

6. But why so many religions? & Who wants boring old rules?

If you've ever been out driving and mistakenly got yourself off the route you thought you knew, you soon discover that all roads don't lead to London, or whatever smaller place you're trying to get to. And yet there's a rumour around that says 'all religions lead to God'.

In the supermarket of world religions, there are certainly plenty to choose from: all attractively packaged and advertising themselves as a way to get to God. Sometimes you hear people say that these different religions are all complementary to each other in some way - just coming at things from different angles. They can all accommodate each other, or so they say. But sometimes in a supermarket it's best to read the small print on the label so as to be sure of what's inside. One famous brand name says that if you don't see their name on the outside of the box, then what's inside really will be quite different from their own product. Now if we were to look more closely at some of the world's different religions, we'd find some that accepted there were any number of gods; some that don't seem to go in much for the idea of a god at all, but appear to be more like a philosophy for getting through life; and still others that say there is a god, but you better not expect to ever be able to get to know him. Beneath the surface they're all very different. And in contrast to those points we've featured, the claim of Christianity is that there is a God, just one God, and we really can get to know Him.

So just by looking at a few of the different religious ideas around, it's easy to see that they can't be made to sit comfortably together, nor can they be combined with Christianity without there being basic contradictions. The differences really are much more than just in the packaging.

Well, does it really matter, some folks may say. Even if there are basic contradictions, all that really matters surely is that you're sincere in whatever it is you believe. Which reminds me of the bloke who had a dispute with one of his colleagues over the spelling of the brand name of some foreign food product. His colleague went out to the local supermarket, bought a sample from the shelf, and came and showed it to him. The chap, recognising he'd lost the argument, commented afterwards that he was disappointed that the spelling on the labelling had not somehow rearranged itself to accommodate his sincerity! In other words, we can be sincerely right, but we can just as easily be sincerely wrong. Like those people who appear to sincerely believe the holocaust never happened or that Hitler was a good man.

There are lots of very sincere people practising many different religions which tell them to do different things if they want to get God on their side. The sort of things they might do are: praying a certain number of times a day or not eating anything for a given time. Again there's a basic difference between this and the teaching of Christianity, which says is not about anything we can do, but all about what God Himself has done for us. We were thinking about that last time, when seeing the death of Jesus as God's rescue plan for us.

While we're on the difference between Christianity and religions, we might just say that religions could survive with or without their religious leader or founder, since it's the teaching of these religions that their adherents follow. Christianity, too, has its teaching, of course, but the difference is that a Christian, basically, is a follower of a Person, with that person being Jesus Christ, of course. Take away Jesus - prove somehow that He's an impostor - and the whole thing is worthless, certainly as far as securing a place in heaven is concerned.

Having mentioned Jesus Christ, let's check out the astounding claim He made one day. It's recorded for us in our Bibles in the Gospel by John chapter 14 and verse 6: Jesus said ... "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

Jesus tells us that there is a road that leads to God. Let's just take that on board for a moment. That means that God - God the Father - is reachable. He really is knowable. What's more Jesus actually spoke about 'the way' to God. Not many ways, not all ways leading to God, but just one way. And, that way, He claimed, was Himself, when He said 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'

You'll notice how Jesus linked 'the way' with 'the truth'. There's no mention of sincerity here, only truth, the real article. I suppose someone might say: 'wasn't that arrogant of Jesus to claim to be the way to God?' Let me ask you: 'is it arrogant for someone to claim 2 plus 2 is 4? What's wrong with 5 or 7?' You see, the issue is truth. And if Jesus could truthfully say: 'I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me', then that settles it as a matter of fact.

Now what is it that makes Jesus so different? First of all, He doesn't ask us to earn points in order to qualify for heaven by doing this or that; no, He tells us that He's paid the price all by Himself. That's a major difference. Only because Jesus has died for us on the cross - and if we've trusted in Him - can we come to the Father.

Secondly, while religions tell us how to live, Jesus gives us the power to live a new life.

And not only has Jesus died to pay for our debt of sins, not only does He give us the power to live for God in a way that really satisfies, but thirdly, He offers us a living relationship with God. Not just religious rules, but a real personal relationship with God. You see, God is a personal God, one God in three persons. God exists in a relationship. And we can only know Him through having a spiritual relationship with Him. Christianity is basically about relationship, not rules.

Perhaps it might help to think of it this way. If you've ever been married, on your wedding day you would've been asked: 'will you take this man to be your husband, or will you take this woman to be your wife... to love and to cherish.' Marriage is to be all about a love relationship. You weren't asked, for example: 'will you take this person if they promise to wash the dishes, or iron the clothes, or be the bread-winner?', or anything else like that. Again we're talking about relationship, not rules.

Marriage isn't about rules, it's about relationship. The Christian's commitment in faith to God is like that. By faith we enter into a new life, into a spiritual relationship with God which is based on love. Of course there are rules, just as there are basic ground-rules in the best of marriages, but these are things we're motivated to do because of the love we have for the one we're in the relationship with. 'I will', Jesus says to us, 'I will be your Saviour and Lord', but we for our part must say to Him, in turn, 'I will - I will take you as my personal Saviour'.

But I hear you say: 'what about those in all the different religions? How does God view them?' Well, the God I know, the God of the Bible, is fair - and the words of the Bible reassure me again here: 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' It's none of my business really to wonder about others who may or may not have understood, or even heard, the message of Christianity. I can safely leave the issue to God, but what about you - now that you've heard and, I trust, understood: have you taken the only way to God that there is? It's the way proclaimed in the Bible, when Jesus said: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'.