

What About Other Religions?
That's A Great Question Series: Week 4
11/12/17

Welcome/Intro/Vision

This is week 4 of a 5-week series called "That's a Great Question"

Where each week we're tackling some of the top questions that we get from people who are exploring faith, considering faith, or questioning faith

Our hope is that for those of us who are Jesus-followers, we might learn respectful, gentle, thoughtful ways of fielding and affirming people's great questions that come our way

But more importantly, we want to be a place where people who are on a journey of faith can ask their great questions and know that they'll be respected and taken seriously

And hopefully get some answers that will help remove obstacles to you engaging with a genuine life of faith

Here's our series outline, where we've been and where we're going

And as Reminder: next week we're going to open things up to your questions

In your bulletin is this tear-off comment card, write your questions, and we'll tackle those NEXT week.

This week, we're tackling the question "What About Other Religions?"

One of the conversations that I often have here with the people who are considering Jesus

is this push-back against the idea that Christians have held from the very beginning that there's one true faith and everyone else is wrong

in fact, many people as they come here just assume that we can't possibly believe that any more, aren't we all past that by now?

That's hard to grapple with not just on an intellectual level but on a personal level.

Whether you'd call yourself a Jesus-follower or not, most all of us have people that we love and care about who believe differently than we do

over the past 50 years our worlds have gotten much smaller and the interactions across different races and cultures and religions is much more common

it's not just "them" out there overseas or in different countries, it's our co-workers, classmates, and neighbors now, and some them seem like pretty nice people!

In fact, they're nicer than I am or the church people I know! How can we say that they're wrong?

And, of course, there's often conflict along religious lines—some interpersonal conflict, sometimes nations will erupt in wars over religious differences

And the core problem, it would seem to many, are these absolute truth claims that religions often make, that they've got the right picture of God and everyone else is wrong.

So the contemporary buzz word is, of course, **tolerance [bumper sticker]**. We need to be less assertive in any truth claims and more tolerant of other people's truth claims and recognize that we've all got different perspectives and experiences

Tolerance is a very important one for us here in America as our own country is more and more religiously diverse

AND it's important for us as we relate globally to people who are different from us

I want to propose to you that tolerance is very important and it's something that Jesus-followers can and should affirm, in fact we should take the lead on such a thing.

When Jesus told us that the greatest commandment was to love our neighbor, he meant any and all of them.

Now in order to support this call to tolerance, there have been any number of streams of thought that have developed from religious and non-religious perspectives

to try to make us a little more humble and less assertive about those truth claims.

More recently over the past 50 years or so especially here in the United States one perspective or option has developed that's very pragmatic in its approach

We'll call this the "**whatever works for you**" approach

The idea here is that there's nothing real or concrete about God or faith, it's much more utilitarian or functional or practical than that

The basic premise of the 'whatever works for you' approach is that all religions basically teach the same things:

1. **you need to be happy** and
2. **you need to be nice to other people**
3. **God doesn't need to be all that involved in your life unless you need something or are into that sort of thing**
4. **It's private**

And so the purpose of any religious experience, if you're into that sort of thing, is just to help you to navigate life

to get through the hard times and to help you to be a happier, better person all the rest of the time

And all religions are basically kind of the same, just pick one that works for you OR better yet, just pick and choose elements or aspects a bunch of different religions and create your own little system for yourself

In this line of thinking, religion is like a rack of clothes, you pick articles of clothing that fit you JUST RIGHT and that makes you look and feel SO GOOD about yourself

And you can discard or bypass all the rest

So here's the question: who's at the center of this whole whatever works for you approach? You are. I am.

And of course we like that, and of course this matches pitch with every other message we're getting throughout the rest of the course of our lives

But let me humbly propose to you that you should be a little bit suspicious of any line of thinking that makes you the center of the universe

Because what if faith is less like a rack of clothes that you get to choose one that fits you and makes you feel good

What if it's more like a fixed reality that only works if you accept it as it is--like the laws of physics or laws of gravity or how the universe is laid out?

For centuries we tried to make the earth the center of the universe

but it turns out the whole thing makes a whole lot more sense and it works a whole lot better if we let the SUN be the center of the universe

In fact, if WE were the center of the universe and tried to make the whole thing revolve around US, the whole thing would utterly collapse!

The whatever works for you approach tries to minimize religious overly-assertive truth claims but in the process what they've created is merely another set of truth claims:

Religion is all about you: whatever makes you happy, whatever makes you nice to other people, and God is totally optional unless you're into that sort of thing

Instead of synthesizing or bringing together the different religions and approaches

Actually only adds more religious truth claims to the mix, it doesn't bring an end to religious truth claims, it just adds more options

Ultimately, what I want to propose to you is that there's just no way around this problem: everyone and all of us make truth claims about ultimate reality

whether it's religious people or atheists, whether it's people who are ambivalent about the whole thing and just telling you to go for whatever works for you

whether it's people calling everyone to tolerance of other views or it's people calling for war against other views

Everyone is saying that there's a better way to get along, a better way to do life, it's just a question of what's true, right, and good, what's an accurate map of how the universe actually IS laid out

And if we can get that map right, how do we relate in a healthy and right way with people around us who disagree with us

I want to suggest to you that the situation that first Christians were in had a lot in common with our current context here in the United States

They were surrounded by all kinds of religions and philosophies, just like we are here

But they believed deeply **2 core things**:

1. They were sure that **God had done something utterly unique in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus**—this was like nothing else, totally new and revolutionary, like no other religion, not even their own Judaism which they had all grown up in.

But 2. They had to figure out **believe that and even share that in way that obeyed Jesus's teaching to LOVE their neighbor**, even the neighbor that disagreed with them

And so I want to look at a story where one of the first and most passionate followers of Jesus engaged with a group of people who believed very differently than he did

And the WAY that he did so is a very helpful answer to the question “what about other faiths?” If Christians are taking Jesus seriously, how does that shape how they think about other faith traditions in general

AND how do we relate to people of other faiths in all their variety and difference

And if you're here today, not a Christian, not sure what you believe, checking things out, and if this is one of your obstacles to taking a step into faith, I hope that this story will help to give you a picture of what Christian tolerance looks like.

And how that tolerance is an important value that serves the greater thing that Jesus has called us to do, which is to love.

We're going to look at a book of the Bible called Acts: A-C-T-S, it's shorthand for “Acts of the apostles”—this contains the stories of what the very first followers of Jesus did after Jesus's death and resurrection

And how the early church got it's start

And in Acts 17, we're dropping into a story where a man named Paul along with a small crew of a couple of friends is traveling all over the Mediterranean starting new churches, talking to people about Jesus

And in Acts chapter 17, Paul is waiting for his buddies in Athens when he has this remarkable experience with a whole city who believes very differently from what he believes:

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So...

My wife and I both went to Carolina and we met at UNC, and so we have, of course, raised our 3 children up to know what the right shade of blue is and what the WRONG shade of blue is

And at one point when our kids were really little and we lived in South Durham, my wife Kelly took our three kids to a play date with friends over at Duke Gardens

And as they approached Duke's campus my four or five year old daughter says with eyes wide open: "Mom, is this where the bad people live?"

My wife was, of course, horrified, and I of course, was elated: Mission accomplished!

Paul is in Athens, and distressed by the fact that he's in a city that is saturated with pagan religion, idols, idols everywhere in the city—like my daughter traveling through Duke

And so Paul responds emotionally in a way that is perhaps where all religious wars and conflicts begin: he's upset!

He's upset that these people are worshiping what Paul considers to be inferior gods, he's disturbed that they're worshiping gods that he would say are not gods at all

Now for many of us, this idea that anyone would think that someone else's god or gods was the wrong one violates our 21st century ideal of acceptance and tolerance

But when Galileo proposed that the earth revolved around the sun and not vice versa, was he being oppressive to the rest of the world or helpful, true, and accurate?

Galileo's map of the cosmos was a more accurate view of the universe, and it was a gift that he gave that to us

And if you today still believed that earth was the center of the universe, hopefully someone would love you enough to help give you a more accurate map of the cosmos

Paul here is distressed because the people around him are operating under a map of the cosmos that he believe deeply is outdated and wrong

This is, like we said, typical of many people who have strong religious convictions, they believe deeply in their thing, they react strongly to anyone or anything who believes differently

This is normal, but what I want to propose to you makes the difference is what's on the other side of the "so"

Because at various points people throughout history have had this same type of strong religious objection and on the other side of that strong emotion, on the other side of that "so" there's violence

On the other side of that 'so' there's acts of hatred, acts of aggression, acts that diminish and destroy and undermine the people who are engaged in that other religious activity

This is what has caused so much pain and heartache in the name of religion for centuries!

So what Paul does here after this “SO” is mission-critical—is Paul going to simply contribute to more aggression and violence and self-aggrandizement that is so typical of passionate religious people?

Here’s what’s on the other side of Paul’s “so” that is so very instructive:

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

He doesn’t get violent. He doesn’t get aggressive.

But nor does he withdraw and recede and simply let them hold onto a view of the spiritual world that is the equivalent of the sun revolving around the earth

He reasons with them, he’s ENGAGING, deliberately, thoughtfully, not just flying off the handle and yelling at everyone about how wrong they are

he’s living out the conviction that the Jesus map of the cosmos is reality while at the same time loving his new neighbors here in Athens, just like Jesus had commanded him to do

And as is typical, he starts with the people and the places he knows best:

the synagogue is the local church where the Jews worshiped and by God-fearing Greeks it means Greeks who lived in the area who were converts to Judaism

And then from there, he moves into the marketplace, having open discussions and conversations with anyone and everyone who happened to be there

And this matched pitch with the culture of Athens—Athens was full of philosophers and academics who were all roaming around bumping into each other and having nerdy philosophical discussions

I heard somewhere that Durham has the most Ph.D’s per capita of anywhere in the United States—way too many over-educated nerdy people all concentrated in one place!

Athens was kind of like that, and so Paul’s approach was very much in line with his context. And in fact, this approach of reasoning and discussing there in the synagogue and marketplace opens up a way for Paul to get a big moment on a big stage there in Athens, here’s how it unfolds:

8 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.”

21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) 22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said:

Almost exactly 5 ½ years ago I had my candidating weekend here at Chatham Community church

if you're not familiar with what that is, that's the beauty pageant Sunday when you're applying for a church job when you give your best message in the hopes that everyone likes you when they vote on you the weekend after!

And I really wanted the job, I really felt like God was doing something to bring me here, so I did two things:

1. I talked really slow, because that was a concern some people had
2. But I also wanted to talk about what I thought mattered the most in Christian community—so I talked about the power of forgiveness. How God's forgiveness and grace towards US empowers us to forgive and be reconciled to each other.

It was a big moment for me, and I wanted to lead with what I thought was most important.

Paul here is getting a big moment on a big stage.

he's got a captive audience with some of the best and brightest of his day, these were thinkers and philosophers and movers and shakers and people who shaped the religious thinking and understanding of the entire Roman empire

And what he does with his big moment on this big stage is very instructive for us as we ask the question “how do Jesus-followers think about and engage with people of other faiths and religions and spiritualities.”

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

Paul stands up and affirms what he can affirm and then is about to proclaim the fulfilment of their incomplete religious framework

Application #1 to how Christians engage with and relate to people of other religions and spiritualities: We start with YES...

Yes to religious impulses. Yes to a desire to connect with the divine. Yes to the hunger for spiritual experience and reality and truth

YES to the idea that we talked about earlier religious experience should make us better, more alive and even happier people, get us through difficult and hard times, and should make us better neighbors, nicer to the people around us

YES, yes, yes: ...**AND there's more.**—and this is what I'm going to proclaim to you, tell you about

Throughout this little address that we're going to read, Paul is going to look for and build bridges with cultural points of **RESONANCE** in respectful and thoughtful ways **and** build **BRIDGES**

While at the same time, he's not going to shy away from points where the Jesus way is going to **CHALLENGE** the existing religious framework and practices of the people he's talking to

And to help us see this a little more quickly, I'm going to color-code this as we read it, GREEN is going to point out the places where Paul is building bridges and emphasizing RESONANCE

ORANGE is going to be the places where Paul doesn't shy away from the differences in their framework and understanding

And so let's color-code Paul's opening here as all green: I see you're very religious, very spiritual

YES, from my understanding of who God is and how God made us, I would affirm that we both share this hunger for something larger, something spiritual, a larger reality that we all have to understand and engage with in order for us to live as we were made to live

So let's put this all in green, this is all resonance with the Christian story, from this point of resonance, Paul goes on

²⁴ "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything.

Remember the ancient greek myths, how so many of them were like an episode of Desperate Housewives meets General Hospital? Drama, drama, drama, drama

And in many of those ancient myths, the gods were very localized in a very specific place
And humans were created to keep them happy, do their bidding, be their little errand boys and girls

So Paul here declares that there's a bigger God that supercedes time and place and who relates to human beings very very differently than the pagan gods did—less Desperate Housewives

meets General Hospital and much more like love, grace, integrity, wisdom, hope, beauty, and truth, he continues:

Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'^[b] As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'^[c]

Here, Paul is quoting two different pagan philosophers. He's loved his neighbors enough to read their poets, understand their philosophy

And in so doing, he's found points of resonance where he, as a Jesus follower can again say "YES!"

Paul here quotes some pagan philosophers and poets, but in other situations, in other contexts, he's quoted the Old Testament—why be different here?

Because he's going to quote the authorities they *already trust* rather than demand that they submit to a 'foreign' authority that they do not yet have reason to trust.

This is one of the mistakes that my Jesus people make all the time. We take our authority and expect other people to respect it when they do not yet have reason to do so

In order for us to practice a Jesus-following tolerance that serves the greater cause of love, we have to become more fluent not just in our own faith but in the sources of authority that the people around us already have and listen to

And then we have to look for and listen for places of resonance with the message and work of Jesus

Paul has respected and honored the people enough that he's learned their culture, gotten at least conversant in what matters to them

And from that place of thoughtful and loving engagement, he's found points of RESONANCE with the gospel of Jesus Christ

See, here's what we believe as Christians: that God has created everyone in his image with a common set of core soul hungers that we all share

All of us want to be loved, all of us long for meaning and purpose, all of us long for connection relationally and with something divine or at least larger than ourselves,

All of us long for security and love and a clear sense of who we are

And because God has placed these longings in all of us, in every person and in any and every culture and religion, there are expressions of those longings that as Jesus-followers we would affirm and celebrate.

And so everywhere you look, there are echoes of these longings that as Jesus-followers we believe have been finally and fully met in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ

Whether you're into Taylor Swift or Frederick Nietzsche or Marvel Avengers or romance novels or the feed and seed store or the drama on the Chatham Chatlist

There are these echoes of these longings that we believe God has planted in us that are being expressed in some way that resonate with the ways that God made us and the work that Jesus has done

Paul knows this, so he quotes the authorities that they already have rather than attempt to import an external authority that they have no reason to trust

as a way to build bridges into a story that they do not yet know but he hopes that they will engage with and listen to

²⁹ "Therefore since we are God's offspring [there's the YES again, riffing off the resonance with the pagan philosophers], we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill [there's a point of significant dissonance in a city full of silver and gold and stone idols—Paul's saying that these are a little ridiculous if God's as big as your philosophers have said!].³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

Now there's two philosophical and political camps here: the Stoics and the Epicureans, it's like the Democrats and Republicans, they don't agree on much

but one thing that they both agree on is that dead people don't get raised to life!

And it's here that Paul draws the strongest negative response from this crowd:

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

What do Jesus-followers believe about other faiths, other religions, other spiritualities? What does Jesus teach us and show us about how to relate to the neighbor who believes differently from us?

First off, we're called to love our neighbor, no matter what they believe or how they do or don't practice any faith

And part of loving them means getting to know them and their culture and what matters most to them

And at the same time, part of loving them means respectfully and thoughtfully sharing how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is God's great answer to all the core soul hungers we all share

Every Jesus-follower has had to do this from the very beginning!

When Jesus was alive, he called 12 guys to be his followers, all of them Jews, most of them very devout Jews.

After his death and resurrection, every single one of them had to re-think their previous religious and spiritual experience in light of the resurrection of Jesus

Paul, the guy who's speaking to the Areopogus, was a devout and dedicated Jew.

After he had his dramatic encounter with Jesus, he went away and spent 3 years re-thinking and re-understanding all his previous religious and spiritual beliefs and experiences through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ

He couldn't just add Jesus onto his previous religious beliefs like a nice add-on. He wasn't going to accessorize his Judaism with a little bit of Jesus thrown in

Because the Jesus wasn't just going to be fit into some other pre-existing framework and it was too crazy, too much work, too sacrificial and too costly—it just didn't make sense

I want you to step inside the Jesus story and see how it reads: into a perfectly good Jewish family, and to a community of Jewish people, many of whom were already good people, already practicing very devoutly

God himself puts on flesh and comes to earth, the Son of God leaves eternal joy and perfect love and eternal bliss to come to this place that is both beautiful and broken at the same time

And his path leads him to a death sentence, and a torturous, awful execution in one of the most painful ways ever devised in human history to die

in fact, he pleaded in prayer with God that if there was ANY OTHER WAY for humans to be rescued and brought back into a relationship with God, that God would deliver him from the pain and suffering that was straight ahead

But in the Jesus story, the response he got back from God his Father was there was NO OTHER WAY other than to lay down his own life for the sake of all God's children, all his brothers and sisters, all over the globe

This was going to be THE WAY that all the longings and hopes of Judaism and Paganism and Hinduism and Buddhism and Islam and even atheists and apathy-ists and humanists and every other philosophy and religion was going to be fulfilled: the death and resurrection of Jesus

Not just another religion, but the fulfillment of every religion and every non-religion, for all time, forever.

If all religions were equally valid, if all paths led to the same God, why go through all that trouble? Why do all that work?

Why drop down into a perfectly fine Jewish system and declare that you've fulfilled it?

Why drop down into a larger world full of paganism and declare that it's incomplete if it's actually just fine as it is and will work just as well as any other way to get to God?

The entire New Testament is letters and histories of individual people and entire communities re-thinking their previous beliefs and practices through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

For many of us who grew up in church, at some point we, too, have to re-think and re-evaluate even our Christian church teachings and experiences and expectations through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus

And so the work continues and goes forth to and through all the world. All of us are invited to the same cross, the same empty tomb, and the same challenge and the same good news:

God so loved the world, that he sent his one and only son to lay down his life for the world and to be resurrected for the world

So that all those core soul hungers we all share to be loved, to be connected, to know meaning and purpose could be fulfilled

And so we respectfully look around at our neighbors, and we get to know them, love them, respect their views and experiences and traditions

And yes, we graciously and generously and when there's an appropriate time and place, we share how those core soul hungers we all share have been met by the love of Christ

This week's TAKE-WITH:

1. **GQ'er: what are the core soul hungers you have?** Have you considered how life, death, resurrection of Jesus might meet and answer those?
2. **Jesus-follower: this week, listen for RESONANCE look for BRIDGES: *What can we say YES AND to?*** as you relate to neighbors/co-workers/family, whatever you watch on t.v, read, listen to: where are there expressions of good core soul hungers that Jesus would say "YES" to, even if the exact expression of those hungers might not be in line with the Jesus way?

Where are the people around you looking for love? Looking for purpose and meaning?
How are they very religious or devoted? Where is there resonance and how might you
live your life looking for ways to relate in healthy, affirming, honoring ways

3.