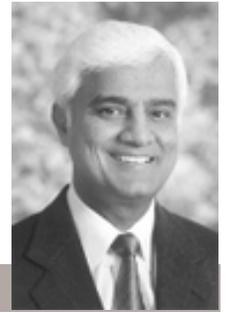


## A Conversation with: RAVI ZACHARIAS

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### RECENT EVENTS HAVE FOCUSED A GREAT DEAL OF ATTENTION ON WORLD RELIGIONS. HOW DO ADHERENTS OF OTHER RELIGIONS VIEW CHRISTIANITY?

Every culture is basically an expression of its worldview and its religion. Theologian Paul Tillich said, "Religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion."<sup>1</sup> In most countries religion has worked itself into the fabric of the culture. Therefore, when people view Christianity, it is inescapable that they will view it within the framework of their historical experience.

In India, for example, many people find it impossible to separate Christianity from the days of the British rule. That was a national exposure to what they thought was the Christian faith. If you go to certain parts of the world where imperialism had its bad days, then Christianity is associated with imperialistic tendencies.

However, I think much change has occurred in recent times. Some of my good friends in India made a surprising comment to me on the heels of September 11. They said that they were watching America's reaction, and they recognized that they were witnessing a "nation with a Christian ethos" respond to a criminal act. I was impressed to hear how many of these friends asserted that they were touched by America's patience and its measured response, as well as the number of Americans who attended church services. A prominent Islamic scholar in the United States commented that had such an attack happened in some Muslim countries, there would have been a violent reaction. When people of other faiths make comments such as these, I think it is a credit to the Christian faith.

### HOW IS THE CROSS OF CHRIST PERCEIVED BY ADHERENTS OF OTHER RELIGIONS?

It varies. Muslims believe that Jesus did not actually die on the cross. They make that comment based on the Koran. It is strange because, also based on the Koran, they recognize that Jesus had the power

to raise the dead, a power they do not attribute to Mohammed, so that's a conflicting response.

As a Christian apologist, I present a defense of the Christian faith in various settings around the globe. I have found that if you build a proper foundation for what the Christian faith is all about, as you lead up to the cross, the listeners sit in stunned silence. They immediately recognize that Christianity stands in stark contrast to everything that other worldviews affirm and assert. They know that true power is being expressed in the cross—restraint, mercy, forgiveness—all when the very One who is offering those things had the capacity to counter instead with force and with domination.

In contrast, consider the radicals in the Islamic movement, for whom power is always present, always political, always military and always violent. The cross will always be a stumbling block to them because it challenges the very core of their thinking. Jesus' way is completely different from theirs. In Jesus' way, winning comes through love and a change of heart.

So the way of the cross is in counter-perspective to every other belief system. The cross seems the way of defeat, but it is the means to victory. It shows meekness, yet it is the ultimate expression of strength. It brings everything that is of eternal value into current perspective.

### IN HEBREWS, JESUS "ENDURED THE CROSS, DESPISING THE SHAME."<sup>2</sup> THE CROSS WAS AN OBJECT OF DERISION AND RIDICULE, YET WASN'T THIS WHERE CHRIST ACCOMPLISHED HIS MOST POWERFUL WORK?

The cross embodied a supreme moment of isolation and public humiliation. The ultimate isolation was the cross of Christ, when He was separated from His Father. But when He cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>3</sup> at the very moment that was probably the loneliest in His earthly sojourn here, He was at the center of His Father's will. In the eyes of humanity, the cross symbolized isolation, separation, expulsion and shame, and yet, in

that moment, Jesus was paying the price for our sin, an act that was in the center of His Father's will.

OTHER RELIGIONS EMPHASIZE MAN'S ATTEMPT TO REACH GOD. HOW DOES THE CROSS SPEAK OF GOD'S DIVINE INITIATIVE TOWARD MAN?

The Bible says that we are separated from God,<sup>4</sup> and salvation does not depend only on my efforts to get back to Him. This is the classic difference between the Christian faith and others. In Buddhism, you work and work your way into Nirvana, an ultimate enlightenment. In the Islamic faith, it's always "In Sha' Allah," the will of Allah, if one reaches God. These systems of thought have no assured way of knowing where you stand with God.

The cross is where God's work of justification occurred. We are made just, not of our own selves, but by the work of Jesus Christ. Christ, being made sin for us,<sup>5</sup> has redeemed us from the curse of the law.<sup>6</sup> He who knew no sin would be made sin for us<sup>5</sup> that we might be reconciled to God.<sup>7</sup> We now have access to the Father because of the Son.<sup>8</sup> In Ephesians we are reminded that those of us who were far off have now been brought near.<sup>9</sup>

The cross is all about the Person and work of Jesus Christ. He says to the onlookers, "Which of you convicts Me of sin?"<sup>10</sup> Pilate says, "I find no fault in this man."<sup>11</sup> The thief on the cross says, "This man hath done nothing amiss."<sup>12</sup> This is the pure, impeccable Son of God, without sin, without blemish. He carries the work of the cross in His life and in His death. No one except Jesus Christ could have died on the cross to pay the penalty of sin. It would not have worked. And if Jesus had just come and lived a pure life without facing the penalty, there would not be the sufficient sacrifice for sin.

WHAT IS THE PRINCIPLE OF SPIRITUAL UNION AND IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST ON THE CROSS? HOW SHOULD IT AFFECT OUR HABITS AND THOUGHTS?

The Apostle Paul talks in Galatians about the role of the Law and faith. It is only faith in the crucified Christ that saves us, not obedience to the Law. Paul goes on to say, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."<sup>13</sup>

It is through the empowering of the Holy Spirit that we are able to see this change. Once I understand that the cross was a personal provision for the sin of every man and every woman, I can identify with Christ in the fact that this is *my* Savior taking *my* guilt and *my* penalty. Then, when I confess my

sin, receive Him and trust Him, the Bible says that He comes and dwells with me.

We hear so little of this indwelling today, so little of "Christ in you, the hope of glory."<sup>14</sup> We have talked so much of accepting and receiving that we have forgotten the intimacy with which He comes and dwells within us. There is no other world religion or worldview that talks in those terms.

In Islam, Allah is seen as distant and totally transcendent. In Buddhism, there is no god. In the core of Hindu thinking, you are, in effect, made to become god. But in the Christian faith, there is the nearness of God. We do not go to the Temple anymore to worship; we take the temple with us. This body is the temple of the living God.<sup>15</sup> There is communion, there is intimacy. We understand that this body is where God wishes to make His residence, and we see the sacredness of the human body.

You cannot take planes and ram them into buildings to kill people. People are individual temples in which God wishes to dwell. Osama bin Laden talks about bombs dropping into mosques, attempting to evoke the anger of the radicals. The teaching of Christ is very different from the philosophy of Mr. bin Laden. It is not the building that is sacred; it is the individual who is sacred. In every life he has killed, he has killed a temple of God.

HOW DID YOU COME TO KNOW CHRIST AS YOUR SAVIOR?

I came to know Christ at the age of 17 while living in New Delhi, India, where I was reared. My father worked for the Indian government. Growing up in India, I faced many struggles, not the least of which was academic competition in a highly stratified culture. One day I realized that I really didn't have any meaning in life. So, at the age of 17, I attempted to take my own life by poisoning myself.

Then, when I was recovering in a hospital, a friend brought me a New Testament. Because my body was dehydrated and I was receiving fluids, I could not hold the New Testament in my hands. The Scripture read to me was John 14, where Jesus said to his apostles, "Because I live, ye shall live also."<sup>16</sup>

I knew that whatever else that Scripture meant, it meant more than physical life. I said, "This is the life that I have yearned for." I made my commitment to Jesus Christ and have never looked back, except to remember how He rescued me and put a new song in my heart—new hungers, new desires, new life. He put a new hunger into my heart, a hunger for God Himself. Prior to that, I was more concerned about success, good grades, good jobs. I was constantly thinking about what others thought

about me. God refocused my attention on Himself.

I knew that this was not some kind of motivational therapy but a new kind of relationship. There is a difference between a person who hungers for love and one who has found love. God put in my heart that great hunger for Him, even as I knew that in Him I had already begun the process of being filled. Before I heard those Scriptures I was completely empty. Now I had found through the Person of Christ how I could be filled.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE GOSPEL THAT EXCITES YOU AS YOU PROCLAIM THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AROUND THE WORLD?

The more I read and understand about other worldviews and other world religions, the more magnificent Christ appears. I have a return invitation from a leading Muslim cleric in a strongly Muslim country to do two open forums at a university. Absolutely nothing compares to the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So I go there with a thrill in my heart

that the Christian message stands so magnificently and so beautifully before a world in need.

I pray for God to open the eyes and hearts of people in all cultures. Among former Muslims who are now Christians, more than 90 percent of those with whom I have talked have come to know Christ through a dream or a vision. God used their own worldview through which to reveal Christ. We must be men and women of prayer, to pray for the salvation of people all over the world. As we wisely and gently present the Person and the work of Jesus Christ, many people will find Him irresistible.

(1) From "Theology of Culture" by Paul Tillich, edited by Robert C. Kimball, © 1959 Oxford University Press, Inc., New York, New York. (2) Hebrews 12:2, KJV. (3) Matthew 27:46, NIV. (4) Isaiah 59:2. (5) 2 Corinthians 5:21. (6) Galatians 3:13. (7) 2 Corinthians 5:18. (8) Ephesians 2:13, 18. (9) Ephesians 2:13. (10) Cf. John 8:46. (11) Luke 23:4, KJV. (12) Luke 23:41, KJV. (13) Galatians 2:20, NIV. (14) Colossians 1:27, NIV. (15) 1 Corinthians 6:19. (16) John 14:19, KJV. Bible verses marked NIV are taken by permission from The Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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703/914-5602  
[www.cslewisinstitute.org](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org)

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