



Is Jesus Really the Only Way to God?

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Last year the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a major study on religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices in the United States. One of the significant findings was that 70 percent of all Americans believe that many religions can lead to eternal life, including 65 percent of all self-identifying Christians. Perhaps the most surprising finding of the study was that 56 percent of all evangelical Christians believe that there are many paths, other than faith in Christ, to God and eternal life. (See <http://pewforum.org>.)

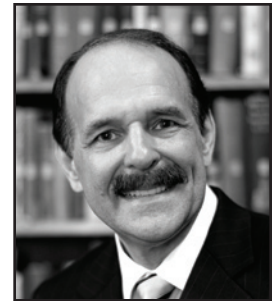
Many were so shocked by these numbers that the Pew Forum went back and did further polling to make sure that by the word “religion” respondents did not have in mind other Christian bodies or denominations. Their earlier results were essentially confirmed.

In this most recent study, large numbers of Americans believe that actions or a combination of beliefs and actions can lead people to God. Even among the 30 percent of Americans who say that eternal life depends on one’s belief, nearly half designate belief in God, a higher power, or other generic beliefs as sufficient for salvation. Among evangelical Christians, only 45 percent clearly affirm that a personal belief in or relationship with Christ is essential for eternal life.

Increasing numbers of Americans, Christians, and even evangelicals are questioning the long-held commitment of the Church that salvation is found only in Jesus Christ. Among all Americans who are affiliated with a religion, 52 percent believe that Islam leads to eternal life with God, 53 percent believe that Hinduism leads to God, and 42 percent even believe that atheism leads to God. Among evangelicals, the numbers are 35 percent, 33 percent, and 26 percent, respectively. Clearly in recent years in the midst of growing cultural and religious pluralism

large numbers of Christians are troubled by or ignore the claim of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6).

What are we to make of all this? Is Jesus really the only way to God? In a pluralistic world, why shouldn’t we accept an inclusivity that embraces multiple ways to salvation? Isn’t it arrogant to believe otherwise?



Dennis Hollinger

Our Pluralistic Context

The perspective that there are many ways to God is essentially one variant of universalism, the belief that ultimately all humans will be embraced by God and experience eternal life. To be sure it is an old belief that was occasionally found early on in Christianity. In the third century the theologian Origen contended that in the end God would restore the whole of creation, including Satan, to a perfect state. This meant that people who never trusted Christ would be saved. Origen’s beliefs were condemned by a Church council in the fifth century.

Over the years and in our own time there have been many arguments for a universalism or at least a religious pluralism that questions the uniqueness of Christ for salvation. Some argue that it is arrogant and triumphalistic to believe that any one way is essential for salvation. Others contend that surely God is a God of love and mercy who will accept people into his presence who don’t believe in Christ. The mercy of God trumps all other characteristics of God.

Some contend that all religions are essentially the same, simply using different names for the divine and different emphases in following the divine path. Still others attempt to articulate a religious pluralism or universalism on biblical grounds, citing texts such as Colossians 1:18-19, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Christ], 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," or Romans 11:32, "For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all."

But perhaps the most significant factor for the growing belief in many paths to God is the pluralism of our social context. By pluralism I don't mean merely the existence of multiple nationalities, races, ethnic groups, or religions in a society. More fundamentally, pluralism means that varying worldviews, belief systems, and moral frameworks exist side by side in a given culture.

With pluralism we now rub shoulders daily with people who put their world together in vastly different ways. There are varying perceptions of God, the good life, salvation, and human nature. There are varying ways of life reflecting these worldview assumptions. As we daily live with a plethora of worldviews, we experience these folks to be exceptionally fine people, who often reflect integrity, high morals, and outstanding contributions to our communities. For a democracy to work, we recognize that these multiple frameworks all need to have a voice in the public square, and all religious and moral frameworks need to be assured of essential rights under the law.

In the milieu of social and legal pluralism, it is quite easy to glide into a religious pluralism that questions the uniqueness or truth claims of Christian faith. When we experience people of other religions as good, moral people it becomes increasingly difficult to entertain any notions other than multiple paths to God and salvation. When we encounter the plurality of the public square, it becomes almost second nature to believe that such plurality must exist with regard to truth and paths to eternal life. Moreover, when we look around us, many who are exclusive in their beliefs often appear to be arrogant and intolerant. Religious pluralists appear to be kind, accepting, and exhibiting a tolerance needed for a pluralistic world.

The reality of this sociocultural pluralism makes it difficult to maintain a belief in and commitment to Christ as the only way to God. Our context of multiplicity tends to undermine the long-held belief that salvation is found only in Jesus.

How Do We Respond?

Given the contexts of our time, what do we do with the question, "Is Jesus really the only way to God?"

As we respond to this question we need first of all to note that Jesus thought himself to be unique and the only way to a personal relationship with God. In Jesus' teachings he made very direct claims about himself and his work that clearly reveal his own identity:

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.... Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Mt. 11:27-28).

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this; to believe in the one he has sent" (Jn. 6:29).

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.... My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day (Jn. 6:35, 40).

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (Jn. 8:12).

I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die (Jn. 11:25-26).

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well (Jn. 14:6-7a).

Such statements may not sit well with a postmodern mindset that is squeamish about the whole idea of truth, and particularly any claims to truth. As C.S. Lewis once pointed out, many are willing to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but not his unique claims to be God. Lewis responded with these memorable words:

That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God (Mere Christianity, p. 41).

Not only did Jesus himself believe that he was the only way to God, being one with God the Father, the early followers and apostles believed the same. Peter, in one of his early sermons said, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The apostle Paul had hated Christians before he became one himself. After his conversion he spoke frequently about Christ with clear conviction that he was the only way to salvation. Speaking of Jesus he said, "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10, 11).

In similar fashion the apostle John wrote, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah is born of God.... God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 Jn. 5:1, 11-12).

Since the days of the apostles, the historic Christian Church affirmed the uniqueness of Christ in his identity and in his role as the only savior for human sin. There has, of course, been substantial variation with regard to particular doctrines among the various families and denominations of Christianity. But Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism have historically been in agreement that salvation is found in no other than the person of Christ. The recent trends are contrary to those convictions.

Conclusion

The growing number of Christians who are troubled by Jesus' claims to be the single course of salvation indicates how much the world has come to live in us as we attempt to live in the world. We easily allow the push and pull of our culture to define our beliefs, commitments, and way of life, even while giving lip service to the name of Jesus. Perhaps the Pew Forum poll will be a wake-up call as to how much Christians have allowed the world to shape their sentiments.

Affirming the uniqueness of Christ for salvation and eternal life does not, of course, answer all our questions. There is much that God has not told us about the mysteries of life, death, and eternity. We naturally wonder what happens to those who never have an opportunity to embrace Christ. To such quandaries we must simply trust in a Savior who is both loving and just, and whose understandings are far beyond ours. We must acknowledge that from Scripture we know relatively little about heaven and hell. What we do know is that

Jesus, the apostles, and the historic Church in all its variations have affirmed that Jesus is the only true way to God. And it only makes sense that if a person didn't want Jesus as Savior and Lord on this earth, they would hardly want to spend eternity with Him.

To affirm the uniqueness of Christ for salvation is not cause for arrogance and boasting. In fact scripturally it is exactly the opposite. Our salvation has nothing to do with our attainments, efforts, and native beliefs. In salvation we do not find God through our own ingenuity. Rather, God finds us as we respond to his loving mercy in Christ as evidenced on the cross. The embrace of Christ as savior and Lord can never be touted as cause for human triumph, smugness, or self-assertion. It is not a sign of our superiority, or cause for triumphalistic efforts in society.

The uniqueness of Christ is a sign that the triune God of the universe cares so deeply for his wayward creatures that he mercifully provided a path to forgiveness, a way to the Father's embrace. It is in the Father's embrace through Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, that we come to realize that we can never pull the Triune God apart. For indeed to know Christ is to know the Father, and to know the Father is to know the Spirit, who enables us to stay true to the One Savior in the midst of a pluralistic world.

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