

# ROADS TO NOWHERE – DON'T ALL RELIGIONS LEAD TO GOD?

Read – John 14 v 6

'I am the Way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'

This is the Christian position; this is the answer that Christ gave Thomas. The only way to God is through His Son the Lord Jesus. Today it is considered arrogant & bigoted to believe this to be true. I still remember a former work colleague asking me whether I believed that only Christianity is true and hence all other religions to be false & the red colour his cheeks went & the near steam coming out of his ears as I said yes & he tried to remain calm.

I know he was dying to stand up and shout at me 'How dare you say such a thing? How could you possibly be so arrogant as to think your religion has all the answers? Thankfully he was far too polite to shout and swear or punch me.

So now you know what I believe & what the Christian religion teaches. We could all go and have a cup of coffee now & go home, but if there are any doubters out there, any who disagree with me, or even anyone who has a different faith from the Christian one or even no faith at all then more needs to be said.

Are we Christians just bigoted and arrogant or are there reasons to believe that what I have said is true? However before I go on I must apologise if I have upset anyone. This is not my purpose, but I feel I would be a liar if I were to say anything different to what I have said so far. It is why I gave up atheism 34 years ago & became a believer & why I am an Elder of this church today. I could not hold my head up in public if I taught anything other than Jesus is the only road to God the Father.

So why do I believe this? Well as with the question of suffering that Andrew Carter looked at last week it is not a question with an easy pat answer. However that does not mean that there are no answers that we can find.

But the first question that I wish to look at is 'does it matter what you believe as long as you are sincere?'

This is a question that is normally raised by someone discussing religion who has not really thought through what they are saying. Do any of us really think that what we believe doesn't matter & it's perfectly ok to believe anything if we are sincere about it. I really don't think so & that goes for atheists as well as religious advocates.

Does it matter what politics we have? It matters to a Tory if you vote Labour & visa versa. Would it matter to you if an extreme left or right wing party came to power in Great Britain?

Does it matter that 'Fred the Shred' and others thought it ok to risk billions of pounds of the banks money in risky lending & in so doing risk the existence of their banks & the very stability of our economy?

For centuries people sincerely believed that trees contained gods, or that thunder was the gods at war. Does it matter that this was just superstition, that there was no evidence for what they believed?

And for centuries people sincerely believed that the sun went round the earth in the mistaken belief that this model of our solar system was in some way more Christian than the reality-nonsense

And a group of Muslim fanatics believed in their cause so sincerely that they were willing to crash airplanes into the twin towers of The World Trade Centre & kill thousands of people in the event forever remembered as 9/11.

Of course it matters what we believe? Being sincere in our beliefs is not enough, we can be sincerely wrong. I might believe that eating a full English breakfast every day to be the best way to lose weight, but unfortunately I would be wrong. I might believe that Great Britain is joined to Europe by a land bridge, but I would be wrong. I might believe that I am the intellectual equal of Einstein, but I would be wrong. Blind belief is just that – blind, and leads you nowhere.

I really do think that most people believe that it matters what they believe, but why then do some people say that it doesn't matter what religion you believe in as long as you are sincere, when the subject of religion comes up? What is different about religion?

Well perhaps they don't want to talk about religion. A long time ago a new colleague at work told me that we would get on fine as long as we didn't talk about religion or politics. That actually doesn't leave you much to talk about if you think about it carefully, but I don't think she had, that was the problem. Or may be she thought that these topics were such hot potatoes in peoples minds that we were bound to fall out if we discussed them. But that assumed we would differ in our politics which she would not know.

Others may make the claim because they have never seriously thought about it. They are not religious & in their minds there are only two sorts of people, the religious & the non religious with those who are unsure hovering between the two. If they know nothing about the world's religions then it is easier to make the mistake that they are all basically the same. Believe you me they are not & you would not be on the Christmas card list of either a Muslim or a Hindu if you told them that their religions are the same.

Others may have thought about religion, but because of the many mainline religions & the myriad smaller religions & cults that this meant that there can never be any certainty in this

topic. Why are you right & all the others wrong? It is a lot easier to assume that it doesn't really matter what you believe, but as we have already seen it does.

Or perhaps there is something more fundamental here. Taking up a religion is not like supporting a football team. The ex Liverpool manager Bill Shankley once famously said 'Some people think football is a matter of life & death, I assure you it is much more important than that.'

I don't think he really believed that & as an avid football fan of 50 years I can tell you that I do not. However I do believe that religion does involve life & death issues, issues that we cannot avoid. However I think that many people do try to avoid them. It is not nice to contemplate your own demise, much easier & nicer to think about your own personal peace & affluence in the here and now.

Where does this leave us? Well you may believe sincerely that it doesn't matter which religion you have. You may sincerely believe that it doesn't matter if you have no religion. You may sincerely believe that Jesus Christ was a good man & an example to us all, or you might sincerely believe that the moon is in fact a giant poached egg. The simple fact is that sincerity by itself although important is not enough.

We would never apply that argument in any other area of life so why apply it to something as important as our religion.

The next question that I want to look at is 'Aren't all religions much the same?'

Now one of the buzz words of today is 'globalisation.' You will hear this regularly on the news & any serious political programme. This week you may have heard about anti globalisation protestors at the G20 summit in London.

What is globalisation? Well one way to look at it is the realisation that the modern world is like a global village & what happens to part of it affects the whole. We see this in the global downturn caused in part by greedy banks not only in the USA, but also in Great Britain & other countries. This has reached around the whole world & even nations like Australia which are normally recession proof are succumbing.

We also see it in the effects of climate change that largely has been caused by the west, but so far felt the worst in developing nations.

Others see globalisation as a capitalist threat where the really big companies in the west seek new markets in developing nations to sell their goods & in so doing march over those cultures & their way of doing things so they can achieve their goal of one huge capitalist market selling the same goods. They need to create markets in developing nations before they can sell them anything.

But however you view globalisation one of the by products of history, politics and the global nature of the modern world is the fact that we as a nation see many peoples from other nations, cultures & religions in our land. One of my friends at work is a Muslim & until last August we had a Hindu working with us. Rightly all those born in our land have British citizenship, but many from other ethnic origins worship in Mosques, or Temples or Synagogues, places that the average white Caucasian knows nothing or very little about. Thanks to the secularisation of our society over the past half century the vast majority of our nation knows little or nothing about what Christianity is & stands for either, so it is not surprising when all religions get lumped together under the same heading.

This can be a very attractive idea. Religion is rightly seen as the cause of many squabbles around the world and has been since creation began. But before secularists get all smug I have to point out that tens of millions of people have been killed in the last one hundred years in the name of atheistic political causes. However that does not excuse the various religions for the wars that they have caused. It just means that religion is not the cause of wars any more than secularism is. There is something deeper in our natures that is at fault. Of course Christians would understand what this is & call it sin, but this is not what we are talking about at the moment.

What I am trying to point out at the moment is that for those outside any of the mainline religions it is easy to just dump all religions together. If you do not believe that any of the religions are true then surely they are a much of a muchness.

In the west we have a legacy of Christianity that still exists in the minds of many people. For them the non existent God that religions believe in must be like the Christian God because that is the only sort of God they have heard of. So Hindu's must believe in a God that is not unlike the Christian God, and Buddhists the same. Don't all religions worship the same God, but differently they say? They are wrong as we shall see.

Another buzz word in our society is tolerance & indeed this is a very attractive virtue. And I would agree totally that all of us ought to have the right to believe in whatever religion we decide upon or none if we wish to.

Many people have noted that the mainline religions share a lot of moral or ethical convictions. Because of the actions of a few terrorists many people think of Islam as the father of killers, but devout Muslims can be very moral people. In fact part of the animosity between Muslim countries & the nations of the west is that they see us as having no morals.

Hindu's, Muslims, Buddhists & Christians all are generally peace loving & oppose rape, murder & theft. This general ethical agreement is further ammunition for those who say that all religions are basically the same.

In fact leaders such as Mahatma Ghandi once said 'The soul of religion is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms.' But then he would as he was a Hindu.

So are all religions the same? The answer has to be a resounding no. In fact it only takes a cursory look at the beliefs of the various religions to see that they are quite different. Having said that there is similarity with Christianity, Judaism, and Islam on one hand, and Hinduism & Buddhism on the other. But go into each religion a little & you will see why I say they are different.

So how do you go about comparing religions? Well to me the obvious way is to look at how they view God. The worship of God has to be the fundamental core of all religions you would think. However that is not always the case as we shall see.

To look at some of the eastern religions view of God you can do worse than look at the movie Star Wars. In this film there is an impersonal force behind all that there is & this force has a good side & a dark side. I remember when this film came out (showing my age) & I also remember some Christians touting it as a Christian film. However it was nothing of the sort (although I did enjoy it).

Christianity teaches of a personal God who has created and sustains the world we live in. He is not an impersonal force, but a God who can be known. But the Hindu god Brahman is a formless, abstract being who takes form in many lesser deities such as Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, & Lakshmi to name a very few.

Buddhism is different in that it denies the existence of a personal God. Its devotees do not believe in a final existence either. Your final destiny after many reincarnations is nirvana (for those who reach it) which as far as I can see means losing one's very existence.

As you can see Hinduism & Buddhism are vastly different to Christianity which teaches of a personal God who can be known & who offers eternal life with Him for those who want it, not deserve it.

Islam is a lot closer to Christianity & I remember being called into a discussion at work between my Muslim colleague that I mentioned earlier and another colleague who happens to be an atheist. My Muslim colleague had said that he worships that same God as Christians which my atheist colleague couldn't believe. They both know that I am a Christian so I was called in to resolve the debate.

This gave me a serious dilemma as I believe that the Muslim view of God to differ from that I have as a Christian. However I cannot deny that Mohammad did incorporate at least the first five books of the bible into the Koran & also that Arab Muslims think of Abraham as their ancestor. This means that Islam, Judaism & Christianity all share part of what we Christians call the Old Testament & hence all must worship the same God.

So if that is the case then why are there three religions instead of one? Well there ought to be just the one. God created the Hebrew people (from whom the Jews descend) to be His people & also to be a vehicle through which the Messiah, the Christ, the Saviour of the

world would come. We Christians look back to this Messiah, and see that Jesus was that man. If things had gone perfectly then the Jews would have accepted Jesus as their Saviour & Christianity would have superseded the Jewish faith. This was not because Christianity was right & Judaism wrong, but because Christianity is the fulfilment of the Jewish faith.

Unfortunately the majority of Jews rejected Christ, although the early church was totally Jewish never the less, & hence why Judaism still exists today. In reality there ought not to be two religions, but only one. The difference is that modern day Jews reject their own Messiah or Saviour.

Some people say that Christianity branched off the Jewish faith at the time of Christ. However this is not the case. It was Judaism that branched away from the true Judaeo-Christian faith at the time of Christ. In effect Christianity is what Judaism should have been.

So although Christianity & Judaism share many things they differ at the root. Central to Christianity is the person & work of Jesus Christ, & He is rejected by Jews.

Islam is the newest of the main religions. Its founder Mohammed was born in the Arabian city of Mecca in AD 570. In adulthood he spent most of his early years in solitary meditation & began to have disturbing visions. Once he believed that he heard the angel Gabriel giving the following command

‘Recite, in the name of the Lord who has created,  
Created man from clots of blood,  
Recite, seeing that the Lord is the most generous,  
Who has taught by the pen,  
Taught man what he did not know.’

The Arabic word for Recite is Quran & the sacred book of Islam the Quran is thus the reciting of revelations that Mohammed received in those disturbing visions whilst in self imposed solitary confinement. Out of interest the word Islam means ‘Submission’ and the word Muslim means ‘those who submit.’

Now although a good argument can be made for Muslims & Christians worshipping the same God there are very important differences in the view of what this God is like.

Christians believe that God is very complicated & reveals Himself to us as Father, Son & Holy Spirit as this is the best way that we can begin to comprehend Him. For Muslims God is Allah, distant & almost cold & unlike the Judaeo-Christian God Allah never reveals himself in person to humankind. The proper reaction to Allah’s will is Islam (submission).

Christians agree that God is way ahead & above us, but differ in that we believe that God came to earth in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ to show us what God is like in terms that we could understand.

Now we can debate the existence of God & just how different the religions view God if indeed they believe in one, but there is one area that Christianity differs from just about all other faiths & that is Salvation.

Christianity teaches that none of us can make ourselves acceptable to God. Our sinful natures are abhorrent to God, but by ourselves there is nothing that we can do about it. But most if not all other religions state that if a person keeps their teaching then they can be saved, fulfilled or reborn.

For Christianity Salvation comes through the Grace of God. It is the basic world view of Christianity that God wants to be in relationship with His creation & it is He that has to do something about our sinful natures that keep us apart from Him. That is why Jesus Christ had to die on the cross on the first Easter. He was taking the punishment for our sins, He was bridging the gap between man & God.

Now we have only had a very short look at a handful of the differences between the mainline religions. If you want to know more then many good books have been written on this subject & I would refer you to them. But what I want you to understand from this evening is that no-one can say 'aren't all the religions much the same.'

Now the next question that I wish to look at this evening is also the subtitle of this evening's talk 'Don't all religions lead to God.'

It is a question that many people have raised. They see that there are great differences between the religions of the world, but maintain that there is a God behind all the Gods that are worshipped and hence all religions must lead to God, the one true god that lies behind all religions.

Well there are many problems with this view. The first has to do with what do you call a religion. I have heard religion described as man seeking god, but as we have seen religions such as Buddhism have no god so do we cease to call Buddhism a religion?

Then there are the various occult religions such as animism, witchcraft, some New Age elements, African witchdoctors, Mongolian Shaman etc who could be said to worship spirits rather than a god. Are these not religions then?

Then there are the political gods such as the worship of the Pharaohs in Ancient Egypt, the worship of Caesar in Rome through Hitler, Mao, Stalin and the emperors of Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But these are not gods you say, but neither can you deny that they were worshipped as gods & projected themselves as godlike.

Marxism itself although passionately atheistic was religious to a tee. An illustrious founder, a sacred book, high ideals, clear convictions about what was wrong with the world, and adherents who would die for the cause.

Indeed it is difficult to distinguish what is a religion & what is not. Even if you could make this distinction with ease then the teachings of the religions themselves would preclude many from being paths to God, as they do not have a belief in God per say or do not make such a claim for themselves.

So with ease we can remove all the small religions that worship small localised spirits plus religions such as Buddhism that have no God.

Hinduism is a little more complex as it does have a god, but a formless abstract god Brahman & millions of smaller gods of which you & me are examples. In effect Hinduism doesn't claim to be a way to God, because it is an all encompassing belief that everything is god or a dream of god.

In fact there are only two religions that teach that God is both a separate entity from His creation & can be personally known by the believer which rules out Islam. These two are Judaism & Christianity.

As we have seen already modern Judaism is a branch off the Judaeo-Christian tree. The worship of the modern devout Jew is much different to that in the Old Testament. There is no ark of the covenant, no priesthood, no sacrifices, no tabernacle & no temple. Modern Judaism is religious law, morality and synagogue worship.

Of course none of this rules out Judaism from being a road to God. The only thing that can do that is Christianity. If Christianity is true then Jesus was the Jewish Messiah & Jews were wrong to reject Him.

At long last we have come to the crux of the matter. Was Jesus right to say 'I am the Way and the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'

How can we possibly know whether Jesus' words were truth & not just words? Well we have to look at the evidence.

Now people discount the reliability of the gospels because they were written by Jesus' followers & hence open to poetic licence. The problem with that argument is that the gospels were all open to scrutiny by people who knew what had happened. They were not just a series of sayings of Jesus, but based on events that happened largely in public & hence easily disproven if they were false.

So if Jesus never did any miracles & the wedding in Cana never saw water being turned into wine then why did none of the other guests refute this. Miracles of healing & raising from

the dead done in public & not refuted is evidence that they happened & that Jesus was who He claimed to be – God on earth.

But the main proof that Christianity is true has nothing to do with the miracles of Jesus except one & that is His Resurrection. The whole of the Christian faith hinges on whether this improbable event actually took place.

A lot of you will remember a book called 'Who Moved the Stone' by Frank Morrison. As an atheist Morrison set out to disprove the Resurrection of Christ once & for all. However he made the mistake of actually looking at the evidence. What he discovered changed his life & he became a Christian & the book was re written to prove the resurrection.

We do not have time to look at the reasons why we ought to accept the Resurrection of Christ. I will leave that to those who next week will bring us our Easter Services. Do come along to these.

I will finish by stating that if the Resurrection of Christ really happened then Christianity is true, and is the only road to God. All other roads are therefore roads to nowhere.

Let us close by singing 'Surely our God is the God of gods' It is not in Mission praise.