

# "Hot Potatoes"

Sunday May 16<sup>th</sup>

## Are all Religions the same?

We Christians have always been aware of other faiths. However there is no doubt that during the second half of last century, a new kind of awareness of other faiths have emerged amongst Christians. This has been due to a number of reasons. First of all, the explosion of information, relatively cheap paperbacks, have been and are now available about the major religions of the worlds and many of these books were written by first rate scholars.

In our Universities and colleges religious studies which investigate religion around the world and across the centuries, is now a well established discipline. Sometimes along side or even in place of studies previously restricted to the Christian tradition.

A second factor, which has increased our awareness, is that of the ease of travel, many of us travel to exotic places, and we can see the great mosques, Istanbul, we can see the Taj Mahal in India we can go to Thailand and see the influence of Buddhism there.

A third and most important factor about our new awareness is the large scale immigration, from East to West, bringing millions of Muslims Hindus, Sheiks and Buddhist. Into a number of European and North American cities.

As I speak in one of our major cities, Birmingham, do you know there are over one hundred thousand Muslims? There are over one hundred mosques; Birmingham has a large Sikh community. Has a Hindu community with at least six temples. It even has a small Jewish community. We certainly live in a multi cultural society. What this means in practice, when you meet neighbours, from these other faiths, and you get to know them

as individuals, and families and you get invited to their weddings, their festivals, and their community events. You discover all kinds of fascinating cultural differences, in general, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhist, do not seem to be less honest, less true full, less loving and compassionate, in family and community. Less good citizens or less religiously committed, than your Christian neighbours.

Prof John Hicks has written, " The ordinary people of these other faiths, do not seem to be better human beings, morally and spiritually than Christians, but neither do they seem to be worst human beings. There is also an increased understanding around today as we study our world, that in perhaps 99 % of cases the religious faith which you follow of which indeed you specifically reject, selected by what people call accident of birth. What I mean is; when someone is born into a devout Muslim family in Pakistan, Egypt or Saudi Arabia, it will always be safe bet that he or she will be a Muslim. Observant or non observant And so with these factors in mind, this new awareness, many are asking both inside and outside the Christian church what about these other faiths, how are we as Christians view the followers of other faiths, and its not merely I suggest, an academic question, the answer we give to what about other faiths, will effect the way we do evangelism, mission, it6 will decide whether we take part in interfaith services, interfaith dialogue, join with other faiths in working together on social or political issues.

In the following comments I am going to confine myself to the major world faiths, meaning those traditions that have existed for more than 1000 years, faiths that have their own holy books, those that have produced great saints and thinkers, those faiths that have provided the foundations of civilisation for many millions of people: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism and Taoism. From a Christian perspective there have been a number of different approaches to the question what about other faiths. Two major views:

- The exclusive view.
- The inclusive view.

The exclusive view, the older exclusive view in its Roman Catholic version, that outside the church, there is no salvation. In the protestant version is that outside a personal faith in Jesus Christ as lord and saviour there is no salvation. This is a strong exclusive view, only Christianity is true. All the other faiths are false. A very stark a very extreme views to take. Let me take you through why people believe in this view. It is a cumulative case based on a number of factors and why people hold this view. 1<sup>st</sup> factor on why people hold this view that only Christianity is true while other faiths are false, there are a number of statements in scripture which people interpret as being very exclusive John 14:6, I am the way, the truth ,the life no one comes to the father but by me . Romans 10 :9 If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you shall be saved. Act 4:12. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Jesus).

The second factor in this case is when you ask about the person of Jesus how he's understood by Christians and by the other faiths. Who is Jesus? We Christians believe in what is called the incarnation we believe as John says the word which was at the beginning was God, that word became flesh.

Colossians 1 : 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the first born over all creation, that by him all things were created things in heaven and on earth visible and invisible whether thrones or powers rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body the church; He is the beginning and the first born among the dead. So that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

Paul said some fantastic things about Christ on the cross; God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. Philippians 2:5 Hymn, by Jesus being very nature God. Think about John 20:28 Doubting Thomas is confronted by the risen Jesus he can see the nail marks

and the mark in his side. He replies to Jesus My Lord and my God. Jesus is truly a man but Christians believe he is more than just a mere man. In the opening verses in John's gospel known as the prologue, we have the claim that the word that was with God was God and became a human being. How does that stand with regards to other faiths? In Islam Jesus is not considered to be the son of God, they do not believe in the incarnation the word becomes flesh, Jesus is an esteemed prophet but he certainly is not the son of God as we understand that phrase. In Judaism, Jesus may be regarded as a prophet; he certainly is not regarded as the son of God, or the promised messiah in the Old Testament. In Buddhism, Hinduism, Jesus is not regarded in any way significant seeing as though he didn't exist in those times. Sometimes in some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism Jesus is seen as the Christ being he is in the long line of religious leaders who have been anointed with what they call the Christ spirit. Buddha would have been anointed with the Christ spirit, Confucius would have been anointed with the Christ spirit. Other great men would have been anointed with this Great Spirit. But Jesus is not unique he's in a long line, and so what we believe about Jesus, who he is, is quite different from Christians to other faiths. If you ask about the work of Jesus why did he come, what was his mission, the Christian answer is simply this, to rescue humanity. To bring what we call salvation, I don't know if you have ever sat down and thought what salvation means, my definition, salvation according to the bible is a comprehensive term to describe all the benefits of the life the death and the resurrection of Jesus announced and offered in the gospel. It means we are saved from hell for heaven, Saved from sin for holiness, Saved from death for life, Saved from the curse of God for the blessing of God, Saved from slavery for liberty, Saved from the penalty of sin, justification, Saved from the power of sin, sanctification, Saved from the presence of sin, glorification. Paul talks about his commission being given by the living God to turn people from darkness into light, from the power of Satan to God, So that they may receive forgiveness. (Acts 26:17) At the heart of this salvation, is the death and resurrection of Jesus and herein lies the problem. Islam denies that Jesus died on a cross. Two views about the death of Jesus in Islam, 1 says he actually did not die he was taken down alive from the cross, 2 is a mistaken identity someone else put on the cross. Either

way Jesus did not die whatever way you wish to interpret that. Consequently there is no resurrection. In Islam the heart of Christianity the cross and resurrection, is not there, taken out totally. Judaism cannot understand a suffering messiah, a messiah dyeing on a cross. God's messiah cannot suffer such a fate. Therefore Jesus is not the messiah. When you look at the heart of our faith, and why Jesus came for this salvation, we have to say that Christianity stands alone in that interpretation. The other faiths do not see the cross and resurrection, in the way we do. If you think of the afterlife what for example awaits you and I at the end of our earthly lives. Buddhism would tell us that we are trapped in a cycle of reincarnation, and the aim of the Buddhism religion is to escape this cycle and to reach nirvana or some absorption into the ultimate. Hinduism has a very similar belief about the after life. The Christian faith speaks of a bodily resurrection a new body, for existence in a new heaven and a new earth. Christianity speaks of a definitive judgement day where ones eternal destiny will be decided. I have no concept of reincarnation. Christianity speaks of an afterlife where our personal identity continues. So different from so many other religions where our identity is no longer there in the afterlife. Think about the concept of God Buddhism is actually an atheistic religion, pure Buddhism there is no God. It's a philosophy of life, no concept of a personal God. Hinduism there are many Gods, sometimes there are hundreds of Gods, Islam, which is the closest to Christianity apart from the Jewish Faith. Believe in one God. In the Koran there are 99 titles for the word God but they never call God Father. Jesus came to introduce us to a new relationship with God where you and I can call him Father. He taught his disciples to address God as Abba Father, when you think of the whole concept of grace, Christianity is a religion of grace often people talk of grace as being Gods riches at Christ's expense. What God has done for us? So many of the other religions are about what we have to do to get into Gods good books, what we have to do to get into a relationship with God. Christianity simply says we come to God with open hands and we receive because of what God has done for us on the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. Christianity is a religion of grace, and so other world religions are a religion of works. What we do. In the light of these factors many Christians throughout the ages have believed that Christianity

is the only true religion. They have said that Jesus Christ is unique, the exclusiveness of Christianity is really just a reflection of that uniqueness of its founder, master, Col 1:18 so that in everything he might have the supremacy. In this reading says that Jesus is before creation he is the agent of creation, the sustainer of creation, the whole creation is for him. These Christians hold this view are saying if other religions do not recognise this supremacy of Jesus this uniqueness of Jesus then they are flawed at best, that other religions are false if they do not recognise Jesus as revealed in the bible, his identity his mission. Some will go further and say that these other religions are demonic perceptions. If you think that is extreme then listen to the basis of that, 1 Tim 4:1 Where Paul writes to his young man his young friend timothy, spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Strong words. However that's the strong exclusive view. Christianity is true other religions are false. That's the reason behind that stance.

There is a weaker exclusive view, which is held by many, and people will hold this weaker view will want to uphold the uniqueness and the supremacy of Jesus but will also say that other religions have some insight, some knowledge of God especially through natural revelation, looking at creation, a knowledge of right and wrong, through the conscience given to us. The reality of God is present in other faiths, than Christianity but it is merely partial. Whether you hold a strong or weak exclusive view both will want to proclaim Jesus Christ nailed to a cross as the wisdom and the power of God.

In the last 30-40 years through various discussions and debates a new understanding has emerged which is generally known as Christian Inclusivism. This is a view with a number of ways in which to look at this, a view which is on the march, as we have more contact with other world religions this view is increasing in number as more and more people are adopting it.

It has some links with the exclusive view, but also departs radically from the exclusive view, the link with the exclusive view, that under this inclusive view that salvation is still Christian salvation. Made possible by the atoning death of Jesus, the departure from the exclusive view in this inclusive view, that salvation by Christ is not dependant on the excepting of Jesus as saviour in this life.

The anonymous Christian idea: An idea developed especially amongst Catholics the idea which is called implicit faith or a baptism of desire. The idea is that some individuals of other faiths and in deed of no faith may be rightly disposed in their hearts that they would respond to the Christian gospel if it were properly presented to them. But they have never encountered it, or only encountered in inadequate ways. No real opportunity to respond to it. The Catholic theologian Carl Reynar called such people anonymous Christians.

The second form of Inclusivism holds that salvation as we understand it does require a conscious personal faith in Christ. But that is not possible for hundreds of millions of people in this life. But it will be possible in the next. Thus the devout Muslim living in Pakistan insulated from a response to the gospel because of the powerful Islamic faith and culture around them will encounter Jesus Christ after or at the moment of death and will have an opportunity to receive salvation then. Famous writer called Linbeck who wrote about this second idea, that dying itself be pictured that the point at which every human being is ultimately and expressively confronted by the gospel by the crucified and risen lord. It is only then the final decision is made for or against Christ. That this is true, not only of believers but unbelievers.

A second chance at death.

So one person says that there are such things as anonymous Christians, and another says we have a second chance. Both views do not regard other religions as channels of salvation. They are theories about individuals within the other religions. However there is a third form on this inclusive idea which regards other religions as alternative mediators or contexts of salvation. Prof. John Hicks is a holder of this view along with others, about

other religions being mediators of salvation, or the context of salvation, can only hold this view, by totally re-defining salvation. In quite a limited way, Hicks and others want to think of salvation in a much more concrete and empirically observable way. I.e. An actual change in men and women from what they call natural self centeredness to God centeredness. A new orientation centred on the ultimate god. A transition in this life in a life centred in god and moving away from a life centred upon self. We can judge that in people's lives they say, and this view asserts that transition from being a self centeredness to God centeredness can take place within any religion on the earth.

So we have a strong exclusive view, Christianity is true. All their religion is false.

Weak exclusive view: Christianity is true but there might be partial truth in other religions.

That Jesus is still unique.

An inclusive view, which says there are in other religions anonymous Christians, they will be saved Christ. All will have a second chance in other religions, to respond to Christ at death.

Wider inclusive view which says all religions are roads to salvations because salvation is a movement from man centeredness to self centeredness to god centeredness. These are the major views that found around our world today.

### **Implications of this.....**

How you answer this will affect your individual life, your church life, future of Christianity.

### **What about other faiths?**

If all faiths are equally valid and what Hicks said was true- that salvation as he defines it is valid, that all faiths are equally valid do we have to evangelise? It seems that we don't. It undercuts our evangelism.

The missionary act of the church for 2 thousand years has been a waste of time. It's been a pointless exercise. Why bother if that is true?

Why did Jesus want us to go out to the entire world and proclaim his gospel?

Why did God have to send his son into the world? If people are anonymous Christians or given an opportunity for death to respond to Christ then gain it seems that our evangelistic further will be diminished. If that is true?

Think about also, participation interfaith worship. Is it right to as Christians to participate in worship with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhist, Jews, where extracts from ancient sacred writings are read, where prayers are offered to the variety of Gods, which are believed in by the other faiths. Where God is understood in different ways, sometimes in an incompatible way, interfaced dialogue, how far shall we dialogue with other faiths? (Slightly different than taking part in a multi faith service.) I think we owe it to ourselves and to others that we do understand the beliefs of other people. I don't have much time in Christians who don't understand the basics of other faiths; we need to understand the basics in which to dialogue with these people. Find out the ideas with them to understand each other. It does have its limits.

Working together with other faiths, can we work together? On Political issues, social issues, can we campaign together for justice? Can we serve the community and join together in organisations like St. Petrocs where other faiths are welcome. It all comes down to the fundamental question of what is truth.

This question confronted by Pilot on Jesus last day. Pilot washed his hands in that situation. That is essential, what is truth? Are there various truths or is there one absolute truth? When Jesus said I am the way the truth and the life what did he mean? When he said to his disciples when they asked the question show us what the father is like, he said if you've seen me you've seen the father. How do we interpret that? What is truth? A central

question, and the Holy Spirit I believe is the spirit of truth and he would lead us into truth. It seems quite fascinating that the holy spirit in John 14, 15, 16. The essential part of his ministry is to glorify Jesus.

To end, we have to recognise many of our Christian brothers and sisters are living in countries where these other faiths hold sway. Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu countries that we need to bear it in mind as we think about that question what do we think of other faiths, that many of our brothers and sisters are being persecuted for their faith.

**Fact:**

In every three minutes Christians die for there faith.

What about other faiths has an important dimension to that persecution? We as Christians are being persecuted by the adherence of other faiths, in certain parts of the world Christians cannot worship together, read bibles together, share their faith in any sense shape or form with each other because of the heavy-handedness of persecution from other faiths.

We live in a land that is free, free speech, the right to express our own belief, without any restrictions *at the moment*.