

^{As}
Are All Religions Equally Good?

Facing the question, "Are All Religions Equally^{as} Good?", has been one of the most difficult tasks of my preaching ministry. In the liberal atmosphere of a great academic ~~center~~ one ought to strive for intellectual honesty and accuracy. Perhaps on few ~~other~~ questions would people cling to views ~~more~~^{as} tenaciously and variously. It is a dangerously loaded question. One approaches and seeks to handle it as though it were a stick of dynamite. Nonetheless it is an honest question and deserves an ~~straight-forward~~ answer.

In searching through some of the literature on this question I have discovered that it is pretty thin and scarce. It is, I believe, a question which most religious apologists would like to leave strictly alone. Most of us make huge assumptions about the validity of our particular religious point-of-view without ever raising it. As we think about ~~this~~^{it} this morning let us summon the intellectual courage to inquire if our religion is any better, or poorer, than someone else's.

I invite you, then, to pursue this question by taking the following steps:

-I-

Are all religions equally^{as} good? We can begin by admitting a simple truth: No. All religions are not equally^{as} good. Manifestly we are compelled to make a value judgment. Some religions are inferior to others.

Religions must be judged as cultures are judged. It would be absurd to claim that barbarians of the ancient past lived as well as civilized people. Obviously the law of the jungle is not as good as the orderly compound in which Dr. Schweitzer does his work in Africa. Likewise religions reflect ~~different~~ different levels of cultural and historical achievement and must be so judged. The religion which condones child sacrifice cannot possibly be equated with the religion which builds orphanages for the care of little children. A religion which places a supreme importance on animals can scarcely be judged as good as that religion which places the highest values on human beings. A religion which degrades and enslaves womanhood can hardly be compared with the religion which emphasizes the dignity and worth of women.

It needs to be pointed out that within any one religion there are various sects or denominations which must be differently judged. Certainly the component groups of

Christianity do not agree as to which is the best denomination. The Roman Catholic Church insists that it is the one true church and that it alone has the keys to the kingdom, but I don't ~~buy~~ ^{that}. Jehovah's Witnesses claim that they possess the only true knowledge of the Christian life, and I don't accept their claim either. I do not in fact believe that all Christian ~~denominations~~ ^{as} are equally ^{as} good. I think some are extremely bad interpretations of the gospel, and so do you.

The religious views expounded by different individuals are not equally ^{as} good. Reinhold Niebuhr and Norman Vincent Peale, for example, hold to radically different interpretations of the Christian gospel. I am frank to say that I personally ~~xxxxxx~~ judge Niebuhr's interpretation to be exceptionally profound and challenging where ^{as} Peale's interpretation is to me ~~incredibly shallow and unworthy~~ ^{incomplete and distorted}. I cannot even say "to each his own:" Pealism is ^{not} good enough for the Pealites and Niebuhrism is ^{Not} meant only for the Niebuhrites. Are all religions equally ^{as} good? Certainly not!

-II-

The next step is to assert that there is much we can learn from other religions. ~~xxxxxxx~~ We ought never to hold another religion in contempt. We ought never to dismiss it without seeking to understand it. We ought to ~~grant~~ to other religions the same respect and tolerance which we expect for our own.

Many of the non-Christian religions contain ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ profound and relevant insights which may enrich and ennoble us if we take them seriously. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam all have deep mines of truth. In both Hinduism and Buddhism there is an emphasis on spiritual inwardness which we Christians so often, and so sadly, lack. Judaism, of course, is so akin to our own religion that we can no more ~~xxxxx~~ understand Christianity apart from it than we can study the growth of trees without knowing the soil.

We Christians need to know that ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ there are far more ~~xx~~ non-Christians in the world than there are Christians. By no means is the world predominately Christian. Non-Christian religions are closely linked to the resurgent ~~xxxxxx~~ moods of nationalism which are stirring all over the earth. In many places in the world Christian missionaries are no longer welcome and in other places they now find themselves in stiff competition with the aroused advocates of other religious traditions. If we are going to understand what is happening to our world we must know more about these other religions. We can no longer brush them ~~xxx~~ aside with paternalistic disdain. They have

something to say to us and they insist on saying it.

Indeed one of the most vital ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ experiences many Christians are having now is a direct encounter with other religions. Americans are travelling all over the face of the globe and ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ a great many times lately people have shared with me their colored travel pictures showing the exquisite beauty of Buddhist temples and the solemn sight of a great throng of Moslems prostrating themselves in a city street. It is well that we see other people at worship and it is essential that we appreciate the values of their religions.

It is easy for you to dismiss another religion and say that it ~~xxxx~~ is inferior to your own, but how much do you know about it? Have you studied its origin, its creed, are you acquainted with the meaning of its symbolic acts? The other day one of my children came ~~from~~ home from meeting a young person from another part of the city who had some slanderous comments about ~~xxxxxxxx~~ one of the schools in our area. This ~~had~~ hurt because it was so ill-informed and ill-tempered. This young person was speaking only on the basis of hearsay, for she had never been near this school. She did, in fact, not know what she was talking about. She had no knowledge of some of the ~~very~~ outstanding and commendable features of our school. She spoke in ignorance. And in relation to other religions these days we cannot afford to be ignorant.

-III-

Now we ought to take another step to the place where we understand the position from which we ~~xxxxx~~ make judgments about other religions. It is just basic honesty to see that I judge them from within a life-long framework of Christianity. All of my life I have ~~xxxx~~ stood in the stream of the Christian faith. I have never been out of it and in a sense I can never escape from it. In judging other religions I am restricted by my life-long commitment to Christianity. The same is true of most of us.

When I declare that I believe that Christianity is the best of all religions I would possibly be more impressive and persuasive if I had come to earth from Mars to make a critical study of all religions. My choice of a religion then could be said to be more objective. But I did not choose to become a Christian in this way. I began life with a bias, ~~and I cannot deny it now.~~ My situation is somewhat like that of sportswriters who always pick the home team to win. Every Thursday during the football season a Columbus

writer ~~always~~ predicts the outcome of the week's games. Regardless of whom they are playing he invariably picks Ohio State ~~to win~~. He has been covering their games for so long he would perhaps feel a bit like a traitor not to make such a prediction. Immersed as I am in the Christian tradition I should have extreme difficulty in deciding that Hinduism, say, is the world's greatest religion.

In a like manner I cannot be completely objective in deciding which is the best nation in the world. When our family was in England three summers ago on the exchange pastorate we had an exceptional opportunity to study ~~xxxxxx~~ the British way of life and to get to know their people. We saw much that we admired about England and we came away convinced ~~certain~~ that the English possessed certain qualities of life and character which were superior to our own. Still we were never near the ~~point~~ of saying that we would prefer to live in England. We were too much in love with America for that. For one thing we did not really learn as much about England as we knew about America. Likewise I scarcely know enough about any other religion to choose it in preference to Christianity.

Why am I a Methodist instead of a Presbyterian? Is it because I carefully examined the ways of both and decided to be a Methodist? Not at all! I was born a Methodist and really can't help being one. When I get provoked with Methodism I escape into the comfortable notion of going over to the Presbyterians. But ~~actually~~ they have never invited me to come. Besides I seem always to get things squared with the Methodists and at most times I am very glad to be a Methodist. Had I been born a Roman Catholic would I have changed? Who can possibly answer such a question? Suffice it to say that I would have been influenced by a powerful, built-in tendency to remain a Roman Catholic. In any choice I can never escape from the influences of my birth.

-IV-

Still another step in coming to grips with this question is to consider the fact that there is a real difference between claiming that any religion is the "only" religion and simply declaring that it is the "Best." It would be woefully unintelligent to claim that Christianity is the "only" religion. That simply is not so. There are other religions of very high values. But I do believe that I have the right - yes, the necessity - of saying that Christianity is the best.

There is an old saying that "Though there are many passes at the foot of the mountain, the mountaineers will see the same moon on its summit." Applied to religion

this implies that they all lead to the same ultimate end. Still it is frequently true that the passes are not ~~xxx~~ ^{as} equally ^{as} desirable. It is entirely conceivable that one is better than another. One could take a great deal longer, another could go through unnecessary thicket and danger. One could be the best road to the top.

Religions obviously vary in their capacity to reveal truth, just as do individual ~~xx~~ interpreters. Years ago when I got a chance to spend a Sunday in New York City I would choose most carefully my place of worship. I would go to the great Riverside Church on Morningside Heights because, in my judgment, Harry Emerson Fosdick, as a preacher, was the ablest interpreter of the Christian ^{faith}. When I would go to Chicago I would invariably make the journey to Evanston to hear the great Ernest Fremont Tittle at First Methodist Church, because I considered him the best preacher in that area. In both cities there were many very ~~xxxxxx~~ excellent preachers but to me these excelled above all. I know too that there are preachers far better than I. Just as with preachers, then, there is nothing wrong, as I see it, with saying that one religion is best.

God has certainly revealed himself through other religions, just as he has revealed himself in countless noble persons. But just as we would say that God has been more fully revealed to us through the heroic work of Dr. Schweitzer in Africa than through our work, so too we claim that God has revealed himself best in Jesus Christ.

The last step in answering this question is clear: I accept Christianity as the best religion on the basis of my faith. I cannot compel anyone else to join me in this acceptance: ~~xxx~~ I can only witness to the fact that I believe with all of my heart and mind and soul and strength that it is true.

Here I should like to submit a text which is perhaps the boldest to be found in any religion. It comes from the story of the early church when the followers of Christ were proclaiming his gospel. Peter and John, as a result of their healing of a lame man, were arrested. They next day they were brought before the rulers and elders and scribes for examination. There it was inquired of them: "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Peter, filled with the holy spirit, replied: "Be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there

is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Most of us ~~xxxx~~ shrink from even repeating those words. They seem quite exaggerated and inaccurate. They offend our sense of justice and tolerance. We choke on them because they seem to go too far, to claim too much. I have thought about these words a great deal this week in the light of everything else I have said up until now. I have friends outside of the Christian fold who would be affronted by ~~thxxx~~ their seeming bigotry. But I ask these friends to understand that these words represent the very highest expression of my faith. In repeating these words I ask not to be judged on rational grounds alone. The speaking of those words ~~are~~^{is} to me a commitment of my whole life, my whole-hearted witness to my faith. ~~Exxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ On purely rational grounds I cannot prove that they are true. I can only live as though they ~~were~~^{are} true, knowing that by my fruits I shall be known. Only in this way can I vindicate ~~the~~ my faith.

What is involved here is my conception of the truth. Truth ~~has got to~~^{must} be the same everywhere. The law of gravity applies with equal force in both Columbus, Ohio, and Tibet. ~~xxxx~~ That two times two equals four is attested by experience on every inch of the globe, and it must be true on the distant planets which soon we will reach. There is in Christianity a basic truth which must be true for all men everywhere. Most students of comparative religions ~~xxx~~ conclude that the main difference between Christianity and other worthy religions is the Christian ethic. Christianity is finally an ethical religion. Individual Hindus and Jews or Moslems may be saved as ~~the~~ individuals, but when humanity as a whole is considered only Jesus has a relevant and dynamic ethic. Christ came, we believe, to redeem the whole world, and to save all men.

Dr. Schweitzer has written: "Every rational faith has to choose between two things: either to be an ethical religion or to be a religion that explains the world. We Christians choose the former, as that which is of higher value. We turn away from the logical, self-contained religion . . . We hold to the absolutely and profoundly ethical religion as to the one thing needful, though philosophy may go to rack and ruin." (Christianity and Religions of the World, p.73,74) At no time in human ~~the~~ history have men been so desperately in need of a religion which, being basically ethical, teaches them how to live together in mutual respect and peace. Since Christianity's most fundamental thrust is to teach men to love each other, as they love their Father in heaven, I believe it is of the most crucial importance to the world. Because it is the best answer to man's greatest need I believe it

is the world's best religion.

Recently I received a letter from a woman who made it plain that she would rather hear more of the "straight" gospel than sermons about living issues in the world. ~~Though~~ I think I know what she means, ^{but} I shall have to witness to the fact that it is this ~~Christian~~ gospel of Christ which has compelled me to feel a compassion and concern ~~for the~~ human children of God wherever social "issues" arise over ~~the~~ mistreatment or injustice to a single one of God's children. Hence I cannot help but call attention to the live "issues" in which God's children are involved. I cannot help myself, for it is not really I. It is not because I am good that I feel for those of my fellow men who are oppressed and cast down. I feel for them because Christ compels me to ~~to~~ and because his religion involves me primarily in ~~ethical~~ ethical concerns. I am faced with the awful realization that there is no personal salvation for me as long as my relationships with my human brothers are fouled in injustice and hate. I am constrained by the gospel.

William Ernest ~~Hocking~~ once asked the celebrated British missionary, C.F. Andrews this question: "How do you preach the gospel to a Hindu?" Andrews replied: "I don't. I preach the gospel to a man." (^{D.T. Niles} ~~Exniked D.T. Niles~~ The Preacher's Task and the Stone of Stumbling, p. 89) If I were to seek to persuade someone to accept my religion I would approach him not as a Hindu, or a Moslem, or a Jew, or a Buddhist. I would approach him as a man, hoping and praying that by the quality of my personal witness to ~~my faith~~ I could so produce the fruits of Christian love that he would be attracted to my Christ. Only where love is superior ~~to all other things~~ and Christlike do I have the right ~~to~~ to declare: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Only as I practice the love of Christ, unconditionally and with regard to all men, do I have a right to claim that his religion is the best.