

The Reason for God – 1. Can there really be one true religion? – 1.10.10

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Outline of this lesson:

Popular ideas about religion

- All are basically valid and teach similar things
- Each sees part, none sees all
- Religious belief is too culturally-conditioned to be trustworthy
- It is arrogant to try to convert others
- Religion is fine if kept private

Why the Jesus way is the best way

James 1:5-7 - ⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

Some read this as saying that we have to reject all questions and try to convince ourselves to believe what we really don't believe. I might buy that if this were the complete word on doubt in Scripture. But consider Jesus and doubt. With Thomas (**John 20:24f**) he chided him for his doubt but also offered him the evidence he asked for, which was mostly the same as the other disciples had received (who themselves didn't immediately believe the women who first saw Jesus alive). And with the father who said: **"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)**, he showed gentleness and healed his son.

Scripture surely warns against a proud unbelief that rejects the evidence that God provides or resists the prompting of the Holy Spirit, which is the warning James gives and which appears frequently even in the Gospels. But remember that Jesus called his miracles "signs", meaning that they happened to give evidence of his identity. He didn't simply ask people to believe the impossible. And at some point, each of us Christians considered the evidence and weighed our own doubts and decided that the Jesus way was the best way.

In this study, I want to prepare us to give others the same chance, to love God with all our minds and to be able to show others that this is actually possible!

Source for the structure: Timothy Keller's *The Reason for God* from 2008. Keller is the founding pastor of a church in Manhattan in NYC which has an attendance of about 6,000 and, as you can imagine, engages a lot of well-educated skeptical people. I think God has prepared him to be a fantastic explainer of the faith to this generation in which both skepticism and religion are on the rise.

Planned topics:

- January 10 – Can there really be one true religion?
- January 17 – God and suffering
- January 24 – Does Christianity steal our freedom?
- January 31 – What about Christianity's record of injustice?
- February 7 – God, love, and hell – Super Bowl
- February 14 – Hasn't science disproved Christianity?

Tonight: Can there really be one true religion? This probably doesn't keep us up at night, since there are many areas in which one thing is true and everything else is false. $2 + 2 = 4$, gravity pulls things toward the center of a mass, pure water freezes at 32 degrees F, and if God has spoken one thing, why is it so hard to say that one religion is true and the others false? (BTW, we'll admit that "false" doesn't mean "wrong about everything"). But then again, what about the kind and gentle man who worships another god? Then too, "even if God did speak to the prophets and apostles", some ask, "who is to say how much their message has been corrupted through the years, so that what we have is only approximately what God has said? Shouldn't we humbly turn to other religions and learn from them too?"

Popular views about religion (excluding the rejection of all supernatural things – another lesson)

1. All religions are basically valid and teach similar things.

Paul on Mars Hill in **Acts 17** - ¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." ²¹(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

That description seems so modern. Listen to the latest ideas and try them all on, for they must all be good in one way or another. But the idea that all religions are basically true or fundamentally similar betrays either ignorance of what people believe or else considers most beliefs unimportant. **Can anyone here name something about Buddhism that's fundamentally different from Christianity?** Generally, Buddhism doesn't believe in a personal God, and some forms don't believe in a god at all. Is that a bit different from Islam? Can someone here name something about Judaism that is fundamentally different from our faith? (If you can't, you haven't been paying attention!)

Of course we have some things in common, and we probably share many concerns with folks from other religions about what is wrong with the world, but we believe different things about ultimate reality, things which contradict.

2. Each religion sees part, none sees all.

Keller refers to the story of three blind men trying to describe an elephant. Idea: Truth is too big for any group to get the whole picture. But a couple of issues arise:

- I don't know many people who think they have the whole truth. **1 Corinthians 13:12** says "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face".
- The elephant story works because we DO see the whole picture and we can say with certainty that one guy has the trunk and another the leg. Who in this world can say with confidence that they see enough of the whole picture to say that each religion has part of the truth? That's a vantage point no one can claim. It's truly a statement of faith, and should be treated as such.

3. Religious belief is too culturally-conditioned to be trustworthy.

A child born in Georgia will likely grow up with what faith? What about if the child is born in Iran? Germany? We do tend to accept the beliefs we learn as a child or else we adopt the beliefs of the people we admire. Even evangelical Christianity has a different flavor in East Tennessee than it does in Colorado Springs or Los Angeles. So this one is true, right?

It IS true that religious belief is conditioned by our culture. And what about the kid who grows up on Long Island and is raised with no religion, and whenever anyone around him talks about religion (which is rare), they treat it as superstition. Are his beliefs about religion culturally conditioned as well?

They are. The take-away from this point is that we're all in the same boat. We do have culturally-conditioned beliefs that are hard to see through, but we must. And we shouldn't be intimidated by someone who doesn't see their own bias.

4. It is arrogant to insist that your beliefs are right and to try to convert others.

If I hear you trying to convert someone and I say to you: "It is arrogant for you to insist that your way is the only right way, and to try to convert others to it", what am I doing? I'm insisting that my way is the only right way and trying to convert you to it".

There is also an assumption behind this: Your beliefs aren't important enough to try to convince someone else. No one would call you arrogant for telling someone his pants were on fire. On the other

hand, if you wouldn't give people peace unless they wear 100% cotton shirts, you would be a nut. The assumption is that religion is more like the latter. We say: **"We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).**

Another assumption is that the individual decides for herself what is true for her, and my experience working with church people confirms that most of us treasure this freedom. No matter how loud I shout or how much guilt I pour on, people are going to decide for themselves, and that's cool. It's also an idea that has grown up with Western Culture. People in Europe and N. America and Australia and New Zealand have learned over the last 600 years to elevate the individual above all else – higher than nation, higher than family, higher than church. If you were raised in parts of Africa or Asia, the family or even the village was the most important thing and the ultimate decider of truth. We're told to respect people and let them decide for themselves what is true and not interfere with their culture, but to even say that is to espouse a Western cultural ideal.

This view (that it is arrogant to try to convert others) may be on the way down. This is an age of conversion. Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens see religion as dangerous and have taken it on as a mission to try to convert people away from it. Certainly the radical Muslims aren't keeping quiet.

5. Religion is fine if kept private.

We've come this far without defining religion. So what is it?

Belief in a god? Belief in the supernatural? According to Keller, some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism defy those definitions. Keller says: *"What is religion then? It is a set of beliefs that explain what life is all about, who we are, and the most important things that human beings should spend their time doing. For example, some think that this material world is all there is, that we are here by accident and when we die we just rot, and therefore the important thing is to choose to do what makes you happy and not let others impose their beliefs on you. Notice that though this is not an explicit, "organized" religion, it contains a master narrative, an account about the meaning of life along with a recommendation for how to live based on that account of things.*

*"Some call this a "worldview" while others call it a "narrative identity." In either case it is a set of faith-assumptions about the nature of things. It is an implicit religion. Broadly understood, faith in some view of the world and human nature informs everyone's life. Everyone lives and operates out of some narrative identity, whether it is thought out and reflected upon or not. All who say "You ought to do this" or "You shouldn't do that" reason out of such an implicit moral and religious position. Pragmatists say that we should leave our deeper worldviews behind and find consensus about "what works"—but our view of what works is determined by (to use a Wendell Berry title) what we think people are for. Any picture of happy human life that "works" is necessarily informed by deep-seated beliefs about the purpose of human life. Even the most secular pragmatists come to the table with deep commitments and narrative accounts of what it means to be human." [Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*].*

It's common to speak of keeping religion out of the public square, but it really isn't possible. It might be possible to keep SPECIFIC religious expressions out of the public square, but everyone has ideas

about what people are for that are deep-seated and unprovable and thus religious in the broad sense of the word.

Can there be one true religion? Of course. We believe that. See **John 14:6** and **Acts 4:12**. Others believe it. Many folks say that we can never have peace in this world as long as people continue to believe that their religion is the only true religion. So Keller finishes up his chapter with some thoughts about how the Jesus way can fix this. It IS true that Christianity has caused a lot of problems in the world when Christians have followed other gods. But consider what the Jesus way offers:

- The image of God in all people (common to all faiths that accept Genesis). Jesus tells us (**Matthew 5:16**) to let our light shine so people will see our good deeds and glorify God (advice we ignore). **1 Peter 2:12** says to “**live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us**”. Paul speaks in Romans about people who haven’t read the Scriptures still knowing right from wrong because God’s law is, to some extent, on their hearts. The image of God in all people means that we can respect others and expect them to recognize good from evil, and they often do. We can even assume that many non-Christians will be more moral and decent than we are. Our faith doesn’t make us superior people. Indeed, it begins by us acknowledging that we are not deserving of God’s love. The Roman Empire was religiously diverse. It was also brutal and stratified into classes, and didn’t give much weight to the dignity of most people. That began to change when people came along with an exclusive belief system that included...
- The suffering Savior. At the heart of our faith is a man, God incarnate, dying for his enemies and praying for their forgiveness.

The common belief today seems to be that having “no religion too” is the best path to people getting along, and I can see why people think that. But in reality, the hope of the world is Jesus Christ and followers who love their enemies, pray for those who persecute them, and understand that when they help the most needy, they serve their God.