

Why Are There So Many Religions?

Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11

April 18, 2010

Here we are the 2nd Sunday after Easter and we just heard about the wise men and sang *The First Noel*. What in the world is going on! I admit I am crossing my holy days but I will tell you why in a little while.

For now I want to tell you about a new sermon series I am beginning. It is called “Christianity and World Religions”. We will be spending the next five weeks looking at the major world religions. What does a Buddhist believe? How does a Hindu worship? What are the similarities and differences between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism?

Two nights ago Connie attended a friend’s Bat Mitzvah. When I was growing up I did not even know a Jew. When I thought of a Buddhist I pictured some monk living in India. Several weeks ago, as he was explaining how he was turning his life around, Tiger Woods said he would be more faithful to his Buddhist teachings.



Since we are living in a diverse world, where a neighbor, doctor or friend might be of a different religion than us, it would probably be helpful to know something about their faith.

A good amount of information that I will be sharing comes from Adam Hamilton’s book *Christianity and World Religions*. In the book, Rev. Hamilton shares what he learned and experienced while preaching about the major world religions.

He states that when he promoted the sermon series there were folks in his church that expressed concern. “Do you really want to teach us what they believe? What if folks get interested in another religion all because of your messages? I don’t know if any of you have those concerns. My comment would be like his, I believe Christianity offers us the truth about God. I believe our faith can withstand the study of other religions. If it can’t, if

Christianity doesn't offer the truth, then we need to find out where the truth lies.

Before we begin looking at the specific religions, let's consider the question of why are there so many religions. Connected to that question is the issue of how Christians should view people of other faiths. Finally how is God at work in other religions?

To give us a sense of the diversity in the world I have an exercise for you to do. In your bulletin you will find an insert. You will see a list of the five major world religions. There are approximately six billion people in the world. I would like you to guess how many are in each faith. Clearly not every one is part of these five religions so your total number should not total 6 billion.

The break down:

Christianity	about 2 billion (1/3)
Muslims	about 1.3 billion (1/5)
Hindus	about 900 million (1/7)
Buddhists	about 360 million (5%)
Judaism	about 14 million adherents

Judaism is a very small part of the world's population: yet Judaism is central to a study of religions because the two largest faith traditions, Christianity and Islam, are both linked to Judaism.

All told, these five religions represent about 4.5 billion people, more than 2/3 of the world population.

Since I have been giving you facts I will give you a few more. In the United States 77% claim to be Christian, 15% claim no religious affiliation, 1.3% are Jewish, and 1/2 of 1% are Muslim, with approximately the same number of Buddhists and Hindus. Another interesting fact about these religions is that world wide over the last decade Christianity grew at a rate of 5% while Islam grew by 110%, Buddhism by 170% and Hinduism by 237%.

As you can see by those numbers these are many in this world that are not Christian. Since we no longer live in isolation we have to decide how we will view people of other faiths. What should our attitude be?

I went to seminary at Boston University. BU was connected with a number of other divinity schools in the Boston Area. As a student of one school you could take classes at any of the other schools. It was through this arrangement that allows me to tell people I attended classes at Harvard. There in the Harvard Yard I took a World Religions course. The class was taught by Dianna Eck; a recognized expert in inter-religions dialogue. In the class she said there were several positions a Christian could take when viewing other religions.

There is the **Pluralist Perspective**. With this perspective one views all religions as equally valid paths to the ultimate reality. To put it another way, pluralists believe that religious people around the world are saying the same thing in different languages, or at least they are pointing to the same truth. (Example of spokes in a tire)



Next there is the **Exclusivist Perspective**. As the name implies this is a very rigid outlook. With this perspective only you have it right. All the other religions are viewed as flawed. God blesses the people in your faith community and curses everyone else. A Christian holding this view believes all non Christians are going to hell.

A third understanding is the **Inclusivist Perspective**. This position maintains that God is at work among all people everywhere, even where there is no Christian witness. In this view Christ is understood to be the definitive revelation of God. All other religions are to be measured in the light of Christ.

Having said that however, Inclusivists believe God is at work in the lives of non-Christians. God has not “written off” anybody. God accepts the attempts of people in their reaching and yearning for the almighty. As Adam Hamilton writes, “People of other religions may not understand or

have knowledge of the gospel, but their service to God is a demonstration of the fact that they do have faith.”

Inclusivists are not saying all religions are equally valid or that their teachings are true. Rather, they believe that God examines the hearts of people of other faiths; that God sees their true faith in him; and, as was the case with Abraham, that God credits this faith to them as righteousness.

If you were to take a poll on the street, I believe the Pluralist Perspective would be the most popular. Folks want to be open minded, non-judgmental.

If you are asking Conservative Christians, the Exclusivist position would receive the most votes. For Christian thinkers, it would be the Inclusivist Perspective that would be the most popular. John Hick, author of *Philosophy of Religion*, wrote that inclusivism “probably represents the nearest approach to a consensus among Christian thinkers today”. I would agree with that statement if Mr. Hicks is referring to mainline Christian thinkers.

The idea that God’s mercy and love is for those outside the Christian faith, and that God is willing to speak to them in familiar terms and symbols is what I see at work in the story of the wise men. See I told you we would come back to them. In their story we can see some answers to the question “How is God at work in other religions?”

Let us remind ourselves of who these wise men were. Though we sing “We Three Kings”, they were not kings but instead were likely emissaries of kings. The common belief was they were Zoroastrian priests of the Persian Empire (modern day Iran).

Zoroastrianism is a faith that shares with Judaism the belief in one God.

Though there were a number of other common beliefs, there were also some clear differences. One difference was the use of astrology. Nowhere in the bible does it mention following a star.



God was able to take something in the Zoroastrian faith and use it bring these non-Jews to Jesus. These magi must have been people of great character and remarkable faith. Imagine the journey they took just to get to Bethlehem? And when they found Jesus what did they do? They bowed down before him and offered him gifts.

Every year we remember the story of the wise men on Epiphany. This story reminds us that some of the first humans that recognized the divinity in Jesus were non-Jews. Epiphany calls us to share the good news with those outside the faith.

If we respect person's of others faiths, especially by taking the time and learning something about what they believe, then they might be open to hearing what we might share. It's not that they are going to all of a sudden convert to Christianity, but it will give them something to consider.

Ultimately I believe it is not up to us to convince anybody to give their life to Christ. We can share, we can invite, but is God only who changes hearts. Speaking of God and hearts, let us go back to the question of why there are so many religions. I believe we are created to have a relationship with God. We are not fully complete unless we are in touch with God. One philosopher suggested there is a void in our heart that only God can fill.



If you look through the history of human kind, no matter where or when, you will find an understanding of a being that is beyond mere mortals. It is that innate yearning for the creator that causes that searching. Over the

years many attempts have been made to give a name and a meaning to this Ultimate Being.

Some might argue that all these religions are proof there is no God. If there was a god, they say, this god would be clear about who it was and how people should act. I believe all these religions prove the opposite. If there were no God, why would so many people over such a long period of time have a belief in a God?

I invite you to come next week as we begin by looking at Hinduism. It will be good to learn about these other religions. Who knows, a new appreciation for other faiths

might give us a greater appreciation for our own faith. Cut off the bottom of your insert and share it with a friend.

