

# Probe Religious Views Study 2020 – Do Christians Believe in Christ as the Only Savior of the World?

*Steve Cable explores the results of Probe's new 2020 survey, examining what people believe about Jesus in His time on earth, and His claim to be the only way to the Father.*

Our 2020 survey reveals a striking decline in evangelical religious beliefs and practices over the last ten years. In our first article, we saw a significant degradation in the percentage of American young adults who are born again<sup>[1](#)</sup> and profess a biblically informed worldview<sup>[2](#)</sup>. Perhaps a biblical worldview, as defined by the set of questions we used, is not an accurate gauge of an orthodox Christian belief.

In this article, we will look at several other areas designed to identify those people who closely align their thoughts with the teaching of the Bible. We will look at two areas of belief for all American young adults and for Born Again Protestants in greater detail:

1. Do you believe in some critical aspects of Jesus Christ and His time on earth?
2. Do you believe that Jesus was right in saying “No one comes to the Father except by Me”?

We will look at these two areas alone and then see how those with a biblical worldview align with these questions.

## Topic 1: What About Jesus and His Time on

# Earth?

In our survey, we asked three questions specifically about Jesus. The first question was about what caused Jesus to die on a cross as given below.

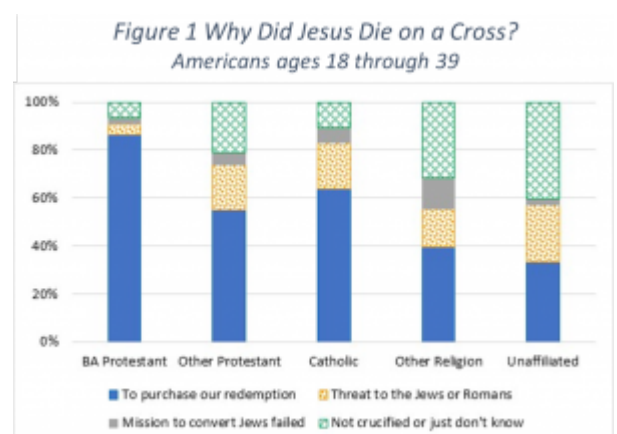
## 1. Why did Jesus die on a cross?

- a. He threatened the Roman authorities' control over Israel.
- b. He threatened the stature of the Jewish leaders of the day.
- c. To redeem us by taking our sins and our punishment upon Himself.
- d. He never died on a cross.
- e. He failed in his mission to convert the Jewish people into believers.
- f. I don't know.

The responses for ages 18 through 39 are shown in Figure 1. As shown, Born Again Protestants have a far greater percentage, over 85%, stating that Jesus was crucified to purchase our redemption. One would suspect that all Protestant and Catholic leaders

would want their people to know that Jesus' death on the cross was for their redemption. Yet, less than two thirds of each group selected that answer. Note that the answer to this question did not say that salvation was through grace alone. So even those with a works-based gospel should still select that answer.

A fair number of Other Protestants and Catholics (about 20% of each group) said that either the Jewish leaders or the Romans caused Jesus' death on the cross. But any Christian should realize that Jesus had to choose crucifixion. Prior attempts



by authoritative groups demonstrated that they could not lay a hand on him otherwise.

Interestingly, about 40% of Other Religions and 30% of the Unaffiliated say Jesus died to redeem us. They understand this is what Christians say about Jesus' crucifixion. It is the best answer for them because it doesn't say that Jesus' death actually worked to redeem us, only that He did it to redeem us. Also note that roughly one third of the Other Religion category is made up of people who affiliate with Christian cults, e.g. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

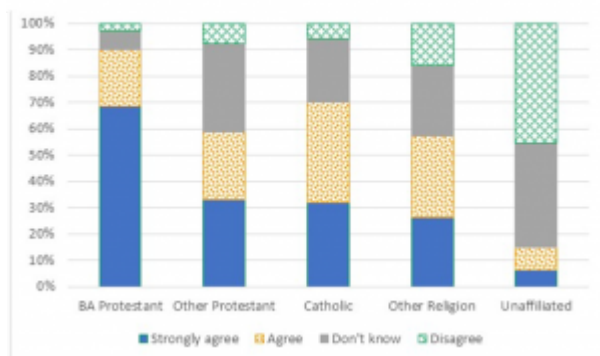
The second question is:

2. Jesus will return to this earth to save those who await His coming.

a. **Answers ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.**

This question is almost a quote of Hebrews 9:27-28 ESV, "And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." As you can see, this verse answers question 1 and question 2. The apostle Paul writing in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 says, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first." He makes it clear that the Lord Jesus will return to the earth to call us to Himself.

**Figure 2 Jesus Will Return to Save Us**  
Americans Ages 18 through 39



The results for this question follow a similar pattern to those for the first question above with a little less surety shown among Christians. As shown, just over two thirds of Born Again Protestants strongly agree that Jesus will return to save. Meaning that almost one

third of them are not absolutely sure of Jesus' return.

For other Christian groups, only about one third of them strongly agree with this statement. Almost one third say they Disagree or Don't Know about this statement.

Once again, over half of those affiliated with Other Religions affirm what they believe to be taught by the Christian religion. At the same time, the Unaffiliated continue to show that very few of them affirm any Christian beliefs.

The third question (also used for determining a Basic Biblical Worldview) is:

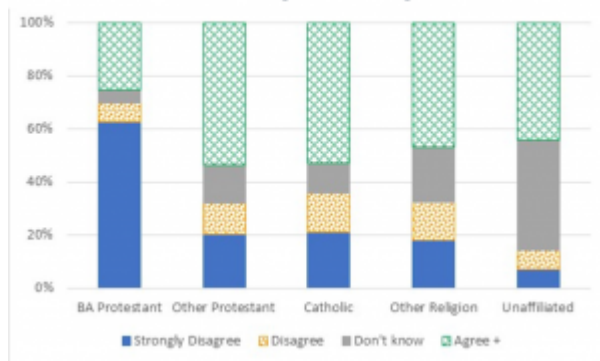
3. When He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.

a. **Answers ranging from Agree Strongly to Disagree Strongly**

The Bible clearly states that Jesus lived a sinless life. For example, Hebrews 4:15 ESV states, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, **yet without sin.**" And again in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made the one who did **not know sin** to be sin for us so that in Him we would become the righteousness of God." As indicated in this verse, God laid our sins upon Jesus in His earthly death. Jesus did not sin but He carried our sins to the cross and the grave to redeem us. If Jesus were a sinner like you and me, His death would have been for His own sin rather than for the

sins of the world.

*Figure 3 Jesus Committed Sins Like Other People  
Americans Ages 18 through 39*



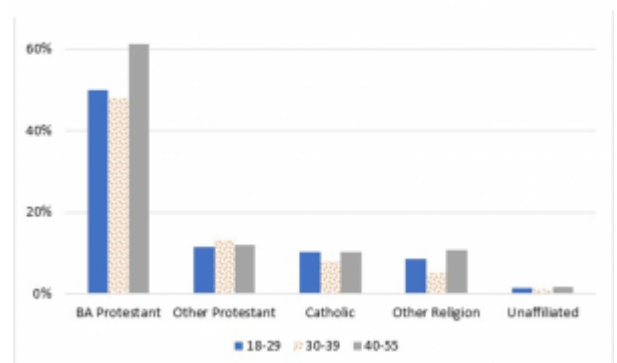
Young adult American beliefs about this statement follow a similar pattern as the first two questions. Once again, about one third of Born Again Protestants either Don't Know or Agree with this statement. Having this large a number of Born Again Protestants who don't accept a primary belief of Biblical Christianity is disappointing.

However, four out of five respondents who affiliated with Other Protestant or Catholic beliefs do not strongly believe that Jesus lived a sinless life. The Unaffiliated group continues to show their aversion to accepting any Christian religious doctrines.

### Accepting a Doctrinally Consistent Set of Beliefs

What happens when we look at how many Born Again Protestants take a biblically consistent view on all three of these questions? Consider the results shown in Figure 4. First, we see that young adult Born Again Protestants drop from about two thirds for the individual questions down to about one half when looking at all three questions. It appears that about one half of those categorized as Born Again Protestants are trusting Jesus to save them but do not have a good understanding of biblical teaching on Jesus.

*Figure 4 A Biblical Position on Jesus Christ*



As you can see, all other religious groups drop to around one in ten or less with a good understanding of Jesus. The

Unaffiliated drop to a level that is basically zero. In toto, about one out of six Americans age 55 and under have an understanding of who Jesus really is in these three fundamental areas.

### **Does Having a Basic Biblical Worldview Equate to Having a Biblical Understanding of Jesus?**

For most people it does. Approximately 90% of people with a Basic Biblical Worldview have a biblical understanding of Jesus, i.e. answer the three Jesus questions from a biblical perspective. This finding (especially if true across other questions where many Born Again Christians ascribe to an unbiblical viewpoint) is important because the four simple questions which define a Basic Biblical Worldview identifies a set of people who also take a biblical view of Jesus' purpose.

## **Topic 2: Are there multiple ways to heaven?**

Pluralism is the belief that there are multiple ways to obtain a right relationship with God, including most if not all world religions. The Bible is very clear on how people can be reconciled to God and obtain eternal life. First, we cannot receive it through our own efforts at righteous living. This truth is addressed throughout the New Testament including Romans 3:23, "For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And Titus 3:5, "He saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of his mercy . . ."

Second, we cannot receive it by placing our faith in some other person or deity. If we try, we are still weighed down by our sin, and that other person or deity has no standing before the living God. Even an angel of the living God has no standing on which to intercede for our salvation as we see in Hebrews 2:5, "For He did not put the world to come, about which we have been speaking, under the control of

angels.”

The only way God could redeem us was through the sacrifice of Jesus, fully God and fully man. As Romans goes on to say in 3:24, “But they are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” And Titus 3:5 continues, “[T]hrough the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us in full measure through Jesus Christ our savior.”

Jesus clearly stated, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” The high price of degradation and suffering paid through Jesus’ life and death excludes the possibility of Jesus being just one of several options offered by God.

What do Americans believe about multiple ways to heaven? And, especially what do Born Again Christians believe? To determine who was a pluralist, we asked what the respondents thought about the following two statements:

1. Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God.

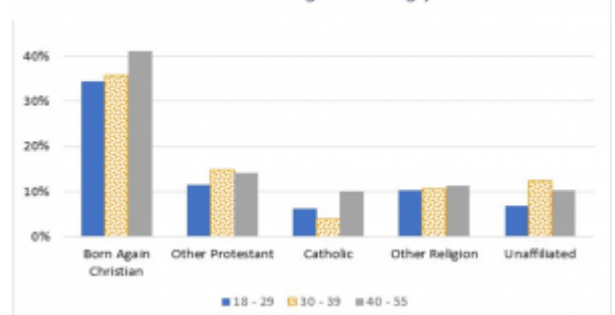
**Answers from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly**

2. I believe that the only way to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ. **Answers from Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly**

## **Who Believes in Multiple Ways to God**

First let’s look at just question number one across the various religious groups, looking for the answer **Disagree strongly** as shown in Figure 5{3}. If someone disagrees with this statement, they could be a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist, etc. The first thing you may notice is that all religious groups other than Born Again Christian all

*Figure 5 Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus are All Valid Ways to God: Disagree Strongly*





congregate around 5% to 15%. So, for all these groups, around one in ten people take a strong non-pluralistic view. Or turning it around, about 9 out of 10 of them are pluralists.

The real shocker jumping from this page is that over 60% of Born Again Christians are also pluralists. Apparently, a majority of Born Again Christians are ignorant about the basic teachings of their faith. Also, it is interesting and disturbing that the percentage of Born Again Christians who are not pluralistic is almost flat across the ages from 18 to 55. A strong majority of Born Again Christians are pluralists across that entire age range.

### Who Believes Jesus is the Only Way

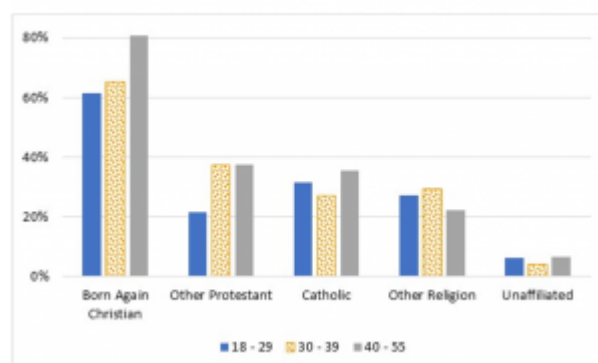
Now to narrow the question even further, we could have stated “Only Jesus taught valid ways to God.” The percentage of people strongly agreeing with this statement should be a subset of the people who disagreed strongly with the question above, “Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God.”

Instead, we asked this second question in a slightly different way but with the same intent: “I believe that the only way to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ.” We thought that this question would be

equivalent to the first one in the prior paragraph. But as we will see, people’s brains allow them to give answers that contradict each other.

Comparing this chart with the prior one, we see that Born Again Christians are at least 25 percentage points higher for this second question. And, the other Christian religious groups are higher by about 25 percentage points as well. And

Figure 6 Jesus is the Only Way to a True Relationship with God



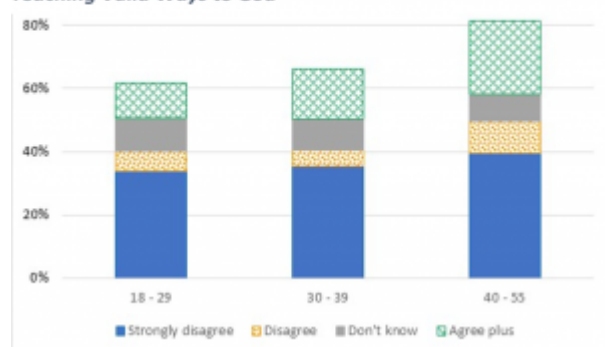


even Other Religions are up by over ten percentage points. Only the Unaffiliated drop from the first question to the second, dropping by almost half from ten percentage points down to about five percentage points.

### **An Inconsistent Worldview Among Many Born Again Christians**

The results outlined above are disconcerting in that if the answers to the two questions were consistent, we would see Figure 6 reporting lower numbers than Figure 5 which is clearly not the case. Logically, one could say that Mohammad, Buddha, and Jesus are not all valid ways to God while still saying that Jesus is not the only way to God. You could believe, for example, that Buddha is the only one who taught a valid way to God. But, if you say that Jesus is the only way to a true relationship with God, then it follows that you believe that Mohammad, Buddha, and Jesus cannot all be valid ways to God.

*Figure 7 What Born Again Christians Who Say Jesus is the Only True Path to God Say About Mohammad, Buddha, and Jesus All Teaching Valid Ways to God*



However, the survey respondents show us that one does not have to give answers which logically support one another. Even if some of the respondents misread the statement, the difference between the two is great enough that it is safe to assume that the results are not primarily

attributable to misreading.

In Figure 7, we look at what the Born Again Christians who stated that Jesus is the only way to a true relationship with God said when responding to the question about Mohammad, Buddha and Jesus. First note that the total height of each column is the same as the Born Again Christian columns in Figure 6. As shown, almost half of each column represents those who did not strongly disagree with the pluralistic view. For the youngest adults, that upper portion is about evenly

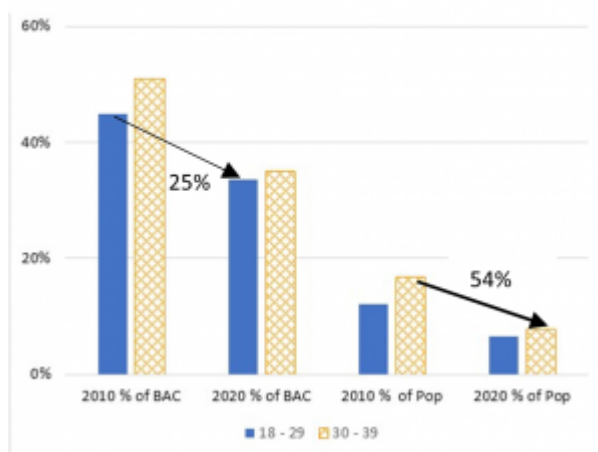
split between those who Don't Know and those who Agree or Strongly Agree that the three men taught valid ways to God. For those ages 40 through 55, we see that a significantly higher percentage affirm that all three men taught valid ways to God.

Based on these results, about one third of Born Again Christians appear to have a consistent biblical view toward pluralism. Another third appear to be totally in line with the pluralist position. The last third are those who want to say that Jesus is the only true path to God AND that Mohammad and Buddha also taught valid ways to God. In church, they may say that Jesus is the only way, but out in the world they act as if Muslims and Buddhists don't need to know this critical truth. These individuals have an incoherent worldview.

### Changes over the Last Decade

How have the statistics on Born Again Christians and pluralism changed from 2010 to 2020? As shown in the figure, we see a significant drop in the percent of BACs who are not pluralists. Those age 18 to 29 drop by 25% (from 45% to 34% of all BACs) and those age 30 to 39 drop by 31% (from 51% to 35% of all BACs).

*Figure 8 Born Again Christians Who Are Not Pluralists comparing 2010 with 2020*

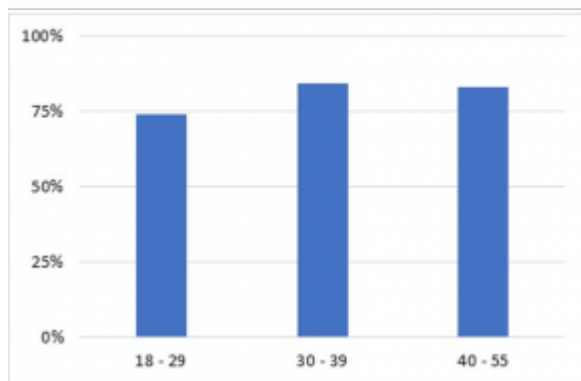


Of course, we need to remember that the percentage of BACs in the population has dropped as well. So, when we look at the percentage of Born Again Christians who are definitely not pluralists in our country the drop off is greater. As shown the number of those age 30 to 39 drops from 17% in 2010 to less than half of that number at 8% in 2020 (a drop of 54%).

Over the last decade, Born Again Christians in America have

continued to grow in the number who are pluralists.

*Figure 9 Born Again Christians with a Basic*



What about that smaller subset of people who have a Basic Biblical Worldview? Do a majority of them also have a pluralistic worldview? The answer is no. As shown, between 75% and 85% of them are not pluralists.

This result is not a surprise since the Basic Biblical Worldview questions do not align well with a pluralistic view. However, the result that about one in four of Born Again Christians with a Basic Biblical Worldview appear to be pluralists is unsettling.

## Countering the Negative Slide

If you are reading this, you may want to do something to help reverse this trend among Born Again Christians to misunderstand who Jesus is and His unique ability to redeem us and restore into a relationship with our Creator. Here are several suggestions that can help in this reversal.

Faithful prayer. Daily pray for the lost and against the forces of darkness so visibly arrayed against them. Pray for the saved, that they may take up the true gospel and cling to the eternal truth of Jesus.

Preach, teach and speak OFTEN about the events of the cross and the tomb.

- Explain that only someone perfectly sinless could undertake the task of reconciling us before a holy God. Make sure they understand that “God made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf in order that we may become the righteousness of God in him.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

- Explain that only God, in the person of Jesus Christ, could be that sinless sacrifice. God had to undergo the pain and suffering of separating Himself from His Son on the cross. "Though he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!" Philippians 2:6-8

- Explain that the cost was so high, no other way to God is possible for sinful man. No one can come to the Father except through the Son and anyone may come through Him. "God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one intermediary between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all, revealing God's purpose at his appointed time." 1 Timothy 2:4-6

- Explain that Jesus' return is delayed only by the loving patience of God who is waiting for all to come to Jesus who will. "The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some regard slowness, but is being patient toward you because he does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." 2 Peter 3:9

- Explain that accepting pluralism will not automatically get your non-Christian friends into heaven. Only the truth of Christ presented to them by willing lips has the power to change their eternal destiny. If you care about them, you will share with them.

It is critical that every teenager, young adult, and older adult who crosses our path needs to have these truths reiterated for them. Use different techniques and different word pictures as you strive by the power of the Holy Spirit to continually make this message clear. We know God desires to work in their life.

## Notes

1. A Born Again person in our survey results is someone who 1) has made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and 2) when asked what will happen to you after you die, they answer I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.
  2. See our first article: Introducing Probe's New Survey: Religious Views and Practices 2020 for a description of the biblical worldview questions used.
  3. Born Again Christians include Catholics who answered the born again questions to allow comparison with the 2010 survey, but in the Catholic category we include all Catholics including those who are born again. About 20% of Catholics affirm the two born again questions.
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# Christianity and Religious Pluralism – Are There Multiple Ways to Heaven?

*Rick Wade takes a hard look at the inconsistencies of religious pluralism. He concludes that if Christ is a way to heaven there cannot be other ways to heaven. Whether Christianity is true or not, pluralism does not make rational sense as it considers all religious traditions to be essentially the same.*

## Aren't All Religions Basically the Same?

In a humorous short article in which he highlighted some of the silly beliefs people hold today, Steve Turner wrote, "We

believe that all religions are basically the same, at least the one we read was. They all believe in love and goodness. They only differ on matters of creation sin heaven hell God and salvation.”[\[1\]](#)

It is the common belief today that all religions are basically the same. They may *look* different—they may differ with respect to holy books or forms of worship or specific ideas about God—but at the root they’re pretty much the same. That idea has become so deeply rooted that it is considered common knowledge. To express doubt about it draws an incredulous stare. Obviously, anyone who thinks one religion is the true one is close-minded and benighted! More than that, the person is clearly a bigot who probably even hates people of other religions (or people with no religion at all). Now, this way of thinking is very seldom formed by serious consideration of the issues, I believe (although there are knowledgeable scholars who hold to it), but that doesn’t matter. It is part of our cultural currency and is held with the same conviction as the belief that planets in the solar system revolve around the Sun and not Earth.

On the surface at least, it’s clear enough that the various religions of the world are different. Theists believe in one personal God; Hindus believe in many gods; atheists deny any God exists. Just on that issue alone, the differences are obvious. Add to that the many beliefs about the dilemma of the human race and how it is to be solved. Why don’t people understand the significance of these differences? On the scholarly level, the fundamental objection is this. It is believed that, if there is a God, he (or she or it) is too different from us for us to know him (or her or it). Because of our limitations, he couldn’t possibly reveal himself to us. Religious writings, then, are merely human attempts at explaining religious experience without actually being objectively true.

Philosopher John Hick wrote that this is really a problem of

language. Statements about God don't have the same truth value as ones about, say, the weather, because "there is no . . . agreement about how to determine the truth value of statements about God."[\[2\]](#) We use religious language because it is meaningful to us, but there is really no way to confirm the truth of such talk. Because we can't really know what the truth is about God, we do our best to guess at it. For this reason, we are not to suggest that our beliefs are true and others false.

On the more popular level, the loss of confidence in being able to know religious and moral truths which comes from academia and filters through the media, is teamed up with an inclusivist attitude that doesn't want anyone left out—that is, if there are any truths to be known.

I want to take a look at the issue of religious pluralism, the belief that there are many valid ways to God. We'll start with some definitions and a reminder of what historical Christianity teaches about God and us and how we can be reconciled to Him.

## Starting Points

There are three basic positions on the question of the relation of Christianity to other religions. The historic view is called *exclusivism*. That word can be a real turn-off to people because we live in an inclusivistic era. What it means in this context is that the claim of Christianity that Jesus is the only way means that all other ways to God are excluded. If Jesus is the only way to the one true God, then no other claims can be true.

Another view on the matter is *inclusivism*. This is the belief that, while salvation is made possible only by the cross of Christ, it can be obtained without hearing the gospel. Even people who are externally part of other religions traditions



can be saved. This is a temptation for Christians who are convinced that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but don't like the idea that there are people who haven't heard the gospel who thus cannot be saved.

By religious *pluralism*, we mean the belief that all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) are valid as ways to relate to God. There is nothing unique about Christ; He was one of many influential religious teachers and leaders. This is the position I'll be considering in this article.

Before looking at pluralism, it would be good to review the historic Christian understanding of salvation to bring the contrast into bold relief.

## **One God**

The Bible is clear that there is one God. Through Isaiah the prophet God said, "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God" (Is. 45:5a; see also 43:10; 44:6).

Beyond this, it's important to note that, philosophically speaking, it is impossible that there could be two (or more) "Gods" like the God of the Bible. Scripture is clear that God is everywhere present at once, so there can't be a truly competing presence (Ps. 139:7-12). God is capable of doing whatever He wills. There can be no ultimate interference by another deity. "The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths," says the Psalmist (135:6). Or more succinctly, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps. 115:3; see also Dan. 4:35). How could there be two Gods like this? They would have to be absolutely identical, since neither one could be interfered with. And if so, they would be the same God!

## **One Savior**

The Bible is also clear that there is only one Savior. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes

to the Father but through Me" (Jn. 14:6). To the rulers and elders and scribes in Jerusalem, Peter declared, "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

## **Theological necessity**

In addition, it was theologically necessary for salvation to come through Christ alone. In Hebrews chapter 9 we read that the death of the sacrifice was necessary. According to Hebrews chapter 7, the Savior had to be divine (see also 2 Cor. 5:21). And Hebrews 2:17 says the Savior had to be human. Jesus is the only one who fulfills those requirements.

## **One more consideration**

To this we can add the fact that the apostles never even hinted that people could be saved any other way than through Christ. It is this belief that has fueled evangelistic endeavors all over the world.

## **Religious Pluralism Can't Accomplish Its Goal**

Even on the surface of it, the notion of religious pluralism is contradictory. If we can't know that particular religions are true, how can we know that *any* are valid ways to God? The pluralist has to know that we can't know (which is an interesting idea in itself!), while also having confidence that somehow we'll be able to reach our goal through our particular beliefs and practices.

But that brings serious questions to the surface. Do all religions even *have* the same goal? That's an important issue. In fact, it's the first of three problems with religious pluralism I'd like to consider.

Can religious pluralism accomplish its goal? What do I mean by that? Two ideas are at work here. First, it is believed that we can't really know what is true about God; our religions are only approximations of truth. Second, if that is so, aren't we being high-handed if we tell a people that their religion isn't true? How can any religion claim to have *the* truth? To be intellectually honest, we need to consider all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) as equally valid. There is a personal element here, too. The pluralist wants to take the *people* of all religions seriously. Telling anyone his or her religion is false doesn't seem to signal that kind of respect. So the goal of which I speak is taking people seriously with respect to their religious beliefs.

I can explain this best by introducing a British scholar named John Hick and tell a little of his story.<sup>[3]</sup> Hick was once a self-declared evangelical who says he underwent a genuine conversion experience as a college student. He immediately began to associate with members of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in England. Over time, however, his philosophical training and reading of certain New Testament scholars made him begin to have doubts about doctrinal matters. He also saw that, on the one hand, there were adherents of other religions who were good people, while, on the other, there were some Christians who were not very nice people but were sure of their seat in heaven. How could it be, he thought, that God would send these good Sikhs and Muslims and Buddhists to hell while saving those not-so-good Christians just because they believed in Jesus? Hick went on to develop his own understanding of religious pluralism and became probably the best-known pluralist in the scholarly world.

I relate all this to you to point out that, at least as far as the eye of man can see, Hick's motivation was a good one: he wanted to believe that all people, no matter what religious stripe, can be saved. Harold Netland, who studied under Hick and wrote a book on his pluralism, speaks very highly of

Hick's personal character.[{4}](#) And isn't there something appealing about his view (again, from our standpoint)? Wouldn't we like everyone to be saved? And having heard about (or experienced directly) the violence fueled by religious fanaticism, it's easy to see why many people recoil against the idea that only one religion has the truth. We want everyone included! We want everyone to feel like his or her religious beliefs are respected and even affirmed!

The problem is that we are supposed to view our beliefs as *approximations* of truth, as somehow meaningful to us but not really true. All people are to be welcomed into the universal family of faith—but they are to leave at the door the belief that what they believe is true. It's as though the pluralist is saying, "It is really noble of you to be so committed to your faith. Of course, we know that little of what you believe can be taken as truth, but that's okay. It gives meaning to your life." Or in other words, "We want you to feel validated in your religion, even though your religious doctrines aren't literally true."

To be quite honest, I don't feel affirmed by that. My religious belief is completely undermined by this idea. If Jesus isn't the only way to God, Christianity is a complete lie, and I am believing in vain.

My belief is that salvation—the reconciliation of persons to the one, true trinitarian God—has been made possible by Jesus, *and* that I *know* this to be the case. In his first epistle, John wrote: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:13). If I can't know this to be true, the promises of Scripture are only wishes. In that case, my hope for eternity is no more secure than crossing my fingers and saying I hope it won't rain this weekend. We are all, in short, forced to abandon our notions of the validity of our religious beliefs and accept the skepticism of the pluralist. And I don't feel affirmed by that.

For my money, to be told I might be very sincere but sincerely wrong if I take my beliefs as true in any literal sense is like being condescendingly patted on the head. To be honest, I take such a notion as arrogance.

So my first objection to religious pluralism is that it does not accomplish its goal of making me feel affirmed with respect to my religious beliefs beyond whatever emotional fulfillment I might get from pretending the beliefs are true.

## Religious Pluralism Doesn't Make Sense

My second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. Let me explain.

Christianity is a confessional religion. In other words, there are particular beliefs we confess to be true, and it is partly through confessing them that we are saved. Is that surprising? Aren't we saved by faith, by putting our trust in Christ? Yes, but there are specific things we are supposed to believe. It isn't just believing *in*; it's also believing *that*. For example, Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe *that I am he* you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:23-24). And then there's Paul's clear statement that "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). So what we believe is very important despite what some are saying now about how Christianity is a relationship and how doctrine isn't all that important.

Back to my point. Christians who know what the Bible teaches and the basics of other religions find themselves staring open-mouthed at people who say that all religions are basically the same. How could anyone who knows anything about

the major religions of the world even think such a thing? I suspect that most people who say this do *not* know the teachings of the various religions. They have some vague notions about religion in general, so they reduce these great bodies of belief to a few essentials. Don't all religions believe in a higher power or powers? Isn't their function just to give meaning to our lives? Don't they all typically include such things as prayer, rituals of one kind or another in public and private worship, standards for moral living, holy books, and the like?

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias has said something like this: Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different, but just the opposite is true. People believe there are some core beliefs and practices such as those I just named which are common to all religions, and that religions are different only on the surface. Muslims have the Koran; Christians have the Bible; Jews have the Torah; Hindus have the Bhagavad Gita. Muslims pray five times a day; Christians pray at church on Sundays and most anytime they want during the week. Buddhists have their shrines; Jews their synagogues; Hindus their temples; Muslims their mosques; and Christians their churches. So at the core, the same; on the surface, different.

But just the opposite is true! It is on the *surface* that there is similarity; that is why we can immediately look at certain bodies of beliefs and practices and label them "religion." They aren't identical, but they are similar enough to be under the same category, "religion." On the surface we see prayers, rituals, holy books, etc. It's when we dig down to the *essential* beliefs that we find contradictory differences!

For example, Islam is theistic but is unitarian while Christianity is trinitarian. Hindus believe we are not true individual selves but are parts of the All, while orthodox Jews believe we are individuals created in the image of God. Muslims believe salvation comes through obedience to Allah,

while Buddhists believe “salvation” consists of spinning out of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth into nirvana.

No, religions are *not* essentially the same and only superficially different. At their very core they are drastically different. So while pluralists might take the religious person seriously, they don't take his or her *beliefs* seriously. How can all these different beliefs be true in any meaningful sense? How can the end of human existence be *both* nirvana *and* heaven or hell? Pluralists have to reduce all these beliefs to some vague possibility of an afterlife of some kind; they have to empty them of any significant content.

So what we believe to be true, pluralists know isn't. Isn't it interesting that the pluralist is insightful enough to know what millions of religious adherents don't! That's a strange position to take given that the heart of pluralism is the belief that we can't know what is ultimately true about God!

It is for this reason that my second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. It claims that our different beliefs are essentially the same, which is false on the surface of it. And it claims that the differences result from the fact that we can't know what is true, while the pluralist acts like he or she *can* know what is true.

## **Pluralism Is Incompatible with Christianity**

Religious pluralism may well be *the* most common attitude about religion in America. You might be wondering, Aren't there a lot of Christians in America? According to the polls, one would think so. But I dare say that if you polled people in your church, especially young people, you would find more than a few who are religious pluralists. They believe that, while Christianity is true for them, it isn't necessarily true for



other people. Is pluralism a legitimate option for Christians? In short, no.

This, then, is my third objection to religious pluralism, namely, that religious pluralism is incompatible with Christianity because it demands that Christians deny the central truths of Scripture. If religious pluralism is true, Jesus' claims to deity and biblical teaching about His atoning death and resurrection cannot be true.

The Bible is clear that salvation comes through accepting by faith the finished work of Jesus who is the only way to salvation. Paul told the Ephesians that at one time they "were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (2:12). Without Christ they were without God. He told the Romans that righteousness came through Jesus and the atoning sacrifice He made (5:6-10, 17). Jesus said plainly that "no one comes to the Father but by me" (Jn. 14:6). Because pluralism denies these specifics about salvation, it is clearly at odds with Christianity.

There is a more general truth that separates Christianity and pluralism, namely, that Christianity is grounded in specific historical events, not abstract religious ideas. Pluralists, as it were, line up all the major, enduring religions in front of them and look for similarities such as those we have already noted: prayers, rituals, holy books, and so on. They *abstract* these characteristics and say, "Look. They're all really the same because they do and have the same kinds of things." But that won't do for Christianity. It is not just some set of abstract "religious" beliefs and practices. It is grounded in specific historical events.

This is a crucial point. The historicity of Christianity is critical to its truth or falsity. God's project of salvation is inextricably connected with particular historical events such as the fall, the flood, the obedience of Abraham, the

Exodus, the giving of the Law, the fall of Israel and Judah, the return to Israel—all events leading to Jesus, a historical person who accomplished our salvation through a historical event. It is through these events that God declared and carried out His plans, and nowhere do we read that He would do so with other people through other events and teachings. The truth of Christianity stands or falls with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and their meaning revealed by God. If the resurrection is historically false, “we are to be pitied more than all men,” Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:19). If this was God’s way, and Jesus declared Himself to be the *only* way, then no other way is available.

One thing the church must *not* do is let any of its members think that their way is only one way. This isn’t to condone elitism or condescension or discrimination against others, even though that’s what a lot of people believe today. That believing in the exclusivity of Christ does *not* necessarily result in an attitude of elitism is seen in Jesus Himself. His belief that He was and is the only way to the Father is clear, but few people will criticize Him for having the attitudes just mentioned. It is a strange thing, isn’t it? Christians who say Jesus is the only way are condemned as self-righteous bigots, while the One who boldly declared not His religion but *Himself* as the only way is considered a good man!

To sum up, then. Pluralism falls under its own weight, for it cannot affirm all religious beliefs as it seems to desire, and its belief that religions are all pretty much the same, even though their core teachings are contradictory, doesn’t make sense. It also is certainly incompatible with Christianity which declares that the truth of its teachings stand or fall with specific historical events. And frankly, its claim to know that no religion really has the truth because such truth can’t be known, comes off as a rather hollow declaration in light of the knowledge pluralists think they possess.

## Notes

1. Steve Turner, *Nice and Nasty* (Marshall and Scott, 1980).
2. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, rev. ed. (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), 3.
3. See John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralist World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), chap. 1.
4. Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1991), ix.

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