

Jesus: One Way or One of Many Ways?

by Johan D.Tangelder

The ethnic and religious landscape in the Western world drastically changed in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Millions of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists etc. now live and practice their religions in our midst. In England, two churches have closed for every mosque that has been opened. In the Netherlands, Islam is the second largest religion. The Muslims have now their own training school for their imams (religious leaders) in Amsterdam. France has a new presence of Islam through mass scale immigration from their former North African colonies. In the United States, many recent immigrants have arrived from culturally non-Christian nations, and they brought with them their own religions. Hindu temples can be found in not only Chicago and New York, but also in Springfield, Virginia. It is said that within twenty years Islam will replace Judaism as America's second largest religion. In Canada, a significant number of immigrants have come from Asia, South and Central America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe. Vancouver attracted many Chinese. Someone said that "Hong-Couver, BC." is no longer a novel play on words. The *Toronto Star* reported that Toronto has been designated "as the most racially and culturally diverse city in the world." In my city of London, Ontario, there are Mosques and an Islamic day school. Close to our home is a settlement of Somalis, living in town houses.

A Pluralistic Society

Canada is a welcoming nation, a pluralistic free society in which Christians, Hindus, Muslim, Buddhists, etc. can live together in peace and mutual respect. What if you have nice Muslim or Buddhist neighbors? Should we witness to them? What should we do? In the minds and experiences of many Christians the relationship of Christianity to other religions has become a problem. How can we defend and propagate the Christian faith in our rights-centered pluralistic society? Does pluralism mean that everybody's beliefs, ideas and values are true? What does pluralism mean? In her book *God in the Classroom: The Controversial Issue of Religion in Canada's Schools*, Lois Sweet comments that the word "is bandied about with such regularity that it's not clear that anyone knows quite what it means, let alone what it looks in practice." She is all for tolerating different beliefs, except the orthodox Christian faith. She says the Christian education Canadians received in Protestant schools in the past bred - excessive sectarianism, excessive piety, excessive Christian bias.

What is true tolerance? The secular view of pluralism is inadmissible. It tries to achieve peace and harmony by denying that religious differences exist or that they are important. The result is committed believers of all faith communities, except the secular, are told to keep their beliefs inside the home and place of worship. *True* tolerance respects other people's right to differ. It requires mutual respect for people who differ with us, not indifference to truth. Genuine pluralism does not pretend that our deepest differences make no difference.

The Many Ways

Pluralism is a great challenge for Christians. Its advocates reject the exclusive claims of the Christian faith as

“presumptuous,” “oppressive” and “arrogant.” It makes a mockery of the Christian assumption that God’s Word is truth and that without Christ people are lost. Pluralist Rosemary Radford Reuther makes this very claim: “The idea that Christianity, or even the biblical faiths, have a monopoly on religious truth is an outrageous and absurd religious chauvinism.” Christianity must be viewed as only one religion among many and Jesus as only one way among the many ways to God, if there is a God. And some go as far as making the absurdly simplistic assertion that all religions are equally true and all say roughly the same thing. The guru of America’s religious environmentalists Matthew Fox, a former Roman Catholic priest who turned Episcopalian, says that all religions are really just different paths to the same end. In 1997, Michael Ingham, the Anglican bishop of Vancouver published *Mansions of the Spirit*. The book takes its title from John 14:2, “In my Father’s house are many mansions.” Ingham interprets this to mean, “We must take great care not to limit our faith in Jesus to any narrow dogmatism or blind, uncritical creed.” He even has the audacity to say that Christians should accept the spirituality of neo-paganism as an authentic way to God, just like our own Christian faith. No wonder this bishop rejects the very idea of evangelizing people of other faiths. The bishop and others who are like-minded, stand outside the historic Christian faith. In the second century, Irenaeus, the great defender of the Christian faith, argued in his masterful work *Against All Heresies* that an improper view of Jesus Christ lies at the root of all heresy. By the end of the twentieth century, the evangelical theologian D.A. Carson called religious pluralists idolaters, worshipping the created world more than the Creator.

In Canada’s multi-faith society, there is no longer any room for truth claims. Truth has become one’s personal opinion. Many Canadians have bought into a relativistic view of life. Reginald W. Bibby observed that Canadians thought that if Canada would become a country of many cultures, many lifestyles, many religions, many everythings, they cannot pronounce judgments on the merits of their various possibilities. What if these relativists would be right? It would be a world in which nothing is considered evil true or false, right or wrong.

The Early Church

We are not the first generation confronted with religious pluralism. The early Christians were well acquainted with it. Their religious context was very similar to ours. Commenting on the situation confronted by the early church, as described in the Acts of the Apostles, evangelist Michael Green remarks:

“I find it ironic that people object to the proclamation of the Christian gospel these days because so many other faiths jostle on the doorstep of our global village. What’s new? The variety of faiths in antiquity was even greater than it is today.”

How did the early Christians relate to this great diversity of faith and philosophies? They respected other faiths, but they didn’t compromise. They met the challenge of other religions head-on from the very outset. They boldly proclaimed the gospel in a world that reverberated with cults, Greco-Roman religions, including emperor worship. They followed their Master who spoke of His way as steep, narrow, and difficult, as opposed to the broad and easy way that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). Jesus demands from His followers total commitment, taking precedence over all other commitments, even causing division in families, “father against son...daughter against mother” (Luke 12:53). Jesus makes it plain there are no other ways to the Kingdom of God. To be outside of the Way

is to be outside of the Kingdom. And the Lord will say to those outside on the day of judgment, "I never knew you" (Luke 13: 23 -30).

The Romans had their "folk religions" and foreign gods could easily fit in as long as they did not threaten the supremacy of the power of Rome. They adhered to Cicero's saying: "Every state has its own religion, we have our own." Of course, this "own religion" was considered superior. The Roman world loved new gods and Rome's attitude was "the more the merrier," as long as none of them was political. The Greek-Roman world had their diverse schools of philosophy - such as the Stoics and the Epicureans. The 18th century history Edward Gibbon summed up this attitude so well when he said, "the various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosophers as equally false, and by the magistrates as equally useful."

The early Christians refused to put Jesus into the gallery of Roman gods. They called upon pagans to turn away from their idols and philosophies and turn to God through Jesus Christ, God's Son (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). They risked all for the sake of the Gospel - persecution and even death. The readiness to be martyr for one's faith does not come from believing that every path leads to God. It would be ridiculous to give your life for a faith that is not qualitatively different from another. A professed Marxist, professor Milan Machovec, commented, "I do not trust a Christian who isn't interested in converting me." He understood the Christian faith better than bishop Ingham.

One Way

Religious pluralists call themselves tolerant. They think themselves so knowledgeable that they can tell Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians what they should really believe as opposed to what they think they believe! They claim "all religions say the same thing," but all religions disagree with this assumption. Their worldviews greatly differ. Secular religious pluralism is not accepted by other religions. This is obvious. Just think of the many Christians who suffer for their faith in Sudan!

All religions are not the same. If this is true, what then are the differences between Christianity and other faiths? In Christianity God reaches out to human beings in a rescue operation. In non-Christians religions people search and reach for God. They teach a form of self-salvation - salvation by works. Most branches of Buddhism don't believe in a personal God nor in salvation by grace. Buddhism teaches that the predicament of human beings is "desire," the root of suffering. Deliverance comes through earnest self-effort. "Strive without ceasing" were Buddha's last words to his disciples before he died. There are Christians and Muslims who say that they worship the same God. But this is simply not so. It is true that they worship one God. However, Muslims insist that Christians err when they say that God is Triune. The Quran teaches that God is only One without a partner or a son. Islam confesses that God is one and one only, and to associate any being with God is both a sinful and infidel act. Muslim scholar Badru Kateregga says that Islam makes it plain that God has no son, no father, no brother, no wife, no sisters, and no daughters (Muslims think that we Christians worship a Trinity of Father, Mother, and Son). What does Islam teach about salvation? It believes that Allah is the Compassionate and Merciful One. But Allah is only merciful to the meritorious, to those who pray, give alms, and fast in Ramadan. Islam has also an optimistic view of human beings. It

has a great concern for external purity and conformity, but fails to believe human beings are totally depraved. Hence, it does not see the need for the Savior.

How do we come to know God, the One who is utterly beyond us? We can only know God because He has chosen to make Himself known through the very words of Scripture. The God of the Scriptures is totally different from all other gods. The doctrine of the Trinity defines and defends the uniqueness and the distinctiveness of “the God of the Christians.” In the plan of salvation God the Father took the initiative. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). And Jesus said to His disciples that when the Holy Spirit comes, He “will convict the world in regard to sin and judgment”(John 16: 8). And before His ascension to heaven our Lord commissioned them to go and make disciples, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”(Matt. 28:19).

Christianity is unashamedly Christ-centered. Jesus Christ is the Gospel the disciples were commissioned to proclaim (Gal.1: 16; 1 Cor.1: 23; 15:12). The incarnation, God’s Son becoming man, is the greatest miracle the world has ever known (John 1: 1-14). It contradicts the understanding of God in all non-Christian religions. Jesus Christ then is the fullest, definitive and final revelation of God. We affirm, in the words of the historic Nicene Creed that Jesus Christ is “the only begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” The good news is that Son of God came into the world, died on the cross, and rose again. He is the “good shepherd” who laid down His life for His sheep (John 10:11,15). He voluntarily went to the cross in our place, bore our sins, assumed our guilt, paid the penalty we deserved. John Stott comments:

“To add any word of our own to God’s completed Word in Christ or to add any work of our own to God’s finished work in Christ would be gravely derogatory to the unique glory of Christ’s person and work.”

The Gospel of free grace (God’s unmerited favor) is good news which Christians proclaim with joy. But for multitudes it is not good news. Their greatest stumbling block is the cross. Why? The cross humbles all pride and dashes all hope of self-salvation. The apostle Paul recognized this in his letter to the Corinthians, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is power of God (1 Cor.1: 18). The cross stands between Christianity and all other religions. It is either true for all mankind or not true at all. There is nothing in between. The necessary and all-sufficient work of Christ is the exclusive grounds for salvation, the foundation of our faith. Without His substitutionary death, there is no spiritual life (Cf. John 6: 25ff).

Conclusion

Secular religious pluralism stimulates relativism, and uncertainty about the truth of the Gospel. It is a threat to missions as it has already gained a following in various branches of the Church. Consequently, there is a decline in support for missions. As I have shown, we cannot regard all religions as equally true since we believe that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. We cannot claim to love our Buddhist, Muslim or secular neighbors if we leave them in ignorance of Christ. The Church continues to have the responsibility to be the salt and light in this dark

world. Until the end of times our Lord will use His Church to search for the lost. (Cf. 2 Pet.3: 9) The truth of God will triumph. As Lesslie Newbigin said, “Splintered, confused, and compromised, the Church seldom sounds worth listening to. But the Church has outlasted many occupants on Caesar’s throne and will outlast many more, *for the truth entrusted to her is the truth of God.*”