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CHRISTIANITY AND WORLD RELIGIONS. . .

HOW SHOULD WE REGARD OTHER RELIGIONS: JUDAISM

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~ Scripture: Acts 17:16-31 & I Peter 3:15 ~

INTRODUCTION

We live in a pluralistic world and society. It used to be the difference between denominations that was such a big deal. Now it's the difference between religions with their diverse and conflicting viewpoints on many different aspects of human experience. What brings this home is the increasing number of followers of non-Christian religions living all around us. The Ann Arbor area is certainly one of the most cosmopolitan regions in the country. It is no longer unusual to see Islamic mosques or Buddhist / Hindu worship centers. People often ask.

I. AREN'T ALL THESE RELIGIONS THE SAME? WON'T THEY ALL LEAD TO GOD?

Could you draw a WHEEL with many spokes and say they all lead to the center == GOD?

Remember the question I opened with: Are all foods / soft drinks / restaurants the same? NO!

Wouldn't it be nice if every belief system was the same? None was any "better" than any other?

- ILLUSTRATION> Wouldn't it be nice if in the TV quiz show *Deal or No Deal* behind every card was \$1 million? Choose any card you like, it's automatically \$1 million. Choose any religion, it's automatically the "right" one.

Not all religions are trying to lead us to God:

- There's BUDDHISM that does not believe there is any God at all.
- There's ISLAM that makes him so far removed. As one writer puts it: "*Allah reveals his message (will). He never reveals himself (heart).*"
- There's HINDUISM that leads to extinction after many incarnations.

How can all religions lead to God when their agendas are all so different. The goal in:

- Ascetic Religions (e.g.: Buddhism / some strands of Hinduism) is self-renunciation—the elimination of desire, of all that makes us human.
- Self-Help Religions (e.g.: Christian Science / Scientology) is self-improvement, not connection with God.
- Legalistic Religions (e.g.: Islam & Judaism) is self-discipline through strict adherence to the Law of God and/or a moral code.

The differences between religions are pretty fundamental. The truth of the WHEEL DIAGRAM is that the spokes are headed in different directions (out & away from the center) rather than toward one common center. So, which one is right? If Christians make up about 1/3 of the world's population (and a large % of them are "nominal").

II. HOW CAN YOU SAY JESUS THE ONLY WAY?

It's not about which religion is right, but about WHO gives life. Nobody cares as much for you! Let me put

it to you this way: *no one else is coming for you!* That's a harsh but true fact of reality. No other God loves you so passionately. . .pursues you with such dogged determination. . .longs to forgive you and heal your brokenness.

I John 4:9-10 — *“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

I John 4:13-16 — *“We know that we live in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.*

That's how God has shown His love (i.e.: by sending His Son). But how can Jesus be the only way? Perhaps we should be grateful there is a Way. . .that He loves us enough to sacrifice Himself on our behalf. Check out every other religion. See if there's a God who is pursuing you. . .giving you the freedom to choose Him or not.

Is there a difference between religions? You bet there is! Most other religions are either:

- Fatalistic == There's nothing you can do. You can't know. . .you have no influence. . . whatever will be, will be. God (if there is one) is impersonal.
- Legalistic == Here's what you have to do. You work to obey / strive / try to live up to expectations. God (again, if there is one) is aloof.

Jesus says: *“Follow me, trust me, receive my love—NOT so you'll be right OR avoid hell OR even go to heaven. . .BUT because I want you to experience life as only I can give it.”*

III. WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO'VE NEVER HEARD. . .OR ARE FOLLOWING ANOTHER RELIGION?

The Scriptures say that God is continuously speaking with everyone. . .yes, everyone. HOW?

A. CREATION

Romans 1:20 says: *“For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”*

The whole created universe bears witness to the One who made it. God is communicating to all 6.2 billion people in the world all at once. [Check out the lyrics to Chris Tomlin's song *Indescribable*.]

B. CONSCIENCE

God has placed a revelation of himself inside of us—in our consciences. It may seem buried. But, it's in everybody—not just Christians, but Atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews—everybody.

Romans 2:14-15 says: *“Even Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, show that they know His law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right.”* [NLT]

Like it or not, all of us have that “voice” inside us. God is constantly working through our mind-set, our thoughts, etc. to woo us to Him. You know when you've violated the unique image of God in your soul; you know it down deep inside. That's the voice of God Himself speaking through our conscience.

C. THE HOLY SPIRIT

Just before He was crucified, Jesus announced that *“the Counselor (Holy Spirit) would come to you. . . and that He would convict the world. . .He will guide you into all truth.”* [John 15:7,8,13]

So, the Holy Spirit would be at work in the world, bringing both comfort and conviction.

Whether you know God or not, believe or not, follow Christ or not:

- There are times when you need comfort.
- There are times when you need confrontation (because you are violating what you know to be right and what it means to be human). And God's Spirit is saying, "*You were not created to live like this.*"

D. FINALLY, GOD REVEALS HIMSELF THROUGH CONTACT WITH OTHERS

Romans 10:14 says: "*How, then, can (anyone) call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*"

That's where we come in. Missions and Evangelism figure in—big time. They give "face" and "voice" to God in the world today. In every way we can, every time we get a chance, we should declare the incredible news about who God is and what He has done in Jesus Christ.

Well, what about the people in India (or wherever)?

When people ask that, I always wonder why the sudden interest in that land. Well, truth is, God is passionate about India, about Africa, about East Asia. . . about all parts of the world. He wants to bring us to Himself so we really will care deeply about them (as He does).

There's a beautiful picture of how God strategically works in history found in **Acts 17**. Paul is in Athens. It says in **v. 16** that "*he was greatly distressed to see the city so full of idols.*" Here he was, confronted by the world's religions; they were all right there in front of him. He started to preach about Jesus and the resurrection, and at first the philosophers didn't seem to understand. So they took him to a meeting of the Areopagus (i.e.: the council of elders of the city ≈ senate) and asked him to explain himself. We pick it up in **v. 22 → v. 26**:

^{22b}"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."

Did you get that last line? The Creator God has chosen the exact time, place where every single person can optimally hear and respond to Him.

- If you were born in Illinois, it's because God chose that for you. [Sorry] ☹
- If you were born into an abusive home, it's because God had something in mind.
- If you were born into wealth or poverty, it's because God could use that in some kind of way to reach you.
- If someone is born in China or Afghanistan or South America, there was a reason.

It's not because He loves people in Colorado (with all those beautiful mountains) more than Kansas (which is flat). It doesn't matter! Wherever you were born, it's His desire that "*men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'*" [vv. 27-28a]

What he's saying is, "*LOOK, there are evidences of God all around you. Even in the middle of all these*

false gods, these religions that are leading you astray, there's a statue to "the unknown God" because your soul knows there is more than this."

"That's why I'm here—to connect the dots. I'm here to help you see God who's always been here. He's been invisible to you, but the evidence is all over the place.

God created us all and placed us in ATHENS / JERUSALEM / ISTANBUL / HONG KONG / SINGAPORE / LA / CHICAGO / DETROIT / ANN ARBOR / DEXTER. He's given us a strategic time & place so we'll have optimal opportunity to come to Him. It's hard to believe that a person might have a better chance of finding God as a Muslim or Hindu rather than as a Presbyterian or a Baptist. But from what I've seen, many in the church spurn the opportunity, so that the foreigner who's grown up in a different culture with a different religion may actually be closer in their journey to finding Christ as "the Way".

ILLUSTRATION> I read an exciting account this week of a person who grew up Jewish. . . followed New Age path awhile. . . never liked organized religion and never felt at home in a church or synagogue. But his business partner started sending him some Scriptures. . . sharing some cool Christian websites. It seemed every time he turned a corner and looked up there was a sign that said something like "*Jesus is the answer!*" His heart was hungry. . . he started to meditate, and what did he see but a cross (of all things). It seemed all signs were pointing to Jesus. But you know what tipped the scale? It was a conversation with a Buddhist healer. Then it all became clear—and he became a follower of Jesus.

People think only Christians can point the way. But God used everything and everyone in this man's life to bring him to Jesus. *Are you willing to be a link in a long chain that might lead to someone deciding to follow Jesus?*

CONCLUSION

What this Scripture teaches us is that all of creation is designed by God to pursue you with His love. You can reject it. . . you can say, "it's not for me".

When Jesus says He's the only Way, He's not trying to sound arrogant, narcissistic, or exclusive (e.g.: "*My way or the highway*"). He's telling you: "*I am the One who loves you. You'll never find anyone who will pursue like I am. I am willing to pay the price because I love you so and want to give you (real) life.*"

NOW, HOW DOES THAT PERTAIN TO JUDAISM?

I feel such a deep kinship with Judaism. Everything having to do with the Hebrew language and religion is deeply moving to me. I love the stories. . . the rituals (e.g.: I once went to a Bas Mitzva and was so impressed by a 13 year old girl chanting, reading and expounding Scripture in Hebrew) . . . the music. . . symbols (i.e.: every word means something).

- Our GOD is the same == He is One. . . the King of the universe. . . Creator of all things.
- Our SCRIPTURES are the same == 39 books of the Old Testament. The Torah is part of that. All those stories of the history of Israel are our stories.
- Our STANDARDS OF MORALITY are the same. The Judeo-Christian system of ethics is probably the greatest in the world.
- Our idea of COVENANT is the same. God uses unlikely people to accomplish His purposes (e.g.: Abraham, Moses, David. . . us).
- Our PASSOVER is the same. Just a different "LAMB", that's all. ☺

Right now in their history, the Jews seem to be out of favor with God. Or are they?

The Apostle Paul takes up that issue in **Romans 9-11**. You should take time to read and digest those 3 chapters. They are a "parenthesis" in the Epistle in which Paul deals with the question: *What about salvation for the Jews? What exactly is God's plan here?*

In **chapter 11**, he acknowledges up front that some of the branches have been broken off. . . and "a wild olive

shoot” (by which he means the Gentile Christians that make up the church) has been grafted in. He is quick to warn the Christ-followers: “*Don’t get haughty. Don’t get to feeling superior. The original branches (the ones ‘natural’ to the tree) can and one day will be grafted back into their own olive tree easily enough.*” [cf. vv. 17-24]

This has to do with whom God is using at this particular time in history to reach the world (i.e.: the Church). But the time is coming, says Paul, when “*. . .all Israel will be saved*” (v. 26). In the meantime, rest assured that “*God’s gifts and His call are irrevocable*” (v. 29). God will never do away with the people He originally chose to do His bidding.

It’s still all about a God who seeks a relationship with us. . . a God who never lets us go—even though we often turn away or do things that break the fellowship. *All of us like sheep have gone astray. All of us are ‘prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love’* (hymn). We make covenants and promises to the Lord (e.g.: when we’re in trouble or in need) → then in time, fall back into old ways. But God takes us back every time.

- Aren’t we like Israel (I mean the person Jacob whose name was changed to “Israel”): *We wrestle with God!*
- Aren’t we like Israel (the nation): *We keep breaking those covenants!*

Twila Paris, a contemporary Christian singer, sang a song back in the 80’s that says it all:

**Covenant maker, I made a start
Covenant breaker, I broke Your heart
Your word is deeper. . . Faithful and true
Covenant keeper, make me like You.**

**Covenant maker, You made a way
Infinite taker, I made You pay
But Your love was deeper. . . Faithful and true
Covenant keeper, make me like You.**