

TALK: aren't all religions the same?

Like I said earlier...

Tonight's all about having some food for thought...

And on the menu tonight is the idea that **all religions are the same.**

Now remember, our food for thought dinners in many ways are the beginning of a conversation about important things...

I'm only going to take up about 10 minutes of your time....

which is nowhere near long enough to consider this properly...

but I hope to at least start the conversation....

So.... "Aren't all religions the same?"

- **an understandable idea**

Can I begin by saying that in many ways the idea that all religions are the same is an understandable idea.

Its not too hard to see why people might get that idea.

Because there are some obvious similarities between the religions...

they are about spiritual reality...

they mostly involve prayer to a higher being...

they are about God or gods...

many of them teach about an existence beyond this life...

they tend to all have certain rituals that go along with believing...

they tend to have a code of ethics...

and that code of ethics can be similar....

and so they can seem the same.

I know that is a terrible confession but I'm not that into cars... (I know that as soon as I say that out loud my masculinity is on the line... even worse I think I've only watched about 2 episodes of Top Gear!)

I drive cars....

and I know that they're useful...

but I'm just not really into them...

And if you pointed out a car to me I may or may not be able to tell you anything about it other than its a car.... and what colour it is(!!!)

But you know what?... in the end what does it matter... a car's a car they all do pretty much the same thing... they're all pretty much the same.

I reckon that's how lots of people think about the many different religions... not that interested... not really into into them... they seem basically the same... doing the same thing....

"Aren't they all just the same?"

Its an understandable idea.

Its also understandable because there seems to be so much trouble caused by religious differences...

Muslims hating Jews... Jews hating Muslims... Hindus killing Christians... Christians being responsible for the suffering of other religious believers...

Surely it'd be a much nicer world.... a much more peaceful world if all religions were the same...

And so I think sometimes we tend to adopt the idea that all religions are the same... almost as a sort of wish fulfilment...

I wonder too though whether we like the idea that all religions are the same because its easier and we'd prefer not to think about it too much....

I don't want to be rude.... but most people like intellectual short cuts...

And if all religions were the same it wouldn't matter what you believed..

and so you could believe them all without much brain effort.. or you could reject them all...

reject one reject them all cos they're the same.

Its just easier.

The other reason why its an understandable idea is because we want to be tolerant...

We don't want to say that Christianity is better than Islam, or Judaism is better than Buddhism... because that feels wrong...

and who are we to judge....

and so it seems better... safer... more noble even... to think that all religions are the same.

So if that's your idea .. if you sort of think that all religions are the same... its an understandable idea.

But I want to also suggest its a mistaken idea.

- **a mistaken question**

Its a mistaken idea because to assume that all religions are the same you need to ignore the many big, fundamental profound differences between them.

I'm sure that it wouldn't be too hard to show that my belief that "a cars a car" is mistaken.

There are lots of big fundamental profound differences between cars...

and it doesn't take much investigation to see that.

In fact its pretty naive & dumb to even to think it.

Its the same... even easier I would suggest... to demonstrate that there is no possible way that all religions are the same...

Some very quick examples...

and I'm only choosing the major religions...

But here are some quick examples of some big, fundamental profound differences between the major religions...

In Hinduism there are many gods.... in Christianity & Judaism & Islam there is one God... the Buddha was basically agnostic.

Buddhism is in fact a rejection of Hinduism... its deliberately different from Hinduism..

Buddhism is a philosophy that teaches the need to remove desire and so find Enlightenment.

Jesus Christ was a man of passion... he wept, he got angry, he was deeply compassionate, he was scared... all such passions the Buddha would reject as ignorance.

At the heart of Christianity is the historical death & resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

In the Koran it is written:-

"They did not kill Jesus, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did... (Koran 4:157)

A Muslim believer cannot accept that Jesus died on a cross.

Judaism rejects Mohammed as a prophet of God and rejects the Christian claim that Jesus is God's Saviour King.

I'm just scratching the surface.

You would hardly have to even begin to investigate the different religions to discover massive, profound differences.

They teach mutually exclusive things.

They could all be wrong but they certainly cannot all be right.

eg. Either Jesus died on the cross or he didn't.

And yet still ... in the face of such massive significant differences... people still want to say that all religions are essentially the same.

And that's why as well as being an understandable idea & a mistaken idea I want to suggest to you tonight that in fact its a very arrogant idea.

- **an arrogant idea**

There's a famous story that people like to use as an illustration when they are thinking about these things..... you may have heard it...

Its about some blind men approaching an elephant.

When these blind men reach the elephant they all end up touching different bits of the elephant (who hopefully is a very patient & tame elephant!)

And so one blind man when asked to describe what he's found describes the trunk...

And another of the blind men when asked to describe what he's found describes the leg...

And another describes the tail... or the ear... or its side...

They've all found the elephant... they've just found different bits of him.

And so .. its said...

the different religions... and religious ideas... are like the different blind men....

they each have a different grip on a different bit of the same reality..

they may seem to be different but in the end they are simply describing the same reality.. the same elephant.

That seems to be a nice way out of the problem doesn't it?

A nice way around the obvious differences between the major religions without needing to be a bigot.

But there's the problem...

How could anyone possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless they have a superior all-complete perfect knowledge of spiritual reality themselves?

The blind men & the elephant story only works if there is someone who can see the whole elephant.

See the problem?

The person who wants to explain the differences in this sort of way...is claiming to be able to see the whole elephant!... unlike the believers in particular religions who are like blind men...

Its an incredible arrogance really when you think about it...

The Hindus... the Muslims... the Jews... the Christians ... the Buddhists... the whatevers...

they only have part of the truth...

but I can see the whole truth...

I can see what they can't..

I can see the whole picture.

And yes its nice that they believe different things... but I can see from my lofty informed intelligent perspective that in the end all of those religions are really the same.

That's pretty arrogant don't you think?

I'm sure that people don't mean it to be arrogant.... but it is... and its absurd.

You can't deal with the differences like that.

Another way of course to deal with the differences is to say something like...
"Well I know that they believe different things...
but in the end all that really matters is *that* they believe... rather than *what*
they believe."

As long as you believe *something*... that's more important than *what* you
actually believe.

Can I suggest that that sort of idea is just arrogance dressed up in
philosophical clothes and in fact is incredibly dishonouring & dismissive of
billions of people.

Because to them what they believe matters enormously.

I'm a Christian.

I believe the promises contained in the Bible.

I believe in the historical person of Jesus.

I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I believe what Jesus taught about himself & God & life & truth.

And for someone to simply dismiss what i believe as being the same as what a
Muslim believes... just because we each believe something...

that's arrogant in the extreme.

Disagree with me...

Choose to believe something different to me..

but don't dismiss me without listening to me.

We don't respect someone by ignoring what they believe.

We respect someone by seeking to understand what they believe and
critiquing what they believe...

Tolerance is a great thing.

But it seems to be completely misunderstood in our society.

Tolerance doesn't mean that we should accept each other's beliefs as true.

That is impossible.

Tolerance means that we should accept people who believe different things.

That's what religious people need of course.

The ability to treat well & honourably people with whom they disagree.

That's tolerance.

Its okay to say that something is true or not true... so long as we say it with
respect.

The different religions are not the same....

And any attempt to make them the same is unloving & arrogant and
ignorant.

Jesus self consciously set himself apart from any other religion... any other
attempt to find salvation... any other pathway to higher good...

Jesus was entirely unembarrassed to set himself apart... as unique.. different

He spoke these significant words:-

"I am the way, the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14.6)

There is lots I could say about just that sentence & I'd be happy to talk further later...

But can I limit myself to 2 things....

The little word "the" is very important in what Jesus said.

The way, the truth, the life... not a way, a truth, a life....

not one one from among many... but one only.

And secondly, and evenly more importantly are to the 2 words "through me".

According to Jesus... the only way to the Father... the only way to true life..

the only way to salvation & paradise & peace....

was through him.

And what Jesus meant was stunning...

it certainly I think.. shines with stunning brilliance across the field of religious alternatives.

According to Jesus.... salvation, life, forgiveness, peace.... is a free gift...

its not earned... its not a reward... its a gift... it is received.

Its secured by Jesus in his death on that cross & given freely to people who put their trust & confidence in him.

According to Jesus, its not what you do for him that counts...

but what he has done for you.

Its through Jesus...

Its through Jesus & not through us.

That sets Jesus & Christianity apart from all other religions I think.

All other religions in the end rely on human effort... to gain salvation...

Unlike the Hindu teaching of karma that insists that wrong actions must reap their consequences...

Jesus teaches that forgiveness for wrong actions is freely available to everyone.. through him.

Unlike the Buddha's teaching that humans have everything they need to be pure & wise and that no divine help is possible...

Jesus teaches teaches that he has done everything necessary to secure salvation for his people... its through Jesus...

Unlike the Jewish insistence on the importance of observing religious festivals & keeping the Sabbath...

Jesus insists that more important than what we do... is what he has done... its through him.

This teaching of Jesus that salvation & forgiveness is a gift secured by him and given freely to his people....

according to Muslim belief.... robs Allah of glory... for the only path to salvation is obedience to what is called the 5 Pillars of Islam.... and men & women are obliged and able to walk down it.

But Jesus said

"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14.6)

Well like I said at the start...
the aim of tonight is to start a conversation...
to give some food for thought.

I hope I've been able to help with that even a little bit...
I'd love to talk some more in a moment over tea & coffee...
I think that the distinctive claims of Jesus are especially worth considering carefully.

Even beyond tonight though...
We love running discussion groups about the BIG answers that Jesus & Christianity offers.
If you are interested in one of those.... you can grab a card from the table & fill it in.

Biographies of Jesus....

We're going to serve some tea & coffee now...

Thank you...