

towards ► belief

Exclusive Faith

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Most people in the world today are religious. Adherents of the Eastern religions, Hinduism & Buddhism, would say that there are many roads leading to enlightenment or to the divine. In western nations which are becoming increasingly secular, pluralistic and multicultural, the idea of absolute truth or exclusive faith is becoming more and more unpopular. Christians, however, have traditionally claimed that Jesus is the **only way** for a believer to have a relationship with the one true God. This claim is said to be intolerant, arrogant or even bigoted because it assumes that all other religions and worldviews are wrong.

Is the Christian claim to exclusive faith and absolute truth reasonable, or is it arrogant and dangerous? Is the claim that Jesus is the only way to God judgemental and dismissive of other faiths? How do we answer those sceptics who say all faiths ultimately lead to the same place?

WATCH THE DVD

PLURALISM TODAY

2 Timothy 4:3-5

Q1. What is pluralism? How is it revealed today?

Q2. Are there similarities to the people Paul says will arise to confront Timothy?

In many western countries today pluralism and relativism have become the default positions of many. They argue that all the differing beliefs and worldviews have a limited picture of truth and can't therefore claim an exclusive position: 'That is your belief or point of view, not mine.' Thus right and wrong become relative to a particular situation and culture. All points of view are considered equally valid. The Christian claim to an exclusive knowledge of the path to God and absolute truth is rejected as arrogant.

IS IT ONLY CHRISTIANITY THE MAKES EXCLUSIVE CLAIMS?

Isaiah 45:18-23

Q3. What amazing claims does Isaiah make about God, the world, salvation, truth and revelation?

Three of the major world religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam (and many of their sub-branches) make exclusive claims. In different ways atheists, agnostics and pluralists also make exclusive claims. Actually, to make a claim about anything has, as its corollary, that this claim is true and the opposite is untrue.

'If something is true then other things must be false. Every single major world religion, even atheism, the lack of religion, is exclusive.' (Michelle Tepper)

DO ALL PATHS LEAD TO THE SAME REALITY?

John 1:1-4, 14, 18; 14:5-11; Phil 2:5-11; 1Tim 2:1-7

Q4. Discuss the implications of these passages. What are they claiming about Jesus?

You can hinge our certainty (that there is only one way to God) on one verse in the Bible. Jesus makes this claim. He says, 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' And though it's one statement, there's lots of things that weave through Scripture that point to this idea that Jesus, being God himself, fully God and fully man is

the way to God because he is God himself. And so He claims that since He is God, He's our pathway to God, He's God come down so that we can finally have a relationship with God. (Michelle Tepper)

Q5. What things are unique about Christianity?

While creation out of nothing, monotheism, the sovereignty of God, divinely given morality and the need for salvation from sin are vitally important in Christianity, they are also vital to other religions (e.g. Judaism & Islam). It's Jesus' **incarnation, cross and resurrection and the saving hope they create** that's unique to Christianity. All paths do not lead to the same reality. Any path or ideology that does not have Jesus Christ as Lord at its centre will not lead to the one true God or to his true salvation from sin or eternal life.

(When thinking about who God is, for Christians) there's a wonderful sentence from Robert Jensen's Systematic Theology– "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having first raised Israel from Egypt." Now that gives the bottom line. So you don't start with a generalised conception of God and then you think 'well we just share that with a lot of people'. (Rather) you start with, 'God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having first raised Israel from Egypt' (Stanley Hauerwas)

There is one thing that's unique about the Christian faith that matters today for the person that you meet at Starbucks...it's hope. I think that's what's unique about Christian faith. (Mareque Ireland)

DO ALL RELIGIONS ULTIMATELY TEACH THE SAME THINGS?

Acts 4:8-12

Q5. Do all religions, when followed sincerely, teach the same things?

'We should look carefully and thoughtfully at what the religions teach because it's just wrong to suggest they all teach the same thing. They just don't. I mean it's disrespectful to all religions to say that they're all kind of pathways to the one reality. They teach very different things. So for a few examples – Islam has very different teachings about Jesus to Christianity. Judaism has a different teaching about Jesus to Christianity. You're going to find differences in areas of morality. You'll find differences in understanding of history, differences in the character of God. And so you have to be thoughtful about other religions and look at what they actually say about God, the world and humanity; and compare and contrast them, and then make your call on which one you think is closer to the truth.' (Greg Clarke)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TOLERANT?

Psalms 101:5; 1 Corinthians 5:1; Revelation 2:2; Colossians 4:5f

Q6. Discuss 'tolerance' and 'intolerance'. What is a Christian response to the claim that we are 'intolerant'?

Although pluralists promote the idea of tolerance as a great virtue it is by no means clear what that means. They don't want to appear 'judgmental' so they accept as many differing ideas and behaviours as they can and devalue the idea of absolute truth or clear moral rules. However this actually becomes a fuzzy, lazy, intellectually sloppy position which they can't maintain. Even they usually don't tolerate murder, rape, incest, fraud, slander, theft and so on. There's a deep inconsistency in pluralism.

And it's no help for them to claim that everything is ok as long as it doesn't 'harm' anyone. Then we have to try to define 'harm' and it too becomes different for different people: what 'harms' me may not 'harm' you. Hitler believed he was doing the world a favour by getting rid of the 'harmful' Jews of Europe. Should that be 'tolerated'?

Rather tolerance is surely about respecting, engaging, and treating with compassion those with whom we disagree. It is not intolerant per se to believe in one way to God or that there are moral absolutes. It very much depends on how Christians present their faith to the wider world. Jesus' attitude to people is the

model of humble intolerance. He stood for truth, justice and compassion for the poor but loved even those who refused to embrace his instructions e.g. Mark 10:21-23.

WHAT ABOUT THE TEACHINGS OF OTHER RELIGIONS AND WORLDVIEWS?

Acts 17:16-31

Q7. What was Paul's model when engaging with people of other beliefs?

Without ever compromising his exclusive claims about the creator God who raised Jesus (e.g. vv.18, 31) Paul acknowledges the Athenian's religious piety vv.22-23 and quotes affirmingly from their poets, v.28. Since all humans are created in the image of God it's not surprising that they retain a capacity to teach some insightful things about life, spirituality and the world. Christians should be like Paul – engaged with the wider world to find link-points to learn from (and to build upon in order to present the gospel message in culturally sensitive ways). Most of the major religions have some helpful teachings. However they have no ultimate offer of true salvation and eternal hope – that is found exclusively through Jesus Christ.

SUMMARY - WHAT TO SAY TO A PLURALISTS AND/OR THOSE WHO QUESTION 'EXCLUSIVE FAITH'?

- i. There are huge inconsistencies in the pluralists view – but not in the Christian faith.
- ii. All religions and worldviews have 'exclusive' claims. They are all different. We must choose wisely.
- iii. Tolerance is about humility and dialogue not the rejection of truth or exclusive faith.
- iv. Jesus is central – he is the world's one true Lord who loves us and can be loved by us.

SHARING & PRAYER