

# JESUS:

**THE ONLY WAY?**  
CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD



**JOHN P. BOWEN**



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Focus Infinity  
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# Jesus: THE ONLY WAY?

As I have talked with people about issues of Christian spirituality over the years, there has been one question more than any other which has returned time and time again: “How can you Christians say your way is the only way? That is ridiculous and arrogant.”



For Christians too, I find that one of the most common reasons they are reluctant to talk about their faith is that they fear this criticism. They find themselves wondering, “Surely those people of other religions are OK as they are? Who am I to say their faith is in any way less than mine? Better just to keep quiet and not risk offending.”

The state funeral of Jack Layton, Canada’s Leader of the Opposition, in August 2011, showcased readings from the New Testament, the Torah and the Koran, as well as a native blessing by an aboriginal leader. The message was clear: these are all to be respected equally as sources of spiritual wisdom for Canadians.

So what are Christians these days to think of people of other faiths: Muslims? Hindus? New Agers? Adherents of native spirituality? Jehovah’s Witnesses? Should we really be trying to convert them all? The spirit of the age, after all, says, “Believe what you like. All religions are the same. Diversity is good. Celebrate difference. Rejoice in people’s different understandings of God, and learn from them. But don’t try and convert anyone, for goodness’ sake!” And increasingly folk inside the church are tending to agree.

Of course, the classic Christian claim is quite the opposite: that Jesus Christ is the only way to God, and that unless people come to God through Jesus, they are spiritually “lost.” The words are harsh, bald and shocking. Can any thinking person hold such a view in today’s pluralistic culture?

Well, at first glance the Bible would appear to endorse just such an attitude. Jesus’ own words are perhaps the most frequently quoted in this respect: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No-one comes to the Father except by me.” The Apostle Peter echoes this view: “There is no other name given under heaven by which we may be saved.” Then there is the Apostle Paul, who says things like, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, you will be saved.”<sup>1</sup> This seems to be a strong theme of the New Testament.

Why would Christians ever have said this kind of ‘outrageous’ thing? There are four reasons in particular for Christians to make the claims they have done, and they all concern Jesus:

## **THE NATURE OF JESUS**

The classic Christian claim is that Jesus is God in human form—God incarnate.

If Jesus had appeared in the context of an eastern religion such as Hinduism, there would have been nothing remarkable about people saying that he was “God incarnate.” Jesus, however, was born and raised a Jew, and never moved outside his Jewish heritage. For someone in that culture to claim the kind of intimate identification with God that Jesus claimed (and others claimed on his behalf) was nothing less than blasphemy . . . at least, if it was not true. However, Christians claim that it was true, that Jesus was the incarnation of God unlike any other, and that therefore we see in Jesus, more fully than anywhere else in our world, what God is like.

## **THE ANSWER TO HUMAN SINFULNESS**

In common with Judaism and Islam, Christians believe that the basic problem for human beings is not political or economic, but spiritual and moral: we have not followed “the maker’s instructions” for taking care of human life and the environment which God entrusted to us. Instead, we have tried to play God and have made a mess of it. But



Christianity claims that in some mysterious way God forgives us for all we have done, through the death of Jesus in the year 33 CE. St Paul put it this way: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”<sup>2</sup> No other religion claims that its founder died for the sins of the world.

## **JESUS' RESURRECTION**

Jesus died on a Friday, but two days later, on the Sunday, his followers began to say that he was alive again, and that they had encountered him. Their conclusion? That God had brought Jesus back from death into a new quality of life which can never be destroyed, and that this was God's seal of approval on Jesus' work, and a foretaste and guarantee of a new world to come. This too is unique. Nobody has ever claimed that Buddha or Muhammad or Confucius was resurrected.

## **THE END OF TIME**

Jesus promised that at the end of time, he would be the one sent by God to write the period at the end of history, to be the judge of all who have ever lived, and to usher in God's new world. No other founder of a world religion claimed such outrageous things.

Now those are pretty strong statements. They show that Christian claims are not based just on a few inflammatory texts of scripture pulled out of context. They are based on the essential nature of Christianity at its deepest level. Without that kind of belief—if we believe, for example, that Jesus was just another good teacher of morality—then Christianity loses not just its distinctiveness, but its distinctive power for good in the world. It's like coffee without caffeine, art without colour, food without taste.

Having said that, however, I have to confess that I have struggled with this for years. There are two things I try to hold in tension:

First, you should know that I hold passionately to those four convictions about Jesus. For me, if I water down those truths, I am betraying what I understand to be the heart—not just of Christianity as a faith I love and am committed to—but the heart of our loving Creator God, and God's passionate desire to put to rights the troubles of our world.

On the other hand, I understand why it is risky to hold those convictions, particularly because of the ways Christians have sometimes used them as

a weapon to oppress and even destroy others who believe differently—which horrify me. Take, for example, the words of the Council of Florence in 1438:

*No one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not just pagans, but also Jews or heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before the end of life they are joined to the church.*<sup>3</sup>

Although this is a Roman Catholic statement, the attitude it represents is found in other branches of the Christian family too. “If you’re not part of us and our church, you are damned forever.” I suppose the main reason I can’t swallow this kind of approach is that it seems so totally alien to the spirit of the Jesus I read about in the New Testament. Not that he is “nice” and “tolerant” in our modern sense of the words. He can be pretty angry at times, and he certainly doesn’t hesitate to talk about hell. But most of his anger is directed against the leaders of his own religion, and their failure to teach the inclusive love of God—a quite different kind of anger (and *reason* for anger) than that of the Council of Florence. In fact, I’ve come

to the conclusion that this kind of statement is not and cannot be the final word on the subject for Christians.

So where does that leave us? Is there a way for Christians to be confident in the classic claims of their faith, wanting to commend them to others, and yet to be respectful, loving and tolerant towards people of other faiths? I believe there is.

In this booklet, I want to do two things. One is to address the counter-arguments that people put up to claims about the uniqueness of Christianity and show why I don't think they hold water. The second is to suggest some pointers about how to be a witness to Christ in a pluralistic society without arrogance—indeed, with love and with truth. First then:

## **ARGUMENTS AGAINST CHRISTIAN CLAIMS**

There are six arguments in particular that I have come across:

## SURELY ALL RELIGIONS ARE BASICALLY THE SAME ANYWAY?

I've heard it many times, and maybe you have too. And it sounds so reasonable. All religions are about relating to God and living a good life. Right? Unfortunately, it's really not that simple. It should put us on our guard that it's often those outside of any religion who make this kind of claim: insiders are generally more aware of the differences.

What I have discovered is that, in fact, different religions make conflicting claims, so it's difficult when one looks closely to see how they can all be true at the same time. John Hick is a well-known writer on this subject who wants to be as inclusive as possible, but even he admits it's difficult to see how the claims of different religions can be both true and not true at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

Hick lists some of the questions religions deal with where there are obvious differences, and I have added a few of my own:

- Is the physical world, including its evil, real (as Western religions claim) or an illusion (as Buddhism claims)?

- Can God have “a son” in the sense that Christians say that Jesus was uniquely “the son of God”? Muslims and Jews would say a clear no.
  
- Is reincarnation true? Broadly speaking, western faiths say no, eastern faiths say yes.
  
- Is there one book which can appropriately be called “the Word of God”? If so, which is it?
  
- What makes us acceptable to God? Our beliefs? Our moral actions? Our religious actions? Again, religions differ.
  
- Is it appropriate to think of God as Trinity, as Christians believe, or is God strictly One, as Muslims and Orthodox Jews assert?
  
- Is it appropriate to think of God as (in some sense) a Person? Western religions say yes; many Buddhists would prefer to be thought of as atheists than endorse that understanding of God.
  
- “The Buddhist concept of nirvana is not the same as the Christian idea of the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>5</sup> Losing my personhood (like a wave of the sea) is not the same as fulfilling my personhood (restored to the image of God).

- And, as Hans Kung has remarked, there is a world of difference between the smiling Buddha and the crucified Christ.<sup>6</sup>

The list could go on. How can all these views be true at the same time? And these are not just secondary beliefs, mind you, somewhere out on the edges of the religions. These topics are all absolutely central.

## PERHAPS EACH RELIGION HAS A PIECE OF THE TRUTH

Sometimes people remind me of the parable of the elephant and the blind men. You may have heard it. It goes like this:

*Blind men are trying to discover the nature of an elephant. Yet each offers a different description, according to the part of the elephant he touches. The one who feels the head concludes that an elephant is like a pot; the one with the ear says, "An elephant is like a winnowing basket;" the one feeling the tusk argues that an elephant is like a plowshare; and so on.<sup>7</sup>*

The conclusion is obvious: religious views are different because, like the blind men, none of

us can see the whole truth, so we draw wrong conclusions from the little we know. Oh yes, religions are different, of course, but if we were not blind and we could see the whole picture, we would understand how they are actually all part of the same great truth.

But, of course, an illustration can never prove anything. Illustrations can only illustrate a point-of-view. If in fact all religions have just a single piece of the truth, then the elephant story illustrates that beautifully. But how could we ever know for sure that God is like the elephant? Or how could we know that different religions are like the blind men? What is the point-of-view the illustration is illustrating?

Well, in its earliest form, this story is supposed to have been told by the Buddha. And in Buddhist tradition, the story works perfectly, because it illustrates the Buddhist understanding of reality—that everything is ultimately one. The story appears to be objective and fair to all religions, yet in fact it speaks out of one particular religious perspective. Buddhists know about the elephant: they're not blind.



However, the real question is: what reason do we have for thinking this perspective is right? I'm not assuming it's wrong, you understand. I'm just saying you can't settle this kind of question with a parable, however clever and amusing. It needs more discussion: about reality and God and truth—and perhaps elephants. For people of Jewish, Muslim and Christian conviction, for example, the whole starting point of the parable is wrong: the elephant in the story is passive, waiting to be discovered. But for people of those faiths, however, God is active, taking the initiative in revealing himself to people. So for them, the parable simply doesn't work.

## **MAYBE DIFFERENT RELIGIONS ARE APPROPRIATE FOR DIFFERENT CULTURES**

Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggested that comparing religions is as futile as comparing civilizations. Religions after all are part of civilizations. If you wouldn't think of criticizing a civilization, then don't criticize its religion either. Nobody complains that the Taj Mahal is not as beautiful as Westminster Abbey (or vice versa). So why complain that Hinduism is not like Christianity? It's ridiculous to compare them by the same standard.

There is no universal standard by which to measure them. They are simply beautiful—and in the case of religions, true—in terms of their own culture.<sup>8</sup>

The fact is, however, that we do make value judgments between religions. There are, or have been, religions based on human sacrifice, fear of evil spirits, or mass suicide. Should I give those the same degree of respect that I would give to, say, Zen Buddhism? Or what about those cult leaders who claim that God has spoken to them? Should I take that as seriously as the claims that God spoke to Moses or Muhammad or Jesus? I don't think so. In practice, we are only tolerant up to a point, and, I would say, rightly so. We should be discriminating in thinking about religion, especially where such issues as freedom, rights, and human dignity are concerned—which is often the case in questions of religion.

This view that religions are just a cultural phenomenon is also difficult to argue when many of the world's religions these days are so thoroughly international. It goes without saying that Islam these days is found all over the world, and not only in the Middle East. It is reported, for example, that in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, there are about 500 Muslim families, 85 percent of them Brazilian converts who

have no Arab links, and the number of mosques has risen to 127, four times as many as in 2000.<sup>9</sup> Or take Christianity. It began in the Middle East, became predominantly a Western religion, but is now burgeoning in the global south even as it declines in the West. Buddhism likewise has adapted to many cultures and languages around the world. As a result, every day it becomes harder to argue that any religion is only appropriate for a certain culture.

## **ARE YOU SAYING THEN THAT THERE IS NO TRUTH APART FROM CHRISTIANITY?**

Personally, I don't find that my belief in Jesus leads me to dismiss other faiths or those who follow them. As C.S.Lewis says, "If you are a Christian, you do not have to believe that all other religions are simply wrong all through."<sup>10</sup> In fact, quite the opposite.

How come? Let me begin with a somewhat neglected aspect of Christian faith which theologians call "prevenient grace." This is the conviction that God is at work throughout the world, blessing people and seeking their good, whether or not they believe in him. Jesus perhaps puts it most simply: God "makes his sun rise on

the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”<sup>11</sup> Although it seems counter-intuitive and even wrong to a lot of religious people, it seems that God is prepared to be good to all, regardless of who they are or what they believe! John’s Gospel expresses the same thing more theologically when it speaks of Jesus as “the true light, which enlightens everyone, [who] was coming into the world.” The light of God is and always has been in the world: the light that Jesus brings to the world is that same light.<sup>12</sup> People may not always respond to the light of God, any more than Christians do, but it is there, and they may respond to it, just as Christians seek to do.

This means I should approach people of other faiths and cultures, not in the first place as sinners who need what I have to offer them, but with humility and openness. Clark Pinnock points out that Christians visiting other cultures “will discover noble insights and actions which are the result of God working among the people.”<sup>13</sup> They will know things about truth and beauty and goodness that I need to learn, because they have learned them (whether consciously or not) from the light of God at work in the world. This shouldn’t surprise me as a Christian: God is gracious and generous to all. So my posture towards people of other faiths is first of

all to respect, value, and expect to learn from them.

That is not the whole story, of course. There will always be significant points at which I disagree with followers of other faiths, and they disagree with me. In some instances, these are huge and serious disagreements—most often around the person of Jesus. But that is the nature of many (perhaps most) relationships: we have some agreements and some disagreements, and we try to live with them. My choice is not between having to agree with everything or having to disagree with everything. Otherwise I would have no significant relationships at all!

This point-of-view is not only one that a Christian might have. I can imagine a Muslim saying something like this:

*Christians respect Abraham and Moses—which is good; and they follow the prophet Jesus—which is also good. Unfortunately, their belief that Jesus is the “Son” of God is blasphemous, and their belief that God would allow one as good as Jesus to die is misguided. And they have certainly missed the best, which is contained in the Koran. Maybe I can talk to my Christian friend about these things.<sup>14</sup>*

Many Christians today hold this kind of view, on the one hand holding firmly to what they believe, but on the other hand affirming truth and goodness wherever they find it. This is what Don Posterski has called “principled pluralism.” Not the kind of pluralism that says, “Anything goes. Whatever.” Nor the kind of principle that says, “My way or the highway.” But an attitude that says, “We can disagree, even on some fundamental things, but there are some important things we agree on too. I will give you the space to be yourself, and I hope you will do the same for me.”<sup>15</sup>

## **BUT CAN RELIGIOUS PEOPLE GO TO HELL?**

I believe that God gives us what we choose. If we choose for God, God honors that choice and welcomes us home. If we resist God and push God away, God respects that choice too. This is why C.S.Lewis, though he says the idea of hell is “a detestable doctrine,” adds that “it has the support of reason.”<sup>16</sup> However, we cannot foretell who may say yes and who may say no to God. I believe they may be people of any religion or of none.

Let’s begin with an assumption behind the question, that religion is where people are drawn who want to

know God, be close to God and follow God. Surely they of all people have said yes to God, chosen for God, and will therefore “go to heaven”? Well, maybe . . . but maybe not as well. Bishop John V. Taylor is typical of religious writers who warn us that religion does not necessarily lead to God:

*It is impossible to escape the ambiguity of all religions, for in every household of faith it is plain that man [sic] uses religion as a way of escaping from God. This is as true of Christianity as of any other religious system.<sup>17</sup>*

Religion as a way of escaping from God? Absolutely. To know this I have to look no further than my own heart. I teach in a religious institution, I engage in religious activities every day of my life, my mind flows naturally to religious language and images. Does that mean I am seeking for God? that I am longing to do what God wants? that I want the friendship with God above everything else? Well, on good days, by the grace of God, yes. But I am also quite aware that religious “stuff” can easily become an end in itself. I can be so wrapped up in the everyday life of a “religious professional” that I forget that the purpose of my life is actually to love and serve God.<sup>18</sup> And I’m pretty sure I’m not the only one.

We shouldn't assume, then, that anyone who is involved in religion will "go to heaven." There is no religious tradition which can guarantee that a person's heart really desires God. Followers of any religious tradition may want religion or any one of a hundred benefits of "religion"—respectability, comfort, community, ritual, and so on—more than they want God, and the God Jesus taught about is not one who would force them into relationship.<sup>19</sup>

Can religious people go to hell? Of course—just like anyone else: that is the dangerous edge of human freedom. So should I evangelize people of other religions? Of course: Jesus is good news for all. In one sense, whether they—or indeed we—are religious or not is irrelevant.

## **WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD ABOUT JESUS?**

I have discovered that there are different answers to this question. Some Christians will tell you that unless you have heard about Jesus and made an explicit commitment to being his follower, you cannot be "saved." Ignorance of the law (or in this case the Gospel) is no excuse. If this seems unfair, the answer is that, if God chooses to "save" only those



who hear and respond, that is God's prerogative. After all, nobody deserves God's love anyway, so who are we to argue with any conditions God may choose to lay down for people to enjoy that love?

There is another approach, however. In the Old Testament, there are many, such as Abraham and Sarah, who apparently had an intimate relationship with God, and who have been regarded as spiritual role models by Christians since the first century. Yet, since they lived before the time of Jesus, not only did they not believe in him, they did not hear about him either.

From a Christian point of view, then, how can people like Abraham and Sarah be in relationship with God? The New Testament's own answer is that they responded with faith, that is, with trust and commitment, to whatever they knew about God, even if that was only a small amount.<sup>20</sup>

Does that mean that Jesus was unnecessary for them? Not at all. If Abraham had a relationship with God, it was because God forgave his wrongdoing, and, as Christians understand it, God's forgiveness is inextricably linked to the death of Jesus. The fact that the crucifixion would not happen in history for two thousand years after Abraham's time is a

minor detail! The significance of Jesus' death is in this sense "trans-historical"—that is, it works backwards in time as well as forwards.

Now, maybe people like Abraham and Sarah offer a clue for thinking about those who have never heard of Jesus in our day. Many Christians would argue that people of any religion or none can find a relationship with God by the same route as Abraham: that is, if they respond with trust to whatever truth and light God has shown them.

Is Jesus, then, not necessary for them? Again, as with Abraham, Jesus is certainly necessary. But they can experience the benefits of Jesus' death even if they don't know about it, just as I can experience the benefits of driving my car even if I haven't the first idea how it works. (I haven't.) William Abraham says, "Clearly, such people will not know that their salvation has come to them through the work of Christ, but then Abraham did not know that either."<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, someone who wants to know God will recognize the importance of Jesus when they do hear about him. Jesus anticipated this when he said: "Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching [I am

giving] is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.”<sup>22</sup>

It doesn't surprise me in light of this that pioneer Christian missionaries tell stories of people hearing about Jesus for the first time and saying (in effect), “This is exactly what we have been waiting for.” For example, here is the response of an old woman in the Philippines to the message of Christ:

*When being examined for baptism, she was asked: “And when did you believe on the Lord Jesus?” Her poignant and pathetic reply was, “As soon as you told me of him, of course. And wouldn't we have believed sooner had you come sooner?”*<sup>23</sup>

Many times, those who have been pursuing the truth about God with humility and faith (resolving “to do the will of God,” to use Jesus' words) recognize in the Christian message the fulfillment of their hearts' yearnings.<sup>24</sup>

What of those who never hear of Jesus? My growing conviction is that God seeks to communicate to all people, and gives them the opportunity to respond, whether the light they have is little or much, whether they live in a place where they can hear the Christian message or they are part of another

religious faith. John V. Taylor gives a dramatic illustration:

*The first to be permitted to teach the gospel in northern Nigeria found themselves greeted by a handful of people who professed to being already followers of Jesus Christ. They told the story of Malam Ibrahim, a teacher of the Holy Qur'an whose studies had slowly convinced him that in its pages a unique office is conferred on the figure of Isa Masih, Jesus the Messiah, as the mediator through whom the prayers of the faithful are offered up to the All-Merciful. So he gathered round him a band of devotees who made their regular prayer in the name of Isa Masih. When the religious authorities found out he was charged with heresy, refused to recant, and was crucified in Kao market-place thirty years before a Christian preacher arrived in the country.<sup>25</sup>*

Do people who are sincerely seeking God still need to hear about Jesus? Oh yes. If you are walking up a steep cliff path with a flashlight, and someone offers you a floodlight that will illuminate the whole cliff-face including your path, do you respond, "Oh no, it's OK. Can't you see I've got a flashlight"? I think not. God's light is everywhere in the world, certainly, but in Jesus, "the light of the world," that light shines most fully and clearly.

If then Christians have something unique to offer to the world, and if the arguments against their sharing it do not stand up to close scrutiny, what does an appropriate Christian witness look like in a culture like ours?

# CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

The first question that is often asked these days is actually a more fundamental one: is evangelism ever ethically permissible? Is it not inevitably a matter of trying to foist one's views on some unwilling victim—and therefore by definition oppressive? Should we not simply be tolerant of whatever people choose to believe, rather than trying to persuade them of our own point-of-view?

Canadian philosopher Elmer John Thiessen argues that “evangelism” in one form or another is simply a human activity like any other.<sup>26</sup> In fact, every one of us is an evangelist, whether we are aware of it or not. We are all enthusiastic about something, and we all recommend things to others on the basis of our enthusiasm—and that's the heart of evangelism. A secular book called *Creating Customer Evangelists* points this out:

*You tell others what movie to see, which computer to purchase, what restaurant to visit, which dentist you prefer, which cell phone to buy, which books to read, which clubs to join. Your recommendations are sincere. Passionate, perhaps. Perhaps you didn't realize that you are an evangelist.*<sup>27</sup>

Thus Jesse Hirsh, Canadian pop culture guru, says, “I’m an internet evangelist.”<sup>28</sup> The head of Kellogg’s in the UK has similarly declared himself to be a “cereal evangelist.”<sup>29</sup> And many companies these days deliberately set out to make their customers so satisfied that they become spontaneous “evangelists” on behalf of their product.

Evangelism then, in the sense of trying to share my enthusiasm with a view to persuading someone else to try the thing I love, is a natural part of human interaction. Is it good or bad? That depends on whether the things I recommend turn out to be as good for others as I claim, and (most relevantly) exactly how I share my enthusiasm.

Can it be arrogant? Absolutely. You can recommend your new most favourite restaurant to me in a modest way (“I can only say that I really like it. I realize it might not be to your taste, but why don’t you try it just once?”). Or you can do it in an arrogant way (“This is only for sophisticated people with a discerning palate, not like that cheap greasy spoon you like so much”). You can guess which I am more likely to respond positively to.

It’s worth noting that an arrogant approach can hide the truth. A doctor may try to persuade her patient that giving up smoking is necessary for his

health. If she does it in an arrogant-sounding way (“You’d never catch me indulging in that filthy habit”), it may only serve to strengthen the patient’s resistance to doing what he’s told. Nevertheless, the arrogance doesn’t change the fact that the advice is good advice. Too bad the patient cannot hear it because of the attitude in which it is offered.<sup>30</sup>

There are several reasons why a Christian should not be arrogant in sharing his or her faith.

- The Christian Gospel is a message of love, and arrogance and love are incompatible.
- Jesus commends humility in his followers, so to speak arrogantly goes against the spirit of Jesus.
- The Gospel is a gift we have received that we never deserved, so we are never more than “one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.”<sup>31</sup>

But even if these are not persuasive, there remains the pragmatic reason: people will not listen to, and cannot hear, a message, however wonderful and true, that is shared in a spirit of arrogance.

The seriousness of this issue is readily illustrated from the history of Christianity, which is littered with examples of Christians not sharing their faith



with humility—and, tragically, the consequences remain with us today. One of those times was the 19th century colonial movement, when all too often in places like Africa missionaries co-operated with the forces of colonization. Frequently, what was supposed to be the “Good News” of Christianity was used to exploit, oppress and dehumanize the colonized. In fact, Christianity turned out to be very bad news.

However, this is not the whole story. There are also less well-known (but equally well-documented) stories of missionaries who opposed the abuses of the colonizers, and of times when the colonizers tried to disrupt missionary work, knowing perfectly well that the missionaries would work against their imperialistic ambitions. In cases like this, the missionaries’ determination to evangelize actually worked against the powerful and for the oppressed.<sup>32</sup>

It seems clear to me which kind of missionary stands in the authentic tradition of Jesus. He himself was a proclaimer of liberation. Ordinary folk flocked to hear him.<sup>33</sup> He was gentle with the marginalized and the disenfranchised. The people who found his message threatening were the powerful, whether their power was political or religious. Certainly, Jesus’ followers have sometimes abused truth and

power, and become agents of bondage, but that does not invalidate Jesus' intention—nor the fact that others have authentically followed his example.

## THE INTOLERANCE OF TOLERANCE

It needs to be said too, though it is counter-intuitive, that “tolerance” can itself be pretty oppressive.<sup>34</sup> Take the elephant analogy. It sounds very tolerant, doesn't it? Yet how do we feel towards the blind men in the story? Pity for a start: poor misguided people. Perhaps we even smile at their foolishness. And how do we feel about ourselves as we observe this scene? If we are honest, rather superior and even smug. After all, we can see, while those poor blind men can't. Not exactly a pleasant or respectful attitude.

And, most significantly of all: how come those watching the scene are able to see everything? How come they are sighted while everyone else is blind? By what right do they say, “This is how things really are”? The story gives absolutely no reason. They simply believe that what they see is the whole truth. So, by a strange reversal, the very story which argues against anyone claiming “truth” for their religion, itself claims to be objective truth. What appears at first sight to be a liberal and tolerant analogy actually imposes its view just as oppressively as the

views it is mocking and relativizing.

Bernard Lewis, writing in *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, put it this way:

*Tolerance . . . is an extremely intolerant idea, because it means "I am the boss: I will allow you some, though not all, of the rights I enjoy as long as you behave yourself according to standards that I shall determine."*<sup>35</sup>

So if evangelism is at its heart a natural human activity, and if Jesus modeled a way it can be done without causing oppression, what does it mean to share our faith with a friend—particularly one of another faith? And how I do that with a combination of deep conviction and genuine humility? If there are two things I believe can guide us, they are truth and love. Rather than offer you theories, here are some examples of how that can work out in practice:

## **MORE TRUTH, MORE LOVE**

¶ I remember once attending a debate between a Christian (an Arab) and a Muslim imam at a mosque. In spite of feeling nervous beforehand, I was delighted to find that it was a model of clarity, charity and respect—and even humour—in spite of the obvious differences between the speakers.

Then came the questions. The first was from a Muslim (an American convert, interestingly enough). Her question was for the Christian: “Will you say, There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet?” The imam was immediately on his feet: “That is not an appropriate question for this occasion. We are trying to listen to one and another and understand one another’s point-of-view, and your question does not help.” The woman sat down, the event returned to its former cordial tone, and a difficult confrontation was avoided. I was impressed.

That debate (and I have been to others like it) have demonstrated to me that respectful, friendly dialogue between people of different faiths is not only possible but in fact more common than cynics think. Believing that one religion is closer to the truth than another (as the debaters obviously did) does not necessarily lead to intolerance or persecution. In fact, for a speaker to be firm in her faith can give her an internal stability which allows for non-defensive dialogue and genuine two-way communication. As Thiessen puts it:

*Those who genuinely believe in truth will be the least likely to come to blows over it, since they know truth will stand regardless of their ability to defend it.*<sup>36</sup>

**2** I have been blessed with friends of different

religions over the years. As I write, one in particular comes to mind, a Muslim. During the years we knew each other, I always hoped that he would become a follower of Jesus—and he knew that. I would not have been faithful to Jesus if I hadn't. And he hoped for me to become a Muslim—and I knew that. All the same, we enjoyed one another's friendship. We had frank conversations about faith, where we listened to one another and tried to understand one another's faith. We laughed together, teased one another, and shared difficulties together. There was no pressure. We found there were issues where we found ourselves closer to one another than to our western secular friends. And we left the outcome of our theological discussions to God. Frankly, we had no other choice!

**3** Sometimes the word evangelism is defined as “preaching the Gospel.” That may explain why some Christians seem incapable of an informal conversation about faith: they always have to preach—even if the audience is only one person! So, if a friend of a different faith says, “Well, Jesus was a very good man,” they are likely to respond by going into “preaching mode”: “No, no, Jesus Christ is Lord of Heaven and Earth, Saviour of the World, Judge of all People before whom every knee in heaven and earth will bow, so you must repent and trust him as your Saviour. Why not right now?”

They may feel that their evangelistic responsibility has thus been fulfilled—they have “preached the Gospel”—but, trust me, there will likely never be a second conversation with that friend. Indeed, there may no longer be a friend!

But the Greek word for evangelise can equally be translated “talk about good news”—talk, not preach. So, in response to the person who says to us (innocently enough), “Jesus was a very good man,” a more friendly, conversational response would be, “You know, a lot of people think that. The problem I have with that is that there just seems to be a lot of evidence that he was more than a good man. I’d be curious to know what you would make of some of the stories of Jesus that have made people come to that conclusion.” That kind of response honours the nature of friendship, and is far more likely to lead to more fruitful conversations about faith.

**4** One of my fondest memories of university ministry is of Bible studies with students of different religions. I remember one study where we were discussing the call of the first disciples, four fishermen. I began by asking what I thought was a simple enough question: “Why did Jesus call these men?” One student, a Japanese Buddhist, said, “Well, all life is sacred, so fishing is an evil occupation and Jesus, who is a good man, calls

them away from it.” You can imagine that that led to a lively conversation. On another occasion, we were discussing Jesus’ offer of “living water” to the woman at the well (John 4). “What do you think the water is?” I asked. A Chinese woman with no Christian background replied quietly, “I think he means water for the heart.”

Encouraging people of other faiths to read the Bible, and particularly the biographies of Jesus we call the Gospels, is one of the most effective ways of communicating Christian faith to anyone, but maybe particularly to those of other faiths. I suppose it is because in Bible study we do not sit face to face and talk (good though that is), but side by side, looking together at Jesus. We do not preach, we simply talk about what we see and hear, and over time Jesus makes himself known. Incidentally, it took a further couple of years of learning about Jesus for that Japanese student to become a disciple—but it did happen. These things do not usually come about overnight.

**5** A different dimension of love and truth is needed when we come across people who have been deeply offended by over-zealous religious people. (I am not singling out Christians in this, since I have myself been on the receiving end of aggressive proselytization from people of other

faiths.) Often such people are wary of anyone who is serious about their faith. They have been burned once too often. What is a suitable response to such people? I honestly think the only place to begin is an apology, particularly if the damage has been done by Christians who have talked about Jesus in an angry, loveless kind of way. That apology itself can be part of a wholesome, winsome witness.

You can also say, “Well, I’m very committed to my faith too, but I promise you I will never treat you like that. It’s certainly not the way Jesus treated people. And if you ever feel I’m coming on too strong, for goodness’ sake tell me, and I’ll back off!” That’s the voice of a friend that promises trust and respect. It’s also an attitude that creates an environment where—perhaps, one day—faith can be shared in a different, more Christ-like way.

## THE LAST WORD

I don’t think anyone these days can hold to the claims of classic Christianity lightly or thoughtlessly. But if we hold to those convictions honestly and passionately, I know from experience that is possible to share that faith with others—including those of other faiths—in a way that is respectful, humble and inoffensive. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not



saying there is nothing offensive about Christianity. Jesus' radical challenge to human autonomy, and the idea that his cross is the ultimate sign of God's love and power, will always be offensive. But that offence is to do with the message, not the messenger or the manner of communication. God can deal with the offence caused by the Gospel. Let's not be responsible for creating any other offence which might get in the way of people hearing that message.

And in the end that message will always be about Jesus—not in the first place about us, not about the church, not about Christianity as a way of life. “What do you think of Jesus?” will always be the question we have to answer for ourselves, and encourage others to answer. All else flows from that.

I find myself moved by the words of one convert to Christianity from Islam who understood this very clearly. Speaking at the World Council of Churches gathering in New Delhi, he said:

*I am a Christian for one reason alone—the absolute worship-ability of Jesus Christ. By that word I mean that I have found no other being in the universe who compels my adoration as he has done.*<sup>37</sup>

And it is the reality of this Jesus, and the goodness of his Good News, that makes me believe that evangelizing all people, of all backgrounds, whether Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Confucian, animist, atheist or indeed Christian, is appropriate—as long as it is done in Jesus' own way.





# SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What in this booklet did you find most helpful and why?
2. What in this booklet did you disagree with, and why?
3. What has been your own experience of sharing your faith with people of other religions? What did you learn from that experience?
4. Has your experience (if any) of sharing your faith with people of other religions been different from that of sharing your faith with people of no religion? If so, how was it different?
5. Have you ever been “evangelized” by people of other faiths? How did you feel? How did you respond, and why? What did you learn from that experience?
6. What is the main “take-away” value for you of this booklet and this discussion? What might you do differently and why?

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Respectively John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 10:9.

<sup>2</sup> Corinthians 5:19.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Michael Ingham, *Mansions of the Spirit* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1997), 52.

<sup>4</sup> John Hick “The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth,” in Hick ed. *Truth and Dialogue* (London: SCM, 1975), 143.

<sup>5</sup> Ingham, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Kung, unpublished lecture at Scarborough College, University of Toronto. December 4, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> The parable is quoted in full in Ingham, 75-76.

<sup>8</sup> Hick, 142. To compare between them, Smith suggests, is like making value judgments between Tchaikovsky and Bach. One musical friend to whom I told this illustration expostulated, “But there’s no comparison! Bach is an infinitely better composer!”

<sup>9</sup> The Daily Star, Lebanon, August 22, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Lifestyle/2011/Aug-22/Islam-takes-root-in-land-of-mini-bikinis-Carnival.ashx#axzz1VmA3mZjY>

<sup>10</sup> C.S.Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana Books, 1956 [1952]), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 5:45. Paul, preaching to the pagans at Lystra, says the same kind of thing: God “has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” (Acts 14:17)

<sup>12</sup> Lightfoot is typical of commentators when he says, “Rightly understood, the Lord’s ministry is, as it were, the relations, written small, of the Logos with mankind.” R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John’s Gospel: A Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1956), 81.

<sup>13</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: the Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 77.

<sup>14</sup> Ingham criticizes this strategy as “an attempt to ‘fit’ other religions into our understanding of God, truth and salvation.” (71) But we all seek, as far as possible, to ‘fit’ new information in to what we already know.

<sup>15</sup> Don Posterski, *True to You: Living our Faith in our Multi-Minded World* (Winfield BC: Wood Lake Books, 1995), 156 et al.

<sup>16</sup> C.S.Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1940; San Francisco: Harper Collins 2001), 120.

<sup>17</sup> John V. Taylor *The Go-Between God: the Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press 1975 [1972]), 190 (my italics).

<sup>18</sup> I am sobered by the words of George MacDonald to C.S.Lewis in *The Great Divorce*: “There have been some who were so occupied in spreading Christianity that they never gave a thought to Christ. Man! . . . It is the subtlest of all the snares.” (1946; San Francisco: HarperCollins 2001, 73-74)

<sup>19</sup> For more on the question of hell, see chapter 12 of my book, *Evangelism for ‘Normal’ People: Good News for those Looking for a Fresh Approach* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress 2002).

<sup>20</sup> e.g. “No distrust made [Abraham] waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” Romans 4:20-21.

<sup>21</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1989), 220.

<sup>22</sup> John 7:17.

<sup>23</sup> J. Oswald Sanders *What of the Unevangelized?* (London: Overseas Missionary Fellowship 1971 [1966]), 67.

<sup>24</sup> Abraham says, “the hands they see in the cross are the full embodiment of those hands that they have already discerned in creation and in their own experience of the divine.” (Abraham 222).

<sup>25</sup> Taylor 193.

<sup>26</sup> John Elmer Thiessen, *The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defense of Proselytizing and Persuasion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2011),

<sup>27</sup> Ben McConnell and Jackie Huba, *Creating Customer Evangelists: How Loyal Customers Become a Volunteer Sales Force* (New York: Kaplan Publishing 2002)

<sup>28</sup> Jesse Hirsh, Internet as Religion (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2IkIpA6Otk>), September 15, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Thiessen, 17.

<sup>30</sup> This illustration is from Thiessen, 60.

<sup>31</sup> Attributed to D.T.Niles (1908-1970).

<sup>32</sup> E.G. Christian Blumhart of the Basel Mission wrote in 1827 that there should be “reparation for injustice committed by Europeans, so that to some extent the

thousand bleeding wounds could be healed which were caused by the Europeans . . . through their most dirty greediness and most cruel deceitfulness.” David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1991), 288. See also 281, 287, 306-307 et al.

<sup>33</sup> Mark 12:37 (KJV)

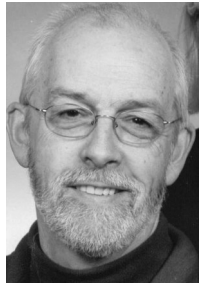
<sup>34</sup> Paul Griffiths of the Chicago Divinity School writes: “Pluralists . . . are themselves engaging in precisely the activity they wish to rebuke. . . . [There are] close links between the ideology of pluralism and a voracious, omnivorous modernity, whose surface tolerance of all religions is indistinguishable from a profound hostility to all.” “Beyond Pluralism,” *First Things*, January 1996, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard Lewis, “I’m Right, You’re Wrong, Go to Hell.” *Atlantic Monthly* 291.4 (May 2003), 39. Cited in Thiessen, 107.

<sup>36</sup> Thiessen, 113. He adds information from a Gallup poll in 1992 that appears to confirm this.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, 193.





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*"This project comes at a time when the Church needs some practical knowledge, encouragement and insight to help them understand and engage better with people from other religions"*

CHRISTIAN WEEK

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