

GETTING TO KNOW OUR NEIGHBOURS

In our time there is an increasing interest in World religions. How do people from other cultures and religions function? The failure to comprehend how religions shape cultures, families, and lifestyles has led Western governments to foreign policy blunders and the failure to understand why Christians are being persecuted for their faith. One only has to read Romans 1: 23-25 to see the negative influence of corrupt ancient pagan religions. Through immigrants coming from Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa, we are now meeting animists, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Muslims in our neighbourhoods. Some are lawyers, some run the corner variety store, some work as baggage handlers in airports, some are medical doctors. Without the study of their religions we will not be able to talk to our neighbours: it will also hinder us in our attempt to reach them with the Gospel. The Gospel cannot be proclaimed without a confrontation with world religions. There is no alternative if we are serious about evangelism and missions. Confrontation with other religions should be counteracted by studying our Bible, our doctrines and our confessions. We can't be effective witnesses for the Gospel without knowing what we believe and why we believe it.

World Religions in Public Schools?

If we need to study World Religions, how should it be taught? In 1971 the Ontario Department of Education introduced an experimental course on World Religions. Through it students were supposed "to come into contact with their own and with other religious traditions in many contexts." The course was to be taught with "objectivity and detachment". In the United States courses were also developed with guidelines for teaching about "religion without indoctrination." But how can a religion be taught with complete objectivity and detachment? Richard Baer of Cornell University has warned that this approach will lead to "intolerable consequences for those persons who take seriously the truth claims of the Christian gospel." He also believes that a requirement of "objectivity" would make it "illegitimate for teachers to criticize any religions, including Satanism, fanatical apocalypticism, or snake handling." Total objectivity is impossible. The teacher's guideline for Ontario's World religion course clearly demonstrates this fact. It says that "World Religions should help a student to clarify his thinking on some of the fundamental questions about himself and his relationship to his fellow man, to the universe, and to the concept of a transcendent order." The teacher may not tell the student which belief he should hold. All religions are treated as equally true. Visits to a church, synagogue or mosque are encouraged as well as the reading "of the sacred writings that form so important a part of religious traditions." But no teacher is able to teach in a completely objective manner. Every teacher has a bias, a point of view. A teacher's own religious background or the lack of any religious upbringing, the academic training received, and his or her own attitude towards religion are bound to have impact on the way a course in World Religions is taught. At the National Conference on the Infusion of African American Content in the High School Curriculum held in Atlanta, Georgia, which was attended by more than a thousand teachers and administrators, all the major world

religions were dismissed as "male chauvinist murder cults." So much for objectivity and tolerance!

History of World Religion Curriculum

The study of World Religions or Comparative Religions did not begin in earnest until the 19th century. And a course in comparative religions is only taught in the Western world and not in Islamic theocratic nations. In Germany the subject was initially approached from an historical perspective. The first major work was Max Muller's Chips from a German workshop in 1867. He was influenced by the theory of evolution, studied Sanskrit and was introduced to Zen Buddhism. He sought the origin of religion in natural, especially solar, phenomena. Since the 19th century was an optimistic age with an abounding faith in progress, comparative religion scholars insisted that religion developed from a lower form of animism and polytheism (many gods) to monotheism (one god). Some scholars took the psychological approach as developed by Sigmund Freud (1856 -1940). In this explanation of the origin of religion, religious beliefs and practices are traced to childhood. According to Freud's theory, God the father, omnipotent and omnipresent, is a symbolic projection of a real father. Others take a sociological approach. They view religion as an expression of life in society; it is considered a sociological phenomenon. There are other approaches to religion as well. Which approach should a Christian teacher use?

In the United States the study of comparative religions became an important element in the expression of American liberalism. As an undergraduate course it became highly popular in the 1960s and early 1970s. Wherever it is taught in secular institutions, the assumption is made that all religions are basically one. Thus the Ten Commandments of Judaism, the four noble truths of Buddhism, and various Hindu moral codes are believed to contain the same common denominator.

Are All Religions Equal?

Helen Connell editorialized in the London Free Press (May 21, 1986) that Ontario's politicians "should take steps to ensure the Protestant faith is on equal footing with other religions - no more, no less." Connell exemplifies the pluralist approach to religion, which has become a fact of life in our multi-religious, multiethnic and multilingual society. In our day many believe that all paths lead to God. In some theological circles this has become the predominant view. In interfaith worship services, the Koran and the Bible are read side by side, and prayers are offered to Allah as well as to the heavenly Father of Jesus Christ since they are considered the same. Canada's multicultural policy financed by our tax money, which considers all religions of equal value and importance, leads Canadians to assume that there is no real difference between them. To defend Christianity as the only true faith is considered intolerant and belittling other religions. Multiculturalism demands that all religions should not make truth claims; such claims are viewed as divisive and imperialist. No wonder that many people have become indifferent to truth and trivialize the Christian heritage on which our Canadian society was founded.

But all religions are not equally true. It is an insult to both Christianity and other world religions to say that they are equally true and all valid roads to God. It is perfectly obvious that each religion has its own truth claims. There are fundamental and irreconcilable differences between them. Theravada Buddhism flatly denies the existence of God. In early 1991 Hindus in India fought to reclaim the shrines of their gods where mosques had been built. I agree with Alec Vidier's comment about the Christian faiths:

Either it is true for all men, whether they know it or not: or it is true for no one, not even for those people who are under the illusion that it is true.

For example the Muslim view of Christ completely contradicts the Bible. Alister McGrath rightly observes:

The New Testament is emphatic: Jesus died on a cross. The Qur'an is equally emphatic - he did not...both the New Testament and the Qur'an cannot be right. If one is correct on this historical issue, the other is incorrect...If Jesus did not die on the cross, an entire series of distinctively and authentically Christian beliefs is called into question.

The main world religions differ notably in what they affirm about faith and practice. The Great Divide between Christianity and other religions lies in the claim to once-for-all divine revelation and salvation by divine grace.

Faith vs Religion

To truly understand the difference between Christianity and other world Religions, we must make the distinction between religion and faith. Religion embraces every human act. According to scripture, faith is the personal relationship one has with God. For a believer, Christianity is not one of the religions of the world. The naming of Christianity as a religion had its origin in the 19th century when it was studied as one of the world's religions. The Reformers Zwingli and Calvin never used the term "Christianity", and Luther preferred the term "faith."

Salvation by works

Religions are not equal in value in the sense of being the same. Their differences are not relative but essential.

What distinguishes the Christian faith from all religions is its view of salvation. According to scripture, God reaches out to sinners through Jesus Christ. We are saved by grace and not through works, lest we should boast (Eph.2: 8-10). The Lord saves, but by nature man doesn't want to be saved. He resists the offer of salvation. He is too proud to accept salvation as a gift from God. Ajith Fernando, national director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka, explains from his own personal experience with witnessing to Buddhist, Muslims, and Hindus that the gospel of grace is a challenge to those who believe that they can save themselves. And he notes:

Christians sometime mistakenly admire the ardor of non-Christians without realizing that such zeal may represent little more than the effort of persons who want to save themselves-independent of God. The message that Christ has all that is necessary

for salvation is not good news to many, for it implies that they must let go of the gratification of trying to save themselves.

All religions are philosophies or moralisms - man's search upward. Their followers seek salvation through their personal efforts. Salvation is a reward for one's good works.

Through following different avenues of thought, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism teach that salvation is found in man doing things and following certain rules rather than in God's imparting new life on the basis of Christ's work for us. Islam is a legalistic religion with many rules for its followers to keep. It holds millions in bondage through its works righteousness. Hinduism teaches that salvation comes from "self-purification and self-realization". To gain it, Hindus suffer through a process of many reincarnations aided by yoga, used to produce a detachment from the physical realm and oneness with the divine mind. In Buddhism the four truths and its eight-fold path of right views base salvation totally on human effort. World missionary Stanley Jones once sat alongside "a holy man" in India, a man who had resigned his high court Judgeship, dressed himself with a loincloth and ashes, to search for salvation. He told Jones, "Please do not disturb my meditation." He was meditating on "Aham Brahma", "I am Brahma", and it was flight from reality.

But one cannot climb a ladder to reach the throne of God. There are many religions, but one Gospel. The Bible describes non-Christians as spiritually blind, living in darkness, being enslaved to sin and without hope in this world. The concepts of sin, prayer, salvation, sacrifice as found in the Scriptures of world religions are in conflict with the same concepts as revealed in the Bible.

The Uniqueness of Christ

Is Christianity the true faith or is it one religion among many? The answer is found in what we think of Jesus Christ. Who is He? Is He the Word Who became flesh? (John 1:14). Is He indeed the only way to the Father as He claims to be? (John 14:6). Is He God's only answer to man's quest for salvation? The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that saving faith must be focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ. There is no other name under heaven by which anyone can be saved (Acts 4: 12).

Salvation through Jesus Christ alone is a stumbling block for non-Christians. Many years ago a high ranking official on the island of Java, who thought deeply about religion's questions, repeatedly told a missionary that Islam and Christianity are basically the same. Until one evening, after having read about the suffering and death of Jesus, he burst out in tears and said, "This is totally different! This in what God does and not man!" In Islam, Jesus is one of the prophets sent by God but it vehemently denies that He is the second person in the Triune Godhead. The Qur'an clearly states:

0 People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion, nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word, which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from

Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not "Three"- Cease! (it is better for you!) -Allah is the only One God. Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that he should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender.

Hinduism boasts about its religious tolerance, believing that all religions are basically the same. An oft-told Indian story of the king who invited a number of blind men to his court, put an elephant in their midst, and asked them to say what it was, illustrates this view. Their varied answers were intended to teach the courtiers that the diverse religions of the world are but groping of blind men after a truth much too great for any human mind to grasp. Hinduism has made room for Jesus Christ as one of its many avatars (a human identity assumed by a deity), but it becomes intolerant when a Christian confesses that Jesus Christ is the only way to God the Father.

The uniqueness of Christ has been the cornerstone of Christian orthodoxy for nearly 2000 years. We need to reaffirm this truth again, as the question of Christ as the only way, is one of the key theological questions of our times.

John Hick, editor of the sensationally named book, *The Myth of God Incarnate* says that the Biblical language about the incarnation of Christ must be viewed as symbolic or mythological. He argues that Christ is simply, and perhaps not even pre-eminently, one access to salvation. The influence of Hick's theology and like minded has been detrimental to the cause of missions. Why send out missionaries if other religions are also ways of salvation?

The second Vatican Council (1962-65) marked an authoritative change in the Roman Catholic approach to other religions. Non-Christian religions are now considered as entities which should be respected and with which Christians should enter into dialogue. In Pietro Rossano's interpretation of Vatican II, " Christ is seen as the origin, center, and destiny of the various religions, as the one who brought them to birth, takes them up, purifies them, and fulfills them." However, the council did not accept officially a reinterpretation of its traditional teaching on the uniqueness of Christ. But Vatican II did lead to a very open attitude to other religions. At an interfaith meeting in Calcutta, Pope John Paul II quoted the Upanishads (Hindu Scriptures) and said that the Roman Catholic Church recognized the truth in the religious traditions of the Indians. On October 27, the Pope presided at an interfaith worship service in Assisi, Italy. Forty non-Christians were present, mostly from India and Japan, as well as fifty non-Catholics, including Archbishop Runcie of Canterbury and the Duke of Edinburgh.

Spiritual warfare

Non- Christian religions are not different revelations of the same God. The Christian faith claims a unique and independent place among all religions. It even declares all other religions idolatry. To say that all religions are paths leading to salvation is plain nonsense and spiritually deadly.

In the Old Testament the deities of the Canaanites and other tribes were condemned as false. The dramatic scene of Elijah on Mount Carmel proves this truth. The Israelites had to choose between Baal and God. There was no middle way. Elijah challenges the Israelites: " How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (1 King 18: 21). The New Testament perceives other religions as forces of darkness. In his speech before King Agrippa, the apostle Paul testified that the Gentiles need their eyes opened because they were spiritually blind and they need to turn from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26: 18). And he wrote to the Thessalonian church that they had " turned from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess.1:9). In Romans 1:25 the apostle says that people have exchanged the truth of God for a lie. In other words, God is exchanged for idols. In Calvin's words, the human spirit becomes a factory of idols (cf. Rom. It 23). The early church also viewed other religions as idolatrous. Justin Martyr (c.100--165) regarded them as inspired by Satan. He said that their gods were "wicked and unholy demons whose actions are inferior to those of more men who set their hearts on virtue." One modern example of the impact of idolatry is the remote Himalayan nation Tibet. In *Lhasa, the Open City. A Journey to Tibet*, Han Suyin, who is not a Christian, tells about the devastating impact of the idolatrous life she had witnessed in Tibet. She writes:

For every gesture, action, was also ritual; demons lurked behind each tree, and each stone; to be placated always. The earth was divine ground, and deep ploughing forbidden, canals were not dug because "divine streams" could not be touched. It ways an intangible world of taboos, stronger than any material obstacle...

Conclusion

If we believe that followers of other religions are in spiritual bondage, we ought to proclaim Christ to them, " proclaim the truth in love " in word and deed. We seek then to understand Hindus, Muslims, etc., while showing them their need to be reconciled to the Triune God. The missionary task of the Church is still unfinished. Although Christianity has expanded dramatically around the world, especially during the last one hundred years, it leaves no room for complacency. There are far more non-Christians in the world today than on the day Jesus Christ was crucified. The Christian mission has not changed. It is still simultaneously directed to "Jerusalem . . . and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

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