamental things about God and the afterlife, so by default they cannot all be true.
4. Which means we all need to decide if Christianity – or one of the other options – is true. This is not about intolerance or arrogance. It's about finding the truth.

So how should we as Christians respond?

1. Don't be afraid of the Answer

It can be very uncomfortable to say that Jesus is the only way to God, but don't shrink back from it. Trust me: I know how scary it is to put the name of Jesus out there when we leave these 4 walls. I really do. But if we deny Jesus, he will deny us before the Father in Heaven. (Matthew 10:33) That is scary. But that's because Jesus longs for people to know the truth. When we shrink back from being honest about the exclusivity of Jesus, that person misses the gospel.

Consider it this way: If I were a doctor and I knew there was just one way to save your life, would I be intolerant or arrogant if I closed down the other routes? Would it be good if I said: *"Listen, you have a hole in your heart and we need to operate tonight, or you will die. There is no other way by which you can be saved. Of course, it's important to me that you do not see me as arrogant or intolerant so by all means pursue other ideas. I know they won't save you, and you may die before seeing me again, but I'd hate you to think I was narrow-minded."*

Guys, Jesus is the answer. He is the only way. Let's not be ashamed of that. Moreover, let's be glad there IS a way back to God!!!

2. Speak the truth but don't be arrogant.

1 Peter 3:15 *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*

One of the fastest ways to turn people off Christianity is to be arrogant about what we have found. There is nothing more annoying than a Christian who acts as if he is the genius who has found this truth and everyone else is an idiot. In the words of Brennan Manning, we need to see ourselves as like beggars showing other beggars where to find food. There is NOTHING we have done to earn God's love or favor. Nothing. It is a gift.

So don't be arrogant. Talk to people with gentleness and respect.

This means remembering that many people who are fervent believers of another faith are genuinely seeking after God. They are just looking in the wrong place. But remember that they are people created by God. Love them. And a part of that is to realize that there is some truth and goodness in all religions, even if that truth does not extend to truth about who God is and what the way to salvation is. A basic tenant of Islam, for instance, is to care for the poor. A principle of Buddhism is to seek to live at peace with yourself and other people. Mormons put a very high value on family and clean living. These are good things, and can be common ground from which to start our conversations. Show them how these things find their completeness in Jesus.

Not all Muslims are terrorists and not all Mormons want 27 wives.

If not a Christian

1. Change the question:

I would argue that the question you need to ask is not "Is it arrogant to say that Christianity offers the only way to God?" but "Is it true that Christianity offers the only way to God?" Because if it is – and billions of us around world believe it to be so – then it is the most important question you will ever need to address. We would love to help you answer that question.

2. Forgive our arrogance

Believe me – we have all met arrogant Christians. If you have been pestered and chastised or beaten down by some Christian because of your beliefs or lifestyle, I ask for your forgiveness. I am sorry. But equally, if we are passionate about telling you that Jesus is the way to salvation, please don't see that as intolerant. Realize that we are telling you because we love you. We are just desperate to see you embrace the love that He has for you.

3. Open the door to Jesus

There are not many true atheists in the world. Some studies suggest that up to 97% of the world's population believe in the existence of some sort of supreme being or God. The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that is because God has set eternity in the hearts of all men. Romans tell us that God's power and divine nature are on display all around us, so we are without excuse. Just go outside and cast your eyes to the lake and mountains!

In your heart of hearts you know you were created for something more. I want to tell you that life can't really make sense without God.

Open the door to the truth of Jesus. Let me put it this way:

You have a God-shaped hole in your heart and you need to surrender to Him. Tonight. You see, you're going to die one day, and there is no other way by which you can be saved except Jesus. You may want to pursue other ideas. But the Bible says those ways will not save you. And the simple fact is you do not know what will happen when you walk out this door and into this week. You may die before seeing us again. And then it is too late.

My parents live on Sydney's northern beaches. There is only one way to Sydney International Airport from there. Up the Wakehurst Parkway, past Frenchs Forest and Gordon, through the Harbour Tunnel and onto the Eastern Distributor through Randwick, and then follow the signs to the domestic terminal. Don't take the sign that says International Terminal. That one will take you on a 3 km detour.

Many will tell you I'm wrong. They will tell you there is a better way. And I'll humor them.

But I'll tell you this – there is only one way to God and that is through Jesus. And He stands with His arms open wide.

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