

Christianity and Other Faiths

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, [£] you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

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Today, more than any other time in our lives, we realize that Christianity shares the world stage with other faiths.

We see Muslim mosques

We may have a Sik doctor

Or a Hindu teacher.

Go to Barnes and Nobel’s and you will see interesting titles about spirituality by people of many different faiths.

What is the relationship of Christianity to other faiths?

And how should Christians approach people of other faiths?

Princeton University researcher, Robert Wuthnow, identifies three current types of response to the presence of other faiths.

Spiritual Shoppers – take a smorgasbord approach

- a bit of this
- little of that
- Jesus a great moral teacher
- Other great moral teachers

Christian Inclusivists – Christian but include other religions

- Christianity is their primary source for their faith journey
- Jesus is the way, the truth and the life
- But they value and respect other faith traditions

Christian Exclusivists – Christian and exclude other religions

- Jesus is the ONLY way
- 1 woman whose best friend is Jewish cried when she said, “I love her dearly; I’m so sad for her.”
- She believes that the woman is missing the joy of fellowship with Jesus and that the woman is eternally damned without Jesus

If you feel some internal conflict about this, you are not alone.

Our faith says clearly that the rock of the Christian faith, the one who secures our forgiveness, who claims us as his own, who gives us the power of his Spirit, who promises to be with us always and come for us to take us to the place prepared for us is Jesus of Nazareth.

This is not just our thinking; it is the legacy of faith we have inherited and the faith attested to in Scripture:

Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth and the light. No one comes to the Father but by me.”¹

Peter preached to the elders and scribes in Jerusalem, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”²

Paul wrote to the Romans, “...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”³

And the promise of Pentecost is that, “...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”⁴

Whatever religion can do for a person, it happens - Christians believe - through Jesus.

The internal conflict comes because we also believe that our Christianity has not always been Christian.

¹ John 14:6

² Acts 4:12

³ Romans 10:9

⁴ Acts 2:21

Some of our faith kin killed people of other faiths in the name of Jesus – the crusades would be one example.

For most of us, however, the matter is more personal.

There are people of other faiths that we know, respect, and perhaps love.

Dr. Singh was the biology professor at my college. He was a Sik. And while he looked differently and dressed differently; he was a man of integrity and I respected him.

Few of us want to be in a position of saying “believe as I do or you will be eternally damned.”

So what is the relationship of Christianity to other faiths? And how should Christians treat non-Christians?

Some would say that the scripture from today tells us that all that is important is to love others.

Whether you realize it or not, that position diminishes Jesus and violates what Jesus taught.

Jesus’ name did not mean “teacher”; it means “savior”. He was not described as “great example” but as Emmanuel, “God with us”.

Similarly, he identified himself with the “Son of man” a technical term referring to the one who initiates God’s new kingdom.

Jesus taught that he is the coming judge and that it is peoples’ relationship to Jesus that determines whether they will be SHEEP – beloved who enter the eternal kingdom, or GOATS – those who are cast out of God’s presence.

We cannot diminish Jesus to make room for other faiths. For in doing that, we do not believe in the Jesus attested to in Scripture.

But there is a twist in this story.

What matters to Jesus is not a public confession of faith, not Biblical doctrine held dear in one’s heart.

I believe that each of these is vitally significant for people and essential to lives of faith..but on the question of eternal destination, what matters to Jesus are humble, merciful acts of compassion towards others.

But even here, it is really love for Jesus that counts.

Jesus not only took on human form, he so identifies with humanity that a good deed done for one person in need is a deed done to Jesus.

What this means is that we hold fast to Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, but we leave the door open to ways that a person might approach Jesus..or, perhaps more correctly, ways that Jesus may enter a person's heart.

This is the position of our catechism – our official teaching.

Put in question and answer form:

Question: *How will God deal with the followers of other religions?*

Answer: *God has made salvation available to all human beings through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. How God will deal with those who do not know or follow Christ, but who follow another tradition, we cannot finally say. We can say, however, that God is gracious and merciful, and that God will not deal with people in any other way than we see in Jesus Christ, who came as the savior of the world?*

This was also the position of John Calvin who once remarked that Christians ought to pray for all “who dwell on earth. For what God has determined concerning them is beyond our knowing except that it is no less godly than humane to wish and hope the best for them”.⁵

This means that we are left in partial mystery: salvation is through Jesus Christ alone, but we may not know all the ways by which Jesus may save.

So in relating to other religions, Christianity does not minimize its core beliefs and neither does it presume to judge peoples of other faiths as eternally damned.

One group working intentionally on interactions of people from different faiths is United Religions Initiative. Their aim is to gather people of different faith traditions, work together, learn what they believe and why.

In such a context the comment has been, we don't want tolerance, we want understanding.

This leads us to how we relate to people of other faiths.

Our text from Matthew provides our guidance:

Humility
Kindness
Compassion
are the ways of the sheep.

Our churches teaching on this is exceptional. I want to quote it fully.

Question: *How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?*

⁵ Quoted in William C. Placher, Essentials of Christian Theology, p. 302

Answer: As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me.

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In a world where religious diversity is moving into our neighborhoods, we are not called to mask our God or to diminish Jesus. Rather, we reveal our God and give witness to Jesus by welcoming and accepting others in the way that the Lord has welcomed and accepted us.

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