

“CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS (#1):  
QUESTIONS WE ASK”

(Matthew 2:1-2, 9b-11)

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**[PROPS NEEDED: “One Way” Video]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 1-23-11]

-I-

1. **[BOTH Services:]** Read Text (MSG at 9:30am; NRSV at 11am): Matthew 2:1-2, 9b-11 and Pray.

2. **[WATCH VIDEO “One Way”** (Time 1:46, from SermonSpice.com)]

A–So, what do you think? How many ways *are* there to God? Are they all really equal? Why are there so many? And why should we as Christians care in the first place?

B–Well, these are some of the questions we’ll be addressing over the next six weeks in a new series called Christianity and World Religions, in which we’ll be exploring what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the midst of today’s multi-religious world.

3. Before we begin, though, I need to share several disclaimers.

A– First *I don’t claim to be an “expert”* on world faiths at all – I did do extensive readings, research, and interviews to prepare for this series, but by no means do I know all there is to know about this subject matter (some of you may, in fact, know more than me!)

B–So secondly, *this will not be a comprehensive study.*

1–There are literally thousands of religions in the world, and I’m only going to be focusing on *five* that I believe are the most influential our American culture today: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

2–And even with these, I can’t delve very far in just 20-30 minutes, which is why my goal is not to teach us everything there is to know about these faiths, but merely to provide some “handles” for our discussions with people who practice them.

C–Finally, I need to acknowledge that no matter how hard we try, *there’s no way for us to be completely objective in a study like this.*

1–Like many of you, I’ve been a Christian most of my life, and so any study of other faiths is naturally going to be colored by the lens of our own faith and experience.

2–The best we can do is approach this topic with humility, openness, and a willingness to see truth *wherever* we may find it.

4. Now, we won’t actually begin exploring the different religions until next week. That’s because I want us to begin today first by addressing two common questions that I believe frame this entire subject, and then talk about three ways we Christians can view other religions in light of today’s scripture.

-II-

5. So the first question is: “***Why are there so many religions in the world in the first place?***”

A–You know, some people claim that the multitude of world religions is proof that there is no God at all, and that (as you heard someone say in the opening video) God is merely a *human* invention – the logic being here that if there *were* a God, He would’ve made Himself known through one, perfectly clear path of truth.

B–And yet, I would argue that, far from *disproving* God’s existence, the *variety* of religious expressions in our world actually shows that there *must be* a God.

1–Think about it: humans of every culture around the world have (since the beginning of recorded history) had religious thoughts, yearnings, questions and experiences.

2–Now, we don’t tend to have such desires for things that aren’t real, do we? No, we have hunger because there is such a thing as food that we need; We thirst because there is such a thing as water that we need.

3–And the fact that people around the globe throughout history have all sensed the need to explain and experience spiritual things tells me that there must be something divine that *does exist* and needs to be interacted with by us.

C–And what’s more is that as humans, we often give *different* explanations for common experiences.

1–For example, my wife and I might go see a movie together, but afterwards when we describe it to each other, I might think “*Did she see the same movie as me?*” – you see... one movie, explained two different ways

2–And if this is true for something as simple as a movie, then why should it surprise us that human beings in different places and times have come up with different solutions to the complex issues of religious questions, yearnings and experiences?

6. So this leads us to a second question for today: “***Why is it important to learn about these other faiths?***” I mean, if we’re content with our own Christianity, then *why bother* with these others? Isn’t it *unnecessary*, and maybe even a little *dangerous*? Let me share several reasons:

A–The first is a *practical reason*. Ours is a world divided by religion, which has been & continues to be one of the primary sources of conflict between people: Protestants vs. Catholics; Hindus vs. Muslims; Muslims vs. Christians/Jews.<sup>1</sup>

1–What’s more is that the influence of religion is *increasing* in our world today – some think science/technology has (or soon will) kill it, but in fact the opposite is happening: recent statistics show that the world’s major religions are growing at a rate *faster* than the global population, and that the majority of that growth has occurred since 1970 (meaning that religions’ influence is speeding up, *not* slowing down!)<sup>2</sup>

2–So my point is that the more we understand about the other religions, the better we’ll be able to understand and interpret our world and its people.

B—A second reason to study world religions is *so we can better understand and practice our own Christian faith* – far from being a threat, I believe that as we unpack these other faiths, we’ll discover things that actually deepen and enrich our *own* walk with God and others, and help us be better *Christians* (and I’ll highlight a few of these each week in this series).

C—A third reason to study world religions is *so we can better share our faith as Christians*.

1—Living in a densely populated urban area as we do here in Cobb County, chances are that you and I have at least one friend, neighbor, co-worker, or schoolmate who practices a religion different than Christianity.<sup>3</sup> And the Bible calls us to share our faith with them – it’s not an option.<sup>4</sup>

2— The problem has been in the *way* that we Christians have tended to share faith – in ways that are arrogant, disrespectful, hurtful, insulting and insensitive to the faith and beliefs of others.

3—And yet, when we take time to learn where others are coming from, we can build bridges of love and understanding that honor and respect the faith of others, while at the same time allowing the Holy Spirit to plant seeds in their lives through *respectful* conversation and dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

7. So, with all this in mind, let’s turn to three ways that Christians have viewed other faiths (and still do), and how today’s scripture illustrates the one that I think is most helpful.<sup>6</sup>

–III–

8. The first is a view often called **EXCLUSIVISM** – the belief that people of other faiths are doomed because they didn’t/don’t accept or believe in Jesus as the Savior of the world.

A—It’s a view championed by many famous leaders of Christian history (Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin),<sup>7</sup> and it’s still very popular among evangelical and conservative Christians today (some of you may hold this view).

B—Now, there are variations of this, such as exceptions that some make for people who lived before Jesus (like the ancient Jews), or who never had a chance to hear about him (like Native Americans before Columbus), or who’re not able to respond (like infants who die, or people with mental incapacities) – but hard-liners won’t even make these exceptions.

C—And yet, I would argue that this view is inconsistent with the way the Bible portrays both God and Jesus. Consider, for example, that there are over 6 billion people in the world today, and that only about 2 billion of them are Christian.

D—Well, doesn’t it seem odd that a God of grace and mercy – a God who the Bible says longs for the world to come to Him, and a Christ who the Bible says “*came to seek and save the lost*” (Luke 19:10) – would eternally punish 2/3 of the world’s population simply because they weren’t born in a predominantly Christian culture?<sup>8</sup>

9. Well, that's why some Christians espouse a second view called **UNIVERSALISM/PLURALISM**, which says that all religions are essentially the *same* – that they're each just different paths up the same mountain towards Ultimate Reality/God.<sup>9</sup>

A–As we saw in the opening video, this is probably the most popular view in today's society because it doesn't offend anyone – it's “politically correct” because it essentially says that everyone will be ultimately reconciled to God no matter what religion they practice.<sup>10</sup>

B–And yet, while there are certainly similarities among the various world faiths, if we examine them closely we find *vast* differences not only in their practices, but also in their very nature and goals (and I'll share many examples of this in the coming weeks).

C–In the meantime, it's sufficient to say (in the words of Stephen Prothero), “[The idea that all world religions are the same] *is a lovely sentiment, but it is dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue.... [It is]neither accurate nor ethically responsible.*”<sup>11</sup>

10. And that's why a third view – **INCLUSIVISM** – is sort of a bridge between these first two.

A–It says that the salvation of humanity *does*, in fact, come through Jesus Christ. But it also allows faith in Christ to transcend a mere acceptance of the *person* of Jesus, by saying that God's grace in Jesus can be credited to the sincere commitments of people of other faiths.

B–Like Abraham, whose faith the Bible says was “*reckoned... as righteousness*”(Galatians 3:6), this view says that God can (and often does) credit the sincerity of other religions in seeking God as genuine faith – not as *equal* to faith in Christ, but as at least some *form* of it.<sup>12</sup>

C–This is the view of Christian leaders like Justin Martyr, John Wesley, Billy Graham, and C.S. Lewis – and it's the official position of the Roman Catholic church and many mainline churches (including our own United Methodist Church).<sup>13</sup>

11. And this is also the view I think we find in today's scripture from Matthew 2.

A–Here we find the story of the Magi/Wise Men, who were most likely priests of the Zoroastrian religion – astrologers who believed God speaks primarily through signs in the heavens.

1–Now we have to remember that nowhere in Jewish scripture (what we Christians call the “Old Testament”) are we told to seek God through astrology.

2–And yet, in this story, the God of Abraham speaks to these priests of another faith *in their own religious language* by orchestrating a comet in the night sky (or the alignment of Saturn and Jupiter) just so these Zoroastrian Gentiles would pay attention.

B–In other words, it's a story that illustrates how God reached out to people who may not have been part of what some believed to be the “chosen religion,” but who *did* have a sincere yearning to find ultimate truth, and a willingness to follow wherever that led.<sup>14</sup>

12. Now, we'll see more of this in the coming weeks as we unpack each of the world religions.

A–But in the meantime, this story illustrates how God can and does work even through other religious faiths to bring about His purpose and will for our world.

B–And when we as Christians learn to honor and value the sincerity and devotion of those who practice these faiths, not only does it open the door to productive dialogue that fosters understanding and peace between people,...

C–...but it also builds bridges of faith that – like the Magi – can lead *any* wise person(s) to a place of joy where they can discover and worship God in new and profound ways.

13. [PRAYER: “*O God, as we learn about our neighbors and friends of other faiths, give us open minds and hearts to think in new ways about the broader human community, and about our mission, witness, service, and life together as followers of Jesus within your Church. May our dialogue help promote peace and harmony with persons of other religious traditions around us. May we not hide or avoid our differences, but seek to make them constructive. In every place we share our lives with each other, let us witness and be witnessed to – to invite others into your community of faith and be humble and loving enough to accept invitations into theirs. May our lives be enriched by the differences of others, so that a new sense of community may emerge, fostered by your love, and so that others may receive your gift in Christ, while we receive also the gifts which you have given to them. We pray this in the name of the one who came to bring all faiths to worship you – the name of Jesus, Amen.*”<sup>15</sup> ]

#### **ENDNOTES:**

1. For example, estimates are that nearly 50% of the civil wars fought since 2000 have been religious in nature [Jacob Neusner, Introduction to World Religions: Communities and Cultures (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. viii].

2. As Jacob Neusner has written, “*far from stamping out religion, modernization has spawned a new generation of organizationally sophisticated and technologically adept religious movements.*” He goes on to observe that religious influence seems to increase with democracy and democratization (which is opposite what some might think) [Jacob Neusner, Introduction to World Religions: Communities and Cultures (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. viii].

3. If not, just go the store or gym and observe the people around you – you’ll see people who’s very dress (such as a head covering) actually reveals that they practice a faith different from us. And the more of these people we really get to know, the harder it becomes to believe that they’re all going to hell simply because they don’t practice Christianity – this is especially true for our youth/young adults who’ve grown with multi-religious friends.

4. Read Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, and Acts 1:8.

5. This is why I believe the bumper-sticker “CoExist” (with the word made up of symbols of many other world religions) needs to be replaced with the words “Respectful Dialogue” – it’s not as catchy, but it more accurately represents what we need to be doing.

Pastor Adam Hamilton summarizes all of these reasons to learn about other faiths when he writes that “*It is essential that Christians seek to understand the faiths of others – to know how these faiths are similar to and different from [our] own faith – and to use that understanding to build bridges with others so that we might grow in our faith, seek peace in our world, love our neighbor, and find positive ways to share the gospel*” [Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling with Questions People Ask (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 12]. In another of his books, Hamilton also writes that “*When*

*Christians get it right, they show respect for people of other faiths. They listen to them, learn from them, and humbly share their faith with them. They look for points of contact and commonality.... and they offer reasons for their faith in Jesus Christ with gentleness and respect.*” [Adam Hamilton, When Christians Get It Wrong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), pp. 58].

6. These three views are shared generally in Adam Hamilton, When Christians Get It Wrong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), pp. 46-55; Read also Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling with Questions People Ask (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 22-27. These same three views (along with a fourth one) are also described with several primary source examples from Christian history in David R. Brockman and Ruben L.F. Habito, eds., The Gospel Among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology and Spirituality in a Multifaith World (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), pp. 32-36 and 54-135.

7. It was also espoused by theologians like Tertullians and Karl Barth. Read about all of these in David R. Brockman and Ruben L.F. Habito, eds., The Gospel Among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology and Spirituality in a Multifaith World (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), pp. 54-135.

8. Two scriptures that are commonly used to support this view are John 14:6 (“*no one comes to the Father except through me*”, referring to Jesus) and Acts 4:12 (“*There is no other name under heaven given by which we must be saved*”). A literal *surface* reading of both of these texts *does* indeed seem to support such a view. However, a closer inspection of this interpretation reveals that the context of these words do not necessarily refer to this view in its strictest sense.

For example, the context of the John passage is *not* a discourse from Jesus about the relationship between faith in Him and faith in other religions, but is in the context of an affirmation of his own Messiahship to his disciples – meaning that the application of this verse in relating to world religions was probably not what Jesus had in mind when he spoke it. What’s more is that the phrase “*through me*” does not necessarily have to mean (as exclusivists would argue) that people have to become Christians in order to be “saved,” but could simply mean that while the merits of Jesus Christ *are* essential for all persons to enter heaven, it is up to God to determine how to apply those merits as He chooses. As one scholar states about this passage, “*the most one can say about John 14:6 is that it affirms that Christ is essential to salvation; but it leaves ambiguous the precise way in which that salvation is effected*” [David R. Brockman and Ruben L.F. Habito, eds., The Gospel Among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology and Spirituality in a Multifaith World (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 50].

Referring to the Acts 4 passage, Brockman and Habito write “*while this passage certainly holds that Jesus Christ is necessary to salvation, it does not rule out the possibility that Christ may work behind the scenes through other religions... [It only states that] Christ – or more precisely, the ‘name’ of Christ, a more ambiguous concept – is necessary..... It does not specify precisely how Christ (or his name) is necessary*” (Brockman and Habito, The Gospel Among Religions, p. 50).

9. In the most popular metaphor for this view, in the “foothills” there are differences between the world’s many faiths, but as one ascends the trails converge towards one summit. Read about this metaphor in Stephen Prothero, God is Not One (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), p. 1.

10. It’s basically the same view that underlies the popular bumper-sticker that says the word “Co-Exist” made up of the symbols of many different world religions. It’s actually a relatively recent view of world faiths that’s been made popular only in the last 150 or so years by philosophers, writers, and even theologians such as Ernst Troeltsch, John Hick; Rosemary Radford Ruether; Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki [Read about each of their view in David R. Brockman and Ruben L.F. Habito, eds., The Gospel Among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology and Spirituality in a Multifaith World (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), pp. 54-135].

One critique I would make about this view is that it seems to remove the Biblical concept of human free will – according to this view, humans ultimately have no freedom to accept or reject God, but instead will all be reconciled to Him whether they want to be or not! Like many parts of the the exclusivist view, this too is inconsistent with the teachings of scripture.

11. Stephen Prothero, God is Not One (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), pp. 2-3. He goes on to say that “*pretending that the world’s religions are the same does not make our world safer. Like all forms of ignorance, it makes our world more dangerous*” (because we are glossing over the differences in these religions that cause the problems and misunderstandings in the first place) (Prothero, p. 4).

12. As Adam Hamilton explains this view, “*People of other religions may not understand or have knowledge of the gospel, but their service to God [in and through their own religion] is a demonstration of the fact that they do have faith*” (Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, p. 26).

13. Besides those I already named, other proponents of this view include Christian leaders like Clement of Alexandria, Karl Rahner, and John Stott. Read about these views in Adam Hamilton, When Christians Get It Wrong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), pp. 52-53. Also read primary source material of several of these in David R. Brockman and Ruben L.F. Habito, eds., The Gospel Among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology and Spirituality in a Multifaith World (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), pp. 54-135.

Some will ask how one reconciles John 14:6 (Jesus saying “no one comes to the Father except through me”) with this view. Within the context of its writing, “through” *doesn’t* mean through a literal holding of the *name* of Jesus, but through the *merits* of Christ which God can be applied/credited to *anyone* God desires to give it to – including, at times, people of other religious faiths (Read Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, pp. 31-32).

But another question would be asked of this view: “*If God can use other world religions to save people, then why should we Christians bother sharing our faith in Jesus?*” First, inclusivism does not believe that all religions are *equal*, nor that Christianity is needed merely to help people avoid hell. Instead, we’re called to share faith because we’re absolutely convinced that in Jesus Christ we see and understand the *fullness* God, and the *completeness* of who we are to be as humans. We share because we believe that in Jesus, we learn most fully about the nature and character of the love, mercy and grace of God, and because we want others to understand and experience this reality for themselves.

14. Exclusivists might argue that this scripture is instead proves the “superiority” of Christianity over other religions because (they would say), the Magi all came and bowed down to the baby Jesus (symbolically meaning that the Zoroastrian faith was “bowing down” to Christianity). But I and many others do not understand this scripture in that way. While it’s true that these priests recognized the truth of God in the form of Jesus, nowhere does in scripture does it tell us that they converted to Judaism as a result of this encounter, much less that they later became “Christians” in any way. One would assume that if the Bible were written to show the “correctness” of the exclusivist view, and either of these things had happened, God would have made sure the scripture writers knew these facts and included them somewhere. The fact that they didn’t leads us to conclude that such conversions either never happened or were not pertinent to the meaning of the story of the Magi. All this leaves us with is that these foreign astrologers experienced the reality of God in the form of the baby Jesus, even though they were led there by signs and language from their own religion.

15. Prayer written by Dr. Germano based on Resolution #3142, “*Called to be Neighbors and Witnesses,*” The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church: 2008 (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), pp 280-289.