

Question 1

There can't be just one true religion, right?

How can Christians be so exclusivist in a modern, pluralistic age? One of the most significant issues that many have with Christianity is its claim that Jesus is the only way we can have forgiveness and start a true relationship with God. This claim leads to questions like, How can Christians be so exclusivist in a modern, pluralistic age? The world is full of people who do not embrace Christianity—are they really ALL wrong? Doesn't the claim to exclusive truth lead to conflict and intolerance?

These questions come from a deep desire to respect those who believe differently and to avoid a confrontational approach to religion.

The reason Christians believe Jesus is the only way to God is because Jesus believed this about himself. On the one hand, when we read the story of Jesus, we encounter how radically inclusive he was in his time:

- Jesus constantly disturbed the religious leaders of his community by going outside the accepted boundaries.
- He was accused of “eating and drinking with the sinners and tax collectors.”
- He included women in his band of followers in a way that was unheard of in his culture.
- He infuriated his countrymen by continually telling people that God's people are not defined by ethnic or racial lines.
- While suffering, he prayed for forgiveness for those who put him to death.

And yet, he also boldly proclaimed, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” The central theme of Jesus' message was, “Your present and eternal life will be defined by your response to me.”

Jesus challenged people to come to an awakening of their true spiritual condition (sin) and offered himself as the only cure (salvation through his death and resurrection). This is what makes Jesus unique among religious leaders. He did not offer a truth, a way, a life to follow to get to God; he

offered himself as the way, the truth, and the life. So, in affirming that Jesus is the only way to God, Christians are being consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus.

But, isn't everyone just seeing different parts of "the elephant?"

The common parable goes like this: Three blind men encounter an elephant and are asked, "What is this elephant like?" One of the men feels the trunk and answers, "It's long and snake-like." The next man touches the foot and says, "An elephant is short and stumpy." The third man then put his hand on the elephant's side and says, "No, no an elephant is big and flat."

The lesson of the parable is that they are all right, and they are all wrong. None of the blind men see the whole elephant. So, as it is told, every religion has only one perspective on the whole truth. This sounds very appealing, but the parable has a fatal flaw. The only way we know what the whole elephant is like is if we have a view of the whole elephant. The story only works if we claim to see the whole truth about spiritual reality that none of the 'blind adherents' to religion can see.

Aren't all religions basically the same when it comes to the essentials?

"All religions boil down to acknowledging a higher power and living a good life." It sounds appealing to look for a simple common core that all religions affirm and just stick to that—the rest are just details. The problem with this approach is that it only works at a very superficial level. Once we ask the natural follow-up questions—"Who/What is this higher power?"; "How do I know this Higher Power?"; "What is the good life?"; and "What happens when I fall short of the good life?" – we find that all major belief systems differ quite sharply.

The truth is that the world's major belief systems do offer distinct answers to life's fundamental questions, and they all cannot be right. This is where dialogue comes in.

In fact, when we take the time to examine this viewpoint, we find that in its effort to avoid an arrogant exclusivist approach to religion, it ends up being the most arrogant approach of all. Think about it like this: In order to claim that all religions are basically saying the same thing. You would have to 1) Thoroughly study all major belief systems to understand them from the

perspective of those devoted to these faiths; 2) Conclude that the devoted Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Taoists, etc. are wrongly emphasizing things about their faith that they think are important but you have determined are not; and 3) Insist that your personal version of the basic essentials is accurate and superior to all those belief systems that are caught up in non-essential details.

Interesting Thoughts

- *It's arrogant for anyone to claim that they have exclusive truth. We need to embrace a more inclusive approach.*

Response: The reality is that everyone is exclusivist. The person who believes that the religious exclusivist is wrong and that this position is false is excluding all other exclusivist beliefs except his own. In other words, we have to see that “philosophical pluralism denies other religions the right to lay claim to the truth, [but] it presents its own worldview as the absolute truth...In the end philosophical pluralism’s dismissal of dogma turns out to be just another dogma” (Leland Ryken). This realization moves us to ask, “Which belief system then best helps us love and listen to those with whom I differ?”

- *Religion and religious exclusivists cause war and violence.*

Response: It is a historical fact that many wars and conflicts have resulted from religious causes. But it is also a historical fact that the most secular period of human history (20th century) was also the most violent. If secular non-theistic belief systems (ie. communism, fascism) were the cause of just as much, if not more, violence than religious belief systems, then the cause of war and violence is not a problem for just religion but for every belief system. The question then becomes which belief system best provides a basis for reconciliation, respect, and peace?

- *But it's just so intolerant to insist that you know the truth and that other people's views are false.*

Response: Absolute tolerance of all viewpoints is impossible (ie. we cannot tolerate the viewpoint that murder and rape are morally acceptable). So, some standard of what we can tolerate and what we cannot is unavoidable. There must be dialogue concerning what is tolerable and what is not. The most dangerous position is to

simply label a view as intolerant and avoid discussion concerning which belief system best accounts for and protects human rights and provides a meaningful moral basis for a tolerant society.