

Aren't all religions different paths to the same God?

Introduction

I think that it will help to engage with this issue by asking three questions: First, what does our culture say? Secondly, what does Jesus Christ say? Thirdly, what do you say?

What does our culture say?

An illustration that perhaps best shows the prevailing view in our culture is the story of the blind men and the elephant.

Several blind men were walking along and came upon an elephant that allowed them to touch and feel it. "This creature is long and flexible like a snake" said the first blind man, holding the elephant's trunk. "Not at all - it is thick and round like a tree trunk," said the second blind man, feeling the elephant's leg. "No, it is wiry like a brush," said the third blind man, touching the end of the elephant's tail. In the same way, it is argued, the religions of the world each have a grasp on part of the truth about spiritual reality, but none can see the whole elephant or claim to have a comprehensive vision of the truth.

At first blush, this sounds like a great way to reconcile the different religious claims. "You all think you believe in different gods but in reality you're describing the same god from different cultural vantage points". However this illustration backfires on its teller. The story is told from the point of view of someone who is not blind, someone who can see the whole elephant because we could ask 'how could you know that each blind man only sees part of the elephant unless you claim to be able to see the whole elephant?' But what is the (absolute) vantage point from which you claim to be able to relativise all the views of the different religions? How could you possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless you yourself have the superior, comprehensive knowledge of spiritual reality you just claimed that none of the religions have? Religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism and some forms of Hinduism are often called 'arrogant' or 'bigoted' for making claims to absolute truth, but surely the person who uses this illustration is doing far worse. He or she is putting themselves above all of these claims by implying that they have the one unique perspective that sees it all; that sees the blind fumbblings of the different religions.

In Western culture at the moment then we're particularly sensitive to truth claims because we know that so often truth claims are power plays. We've had our fingers burnt by painful memories of religious extremism, we're skeptical about anything that smacks of organised religion, and we've been let down by so many people who've said they're telling the truth and yet have turned out to be spinning lies. So we think that it's out of order to make any statement like 'this belief is

true'. We can say it's 'my belief', we can say 'it's a good belief' but don't whatever you do claim it's true, because that would be to imply that others who don't hold your point of view are wrong – that would be 'intolerant'.

Yet it's worth pausing and considering that cultural value – that to claim your belief is true is intolerant, because isn't that value itself intolerant? What I mean by that is that we have developed an implicit but strongly held maxim that we must be tolerant and hence anything that casts a judgement on another's belief is unacceptable. But this maxim fails its own standards; because by definition it casts judgement and won't tolerate those who claim a belief to be true. To put it another way; to charge others with the great 'sin' of breaking the law of tolerance is of course really to say that there is one thing that we won't tolerate - 'truth claims'. It's a strange hypocrisy that our culture unwittingly commits where we actually end up doing the same thing that we forbid others to do.

Why am I making this point? I think it's important to see that no one approaches this topic from a neutral standpoint. Sometimes people say things like 'religion's not for me', or 'I just don't think you can know the truth about god' and it seems like a very non-committal stance, but actually even to make that statement is to commit yourself to a belief. No one is neutral, we all have a belief system about the world whether conscious or unconscious that governs our day to day thoughts and actions. The moment we say 'I don't think that anyone can know anything about god' we've revealed that we actually hold a very strong belief about god. You see the alternative between belief in god isn't having no belief, its belief in something else. The important thing though is to examine this belief system and see whether it has firm foundations or whether its just something you've inherited from your culture.

What does Jesus Christ say?

Jesus' claims are unique. Now you thought I'd write something like that didn't you?! But they are unique because whether you agree with them or not they are of a different **order** to all the other religious claims. Let me explain what I mean.

Imagine that the room you're sitting in had no windows and no doors and no windows. Imagine that you're there because earlier today you were kidnapped and sedated with a drug which has wiped your memory of events. Imagine that you've just come round to consciousness and now you find yourself in the room with three or four other people.

Questions would begin to fly. Who brought us here? Why? What's on the other side of those walls? What's going to happen to us next? And in answer to those questions, different possible beliefs would begin to be put forward.

The *rationalist* would work from reason. 'Maybe each of us has a rich relative somewhere that they're holding to ransom.' The *scientist* would work from observation. 'These sound like load-bearing walls when you tap them. Maybe there's something and maybe someone above the ceiling.' The *wishful thinker* would work from personal preference. "I think they must be really nice people because if I hadn't been kidnapped this morning I'd have to be at work right now. And I bet when they let us out we'll find we're in some lovely place in the country for the day.' The *agnostic* would listen to all of that and say, 'look, the fact is: we *don't know*. And as things stand, we *can't know*'. That is we are 'without knowledge' – which is what 'agnostic' means. You get the point.

The trouble is that from *inside* the room, none of us has the necessary vantage point to answer these questions. Who brought us here? Why? What's on the other side of those walls? What's going to happen to us next? You'd need to be *outside* the room to answer those questions.

In the context of the illustration Jesus' claims are unique because he claims to dwell outside the room, to have made the room, and then he comes into the room and says, "Guessing's over – I can tell you authoritatively what you want to know"

The illustration is a picture of the human condition where the room represents space and time. After nine months we wake up to consciousness in the universe, and we start to ask our questions. And our problem in finding answers is again the issue of vantage point; we're all inside the room. So we make our best efforts to examine the world around us, or to exercise our reason, or imagination about why the room might be here, but we're all still confined to being inside it. What we need is the 'outside of the room perspective' and that's what Jesus claims to bring.

In a dialogue with his disciples when he was preparing them for his death and ascension, Jesus reassures the disciples of a reality beyond this world, heaven beyond the grave. To continue in the metaphor he's effectively saying to them, 'this room is not all there is'. Thomas asked, "Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" It's a great question to ask, he's saying 'what guarantee is there that you're telling the truth, that it's not just wishful thinking?' Jesus replies with those famous words, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Don't let what Jesus claims pass you by, read it again, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me".

Jesus' claim is of a different order because he is not just saying that he **has** the answers to our questions about what's outside the room (many religious leaders have claimed that), he's saying something much bolder – he's claiming that he **is** the answer to our questions.

He says, "Do you want to know truth?" "I am the truth." "Do you want eternal life?" "I can uniquely offer you eternal life, because I'm the very source of life itself." "Do you want access to a relationship with the God who made you?" "Access is only available through me".

You see it would be one thing for someone also to wake up in the room and claim that they had received some message from outside – and that is the order of claim that many religious leaders make. But it is completely different for a person to come into the room and say 'I'm from outside the room, I made the room and when I decide I'll bring the room to an end, and so I am uniquely able to reveal to you what it's all about; why you're here, where you've come from, how you should live, what the future holds.' As I wrote earlier, that is a claim of a completely different order.

What do you say?

Perhaps that claim makes you angry, perhaps you're annoyed that it so blatantly implies that anything a person believes that is in opposition to this claim is false. Perhaps as I mentioned earlier you're thinking – this is just a blatant religious power-play. We can live with Jesus the good moral teacher because he only makes suggestions. But we don't like Jesus the son of God at all. Because he says things like, 'believe me, obey me. Follow me'. He's calling us to conversion and then to take the same message to others. He won't leave us in our ignorance trying to work out the universe for ourselves. He interferes. He has the annoying habit of saying, 'I don't want to leave you in ignorance', I want to enlighten you, I want to have a relationship with you! If we're honest we're really not sure what we think of that at all, but it is worth asking what else would you expect from the infinite and personal God who made the whole show?

There's a great quote by C S Lewis that sums this up brilliantly

'It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. 'Look out!' we cry, 'it's alive'. And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back - I would have done so myself if I could - and proceed no further with Christianity. An 'impersonal God' - well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads - better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap - best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at



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the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband - that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ('Man's search for God!') suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He found us?'

Two thousand years ago God came to find us in the person of Jesus Christ. He intervened in history in the most public way possible because he wants us to know that the guessing is over. His life is the most written biography, his death is the most documented event in history, his book is the most widely available work in print, and his followers are more numerous and are still today growing more quickly than any other religion. Why does God go to all this effort to get your attention? Because God isn't waiting for you to search for him, he's searching for you.

He's searching for you by His Spirit and he's even bold enough to tell you what he wants of you. 'The kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news' (Mark 1:15). Will you draw back or will you respond?