

CHRISTIANITY AND
WORLD RELIGIONS
REVISED EDITION

Christianity and World Religions, Revised Edition:
Questions We Ask About Other Faiths

Christianity and World Religions

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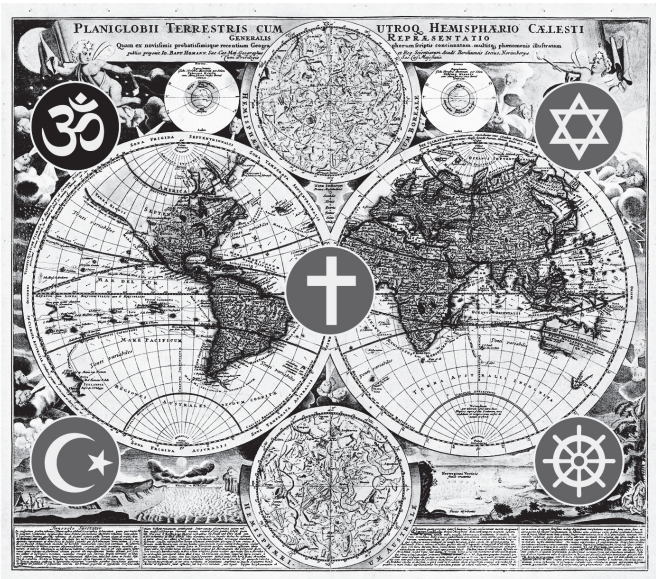
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Author of *Half Truths* and *Creed*

**CHRISTIANITY
AND
WORLD RELIGIONS**

REVISED EDITION



QUESTIONS WE ASK ABOUT OTHER FAITHS

Abingdon Press

Nashville

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*With grateful appreciation to twentieth-century missionary
E. Stanley Jones whose book,
The Christ of the Indian Road,
captures the spirit I hope infuses this book.*

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INTRODUCTION

According to the latest Pew Research Center data, about one in three people in the world claims a Christian faith. Nearly one in four is Muslim. One in six is Hindu. One in sixteen is Buddhist. One in five hundred is Jewish. And about one in six of the world's people is unaffiliated with any religion.¹

While Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with around 2.3 billion adherents, two-thirds of the world's population is not Christian. This fact raises certain questions for earnest Christians: If there is only one God, as Christianity asserts, and that God has revealed himself through Jesus Christ, why are there so many different religions? How does the God of Scripture view earnest followers of other faiths? What do the other religions teach and why? At what points does Christianity find common ground with them? Where do they differ? Is there anything a Christian can learn from people of other faiths? How should Christians relate to their Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Jewish neighbors?

This book considers those questions and others. In each chapter, we will examine one of the world's major religions. We'll seek to understand the essential beliefs and historical setting

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of each faith. We'll look for common ground where we agree. And we will note, with honesty and humility, where we disagree. Along the way, we will gain a greater understanding of what Christians believe and why we believe it. Ultimately I hope this study helps us better understand our neighbors of other faiths, and in the process leads us to better fulfill the command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Increasingly for Americans, our neighbors are people of other faiths. While 70 percent of Americans today claim to be Christian, 30 percent are either people of other faiths or people who claim no religious faith. That means about 100 million of our neighbors in the United States have a different faith understanding than we do. At some point, each of us will be confronted with the claims of persons of other faiths. Our children will have friends and teachers who are a part of other religions. It's likely that you already have doctors, coworkers, and friends of other faiths. If not, you will. Part of loving your neighbor is understanding them.

A first step is to move toward what scholars call a "theology of religions." That will give us a foundation for looking at other religions in our world. A theology of religions aims to answer some of the basic questions I mentioned above, questions like:

- Why are there so many different religions?
- What is the relationship between these religions?
- How does God look at people of other religions?
- What is the eternal fate of those who practice a religion other than the one I follow?

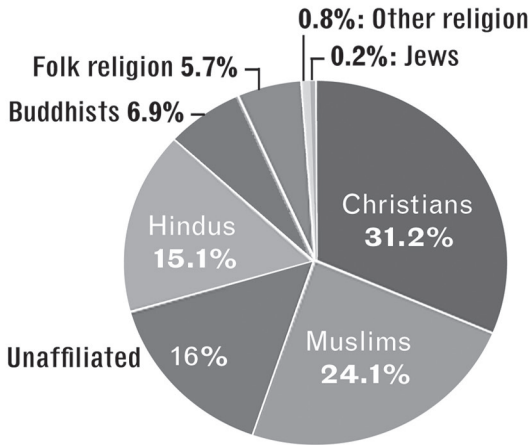
In chapter one, we'll look at these questions from a particular Christian perspective. As we'll learn, various Christians offer different answers to these questions. I approach my own study of the world's religions with an effort to be open and understanding, and with a willingness to see truth where it may

be found. But the lens through which I see the world is my own Christian faith and experience.

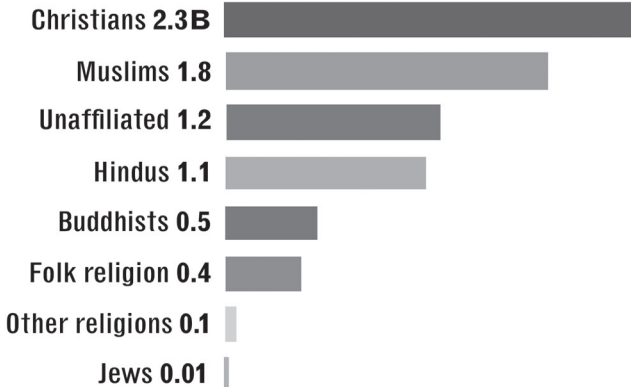
I write as a pastor. I've studied each of the major world religions in seminary. I've read from their sacred scriptures. I've attended services, interviewed multiple leaders of each faith, and read numerous scholars in the field of religion. Having said that, my area of expertise is Christianity. I've written this book as an introduction to these other faiths from a Christian perspective. I urge you to use this study as a beginning point in your exploration of these faiths and to take the next step of reading, studying, and most of all, talking with people of other faiths. Your willingness to listen and learn from people of other religions may lead them, in turn, to be curious about your faith as well.

The Global Religious Landscape

% of world population



Number of people, in billions



"The Changing Global Religious Landscape." Pew Research Center Demographic Study, Washington D.C. (April 5, 2017) <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>.

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1.

THE WISE MEN

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him. . . .”

[Herod] sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. . . .” When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

(Matthew 2:1-2, 8a, 9-11)

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When I was in seminary at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, I often came back to Kansas City for visits with family. During one of those visits, I took my Grandfather Hamilton to lunch. As we were eating, he asked how my studies were going, and I told him about a course I was taking on comparative religion. I said I thought it was fascinating to learn what other people believe. I doubt that my grandfather had ever met a Hindu or a Muslim or a Buddhist. But I recall him responding to me by raising his hands and extending his two forefingers to a point, raised upward. I asked him, “What do you mean, Grandpa?”

He said, “They’re all pointing in the same direction.”

That was my Grandfather Hamilton’s theology of religions. It was quite simple, but it captured what he believed about the other faiths, their relationship to one another and to God.

When you get down to it, everybody has a theology of religions. What is your theology of religions?

Back in 2003, I preached a series of sermons on different religions. After I had delivered the sermon on Hinduism, a man in the congregation came to me and said, “I don’t understand why you’re preaching these sermons. There’s no need for us to hear them. All you need to tell the congregation is that everyone who has not personally accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior is going to hell. It’s that simple.”

His conclusion was based upon his theology of religions. It could not have been more different from that of my Grandfather Hamilton. In this book I’m going to suggest a middle path in understanding the religions of the world, one that falls between my grandfather’s view that all religions are saying the same thing (and thus are equally acceptable paths to God) and the other man’s view that all the other religions are false and their adherents are condemned to hell.

The Hidden God

In this chapter we'll explore several of the questions a theology of religions seeks to answer, beginning with, If there is only one God, why are there so many religions? If there is only one God, wouldn't that God clearly identify himself* rather than allow confusion and multiple religions to coexist? It's an important question, and one that has left a number of people struggling with faith altogether. I'll offer one line of reasoning that makes some sense to me.

Theologians speak of *deus absconditus*—a Latin term that translates as “the hidden God.” While we may see God's handiwork all around us (we ourselves are part of God's handiwork!), we are unable to see God directly. In Exodus 33, Moses prays to God, “Show me your glorious presence” to which God replies, “You can't see my face because no one can see me and live” (vv. 18, 20).

I think of the solar eclipse of 2017. We had a terrific view just outside of Kansas City. My wife, LaVon, and I, and our daughter Rebecca, drove eighty miles east of Kansas City to be in the direct path of the eclipse and to outrun the storm clouds. At just the right moment, the skies cleared. Standing in front of a cornfield, we put on our special eclipse glasses and watched the magic of the moment. It was awesome.

It struck me that this experience might shed some light on God's response to Moses' request. Our sun is a relatively modest-sized star, one of an estimated one billion, trillion stars in the universe (1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000!). God is the source of these billion, trillion stars and, presumably, God's glory and power outshine them all. We needed special solar

* I recognize that God is not male and the use of male pronouns can be problematic, but I retain this traditional language as using terms like “God-self” are problematic in communicating with a wide audience.

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eclipse glasses to avoid being blinded by the sun. It's not hard to understand why no human could survive the experience of seeing God's glory.

We can't see God's glory directly, but in the world around us, and across the observable universe, we see God's handiwork. Religions generally agree about this. Throughout history, as people have looked at the stars or the mountains, or perceived the vastness of the seas, they said, "There has to be something more." In their hearts, they felt a presence bigger than themselves or anything they could imagine. They had what some call "intimations of glory"—feelings and experiences that we identify with God, even though we don't directly see God. God remains above, beyond, transcendent, inaccessible to our sight.

LaVon and I recently attended a gathering of people who largely were either nonreligious or nominally religious. I was the token pastor in the group. We had some meaningful conversations during the evening, and I particularly remember one with a Nobel Prize-winning physicist (who happened to be a United Methodist). I was struck by something he said: "If you want to find the atheists at a state university, go to the Religion Department. But if you want to find those who believe in God, go to the Physics Department." He got a chuckle, but he went on to explain that most of the physicists he knows are Christians. "In our field, we're used to believing in forces that are difficult to see but which shape everything that exists. We cannot see these forces directly, but we see the impact of them all around us."

I think of God in some ways as the physicist describes the four fundamental forces in nature: gravity, the electromagnetic force, the strong force, and the weak force. These forces are what make our universe possible down to the subatomic level. Though we cannot see these forces, our universe would not exist without them. We are utterly dependent upon them.

God is the force, power, and intellect that brought all of these other forces into being. Like the other four, God is unseen. And, like the other four, without God, people of faith believe we would not be alive. As the Apostle Paul, quoting the Greek philosophers and poets, summed it up: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28 NRSV). Apart from God we would not exist.

The words to a hymn that I love capture the idea of the hiddenness of God: “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.”² If God, like the four foundational forces of the universe, is invisible, then we, like the scientists, are left to surmise what God is like by our observations and our experiences of God (which include God’s efforts to reveal himself to us). Is it any wonder there are different religions that developed with different ways of understanding God? Or that there should be so many points at which many of the religions agree?

Feeling the Elephant

As with scientific theories, some religious ideas garner little support. Others seem to hold sway for a time, or in particular places, but eventually fade. Other ideas endure, expressing for many people over a long period of time their experiences of and reflections about God. These enduring faiths, at least four of them, are the “world religions” we’re studying in this book. At the center of each of these faiths are people seeking to express the nature of ultimate reality—various writers of the Hindu scriptures, the Buddha, Moses, Muhammad, and Jesus. They all sought to understand and teach about the “something more” behind the universe, God, and what it means to be human. Each, aside from the Buddha, sought to know the hidden God.

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A familiar metaphor to help us think about this natural variation in the world's religions comes out of a parable in ancient Buddhism. In the parable, a group of blind men encountered an elephant for the first time. They had never met one before, and their lack of sight prevented them from understanding what an elephant looks like. So they put their hands on the elephant and tried to describe its shape and form to one another.

One man, whose hands landed upon the elephant's trunk, said the creature is like a thick snake. Another, who felt only an ear, contradicted the first man and said the elephant is actually like a giant fan. A third, who grasped the elephant's side, said the animal was like a wall. Yet another, who felt the leg, said the elephant was actually a pillar as thick as a tree trunk. Another, who felt only the tail, said the elephant was shaped like a rope. The last of the men, feeling a tusk, said that elephants had a hard exoskeleton. In this way, each man, limited by his own narrow perspective, described only one aspect of the creature but thought he was describing the entire elephant. And they arrived at very different understandings based on what they experienced.

In a sense, the world's religions are like each of the blind men—attempts of human beings to describe what they cannot see in the light of what they have experienced and observed. But the hiddenness of God means that they, as Saint Paul noted, “see a reflection in a mirror.” They are seeking to describe the same reality, but they offer somewhat different descriptions.

Come Find Me

While Christians believe that God may be hidden from direct view, they also believe that the hidden God wants to be found. When our four-year-old granddaughter comes to our house, she

loves to play a certain game over and over. You would recognize it as hide-and-seek. Stella calls it “come find me.” She counts to ten while I go and hide, and then she comes looking for me. After a couple of minutes, I’ll give hints about where I am. If she still can’t find me, I’ll shout, “Stella, I’m in here!” Finally she comes and finds me. Then we’ll switch places, and Stella will hide. She can’t stand to remain hidden for more than about a minute or two. Soon she’ll run out from wherever she was hiding and jump into my arms, giggling with glee. She wanted to be found. And that’s the point: for Stella the joy is in the finding and being found. In a sense, the hidden God has been constantly inviting humanity to “come find me,” dropping hints through the natural world and the intimations of glory—the experiences people have of God.

Christians and Jews believe that the hidden God has revealed himself through a unique relationship with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. Their story, and their reflections on their experiences of God and what they perceived about God’s will, are recorded in the Hebrew Bible—what Christians call the Old Testament.

Christians believe that the hidden God, seeking to be found, known, and understood, came to us “in the flesh” in Jesus Christ. We call this the “incarnation” or enfleshment of God. Every Christmas Eve, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, our church reads the prologue to John’s Gospel:

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God. . . .
The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.*

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*We have seen his glory,
glory like that of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.*

(John 1:1, 14)

This is a central claim of the Christian faith: that God came to the world, as one of us, to reveal himself to us. Jesus taught us not only that there is a God but what God is like. He showed us God's character by his compassion for the sick, the injured, and the poor. In his suffering and death, he taught us something about our brokenness and God's grace. And in his resurrection, he taught us that God's love triumphs over every act of suffering and pain. In all of these things, God said to us, "This is who and what I am; come find me." This is why Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). And it is why Paul wrote of Jesus, "The Son is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

In many of the world's religions, Jesus is seen as a great teacher or prophet, but not as the incarnation of God. Muslims believe God's definitive revelation or word is the Quran, dictated by the angel Gabriel to Muhammad. For Buddhists, the truth about life and its meaning came through Buddha's insights at the moment of his enlightenment and his reflections following this. For Hindus, God is revealed through various stories of deities—incarnations of Brahman—and the reflections on these stories found in the Hindu scriptures.

As a Christian I believe God, who created the universe, came to us in Jesus to show us that he exists, what he is like, and what is God's will for our lives. I can make the case for this, as I will in the final chapter, but I cannot prove it. In the end, faith is a decision. Comparing the various faiths, seeing them through the eyes of their adherents, and finding good in them and points of common ground has not changed my convictions that Jesus

is the definitive Word from God—the only Savior, Son, Lord. If anything, it has deepened these convictions. But studying the other faiths has led me to a greater love of those of other faiths and a deeper appreciation for why they believe what they believe. Ultimately it has also led me to a deeper understanding of my own faith.

How Does God View People of Other Faiths?

To answer the question of how God views earnest, faithful people of non-Christian religions, Christians find answers in our Scriptures, and the answers may surprise us. In the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, non-Jews are referred to as “the nations.” The Hebrew root is *goy* and some variation of it appears over 500 times in the Old Testament. It often refers to non-Israelites who did not embrace Israel’s faith. Reading through all of these passages tells us a great deal about God’s perspective on people who worship other gods.

First, God is seen as king of all the *nations*. In making a covenant with Abraham, God told him, “All the families of the earth will be blessed because of you” (Genesis 12:3). Later, God tells him that “all the nations of the earth will be blessed because of your descendants” (Genesis 22:18). While God had a unique relationship with Israel, it is also clear that God was concerned about all of the other nations of the ancient Near East and wanted to bless them.

The first of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses was, “You must have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Why? Because God is the only true God. The second commandment prohibited the Israelites from making graven images of God. Why? Because nothing made by human hands

could convey the glory of God, and humans found themselves all too willing to substitute idols for the living God.

God told the Israelites, “I...am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5 NIV). God had chosen them and didn’t want them to turn away to other gods. Why? As the Israelites gradually came to understand, God chose them for a special mission; they were, as a nation, intended to reveal to the *nations* of the earth God’s glory, love, and purposes. The prophet Isaiah repeatedly notes that God intended Israel to be a “light to the *nations*.” God intended the nations to walk in Israel’s light. All of which points to a concern for those who did not yet know God.

Isaiah even wrote of a day when all the nations would be drawn to Zion, the mount on which the Temple stood, and the world would live in the light of God. There would be no more suffering, no more war, no more death. Nations would beat their swords into plows for growing crops—they would help feed their fellow humans instead of killing them—and they would bend their spears into pruning hooks to tend orchards whose fruit trees would nourish everyone.

The point I want you to notice is that repeatedly God expresses concern for non-Israelites. They mattered to God, and God intended Israel to serve as a light for them.

This is the central point of the wonderful prophetic parable, the short story of Jonah who spent three days in the belly of a big fish. You may remember that Jonah was called by God to preach repentance to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Jonah refused to go, but eventually relented, preached to the Ninevites, and then moped when the people actually repented and God showed them mercy. Whether you read the story as literal history or as a parable, the point of the story is the same. It is captured in the final verse of the book, where God says to Jonah, “Can’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand

people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11).

Again and again we find this concern for the nations in the Hebrew Bible. And we find God working in and through these nations, as well as demonstrating a surprising patience toward them.

The New Testament very quickly makes the same point. Matthew's telling of the birth of Jesus is very brief (no angels, shepherds, or stable in Matthew; we have Luke to thank for these details). But Matthew does take the time to tell us that God beckoned "magi from the east" to pay homage and present their gifts to the newborn king.

Throughout the Christian world, this story is read on Epiphany weekend, which traditionally marks the arrival of the magi. Epiphany means a revelation or manifestation, specifically involving God—a moment when the invisible God becomes visible. And that is what happens in this story.

The magi (traditionally presumed to be three due to the number of gifts mentioned, though Matthew does not give us an actual number) came from somewhere in modern-day Iran. To get to Jerusalem, and then to nearby Bethlehem, they would have traveled twelve hundred miles along the Fertile Crescent. Many experts suggest that the journey might have taken two months or more.

Who were these magi, these wise men, that God beckoned by a star to come see the newborn king? The term in the Greek New Testament is *magoi* (which is also the root for our English words *magic* and *magician*). Our best sources from the ancient world portray magi as a caste of religious experts—priests—from the Zoroastrian religion. They studied the stars, and they worshiped a God called Ahura Mazda. Like the Jews, they were monotheists, and they shared a strong sense of justice and an emphasis on ethics.

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What does it say about God's view of people of other religions that he invited these Zoroastrian priests to Bethlehem to be, at least in Matthew's Gospel, the first to see the newborn king? Though the Bible frowns upon astrology, God spoke to these astrologers by means of a star. But notice, too, that these followers of Ahura Mazda traveled for months bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh in order to honor the newborn king of the Jews, gifts that likely sustained the Holy Family on their flight to Egypt. We have no evidence that the magi converted to Judaism, and there was no Christianity yet to which they might become adherents. But they surely were affected by this dramatic experience.

I wonder why God chose the Zoroastrian magi from so far away? Surely there were Jews with gold, frankincense, and myrrh in nearby Jerusalem that God might have invited, through an angel, and who would have come to see the Christ Child. At the very least, it appears that God knew the hearts of these followers of Ahura Mazda, twelve hundred miles away, and God sought to bless them and use them to accomplish his purposes. Is it possible that this story is meant to tell us about God's mercy and love for people of other faiths? And to instill in the hearts of Christians a love for these magi as well, pointing towards the kind of love Christians might have for people of other faiths? And what does it say about these Persian priests, that they followed the star, traveling for months, bearing their gifts, all to honor the birth of a long-awaited Jewish king? I think this story was meant to help us understand that there is a wideness to God's mercy—wider, perhaps, than we've often understood.

I'd like to end this chapter by offering three broad perspectives people who identify as Christians have held regarding people of other faiths.

The Religious Pluralist Perspective

Some Christians share the basic view of my Grandfather Hamilton: that the various religions are all pointing to the same ultimate reality, even if they use different metaphors, symbols, and theological ideas to describe this ultimate reality. Further, they believe that the adherents of all the religions, as well as those who have no religion and those who reject belief in God, will all ultimately be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. This view is known as *Christian universalism*.

Unitarian Universalism, which emerged within Christianity, takes this view one step further by suggesting that a variety of religious traditions, including atheism and agnosticism, are acceptable paths to the truth. Universal salvation in this view is not a result of Christ's work, for Christ is one among many equally valid paths to the truth. This view is referred to as *religious pluralism*.

I'm not doing justice to this view, as there are nuances and distinct emphases among different pluralists and universalists. But for many pluralists, there is a tendency to see the various major world religions we'll study in this book as equally valid paths. A religion may be true for some, while another view will be true for others.

I think it is true that all of the major religions we'll consider in this book are trying to ask many of the same fundamental questions. What does it mean to be human? Is there a God? What is God like? What is the nature of ultimate reality? What happens to us when we die? How do we deal with suffering and live with hope?

But these religions are not all giving the same answers to those questions. At points, the answers are quite contradictory. And it does not honor those religions and their adherents to say

that all the religions are saying the same thing. Many of us are saying *some* of the same things, or at least very similar things. But at other very important points, the religions are saying quite different things. It is precisely here that I struggle with the generous spirit of religious pluralism. I love the kindness and broad spirit of this view, but by treating each religion as though it were making equally valid truth claims, it strikes me as illogical. By doing so, it fails to honor the truth claims of any of the religions.

The Exclusivist Perspective

On the opposite end of the spectrum from religious pluralism is *Christian exclusivism*. It asserts that there is only one true path to God—namely through Jesus Christ, who is the “way, the truth, and the life”—*and* that those who do not personally accept Christ as their Savior are condemned to hell. As we will see in a moment, this view is not defined simply by the idea that Christ is the only Savior of the world, and the way, the truth, and the life. It is also characterized by the notion that because this is true, all others who don’t acknowledge Christ as Savior will be tormented in hell for eternity.

The exclusivist points to Scriptures like John 14:6, where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” or Peter’s words in Acts 4:12—“Throughout the whole world, no other name has been given among humans through which we must be saved”—as evidence that non-Christians will be excluded from heaven.

Yet even these persons often leave some wiggle room. Among the questions often asked of these persons is the classic example of the people on a “remote island” who never had the opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ. Will they spend eternity

in hell? The former member I mentioned earlier answered that yes, the nonbelievers on the proverbial remote island would be condemned to hell because their sin separated them from God and they had not received Christ as their Savior. But not all exclusivists take such a position. Many would allow that God judges such persons based upon the “light they had access to,” meaning how they responded to what they could know of God.

Even the man I spoke to, who believed all adults who did not receive Christ would be consigned to hell, made an exception for little children who were too young to receive Christ, noting that they had not reached what he and others often call an “age of accountability,” meaning that they were too young to be held accountable for understanding or choosing Christ. There was his wiggle room. I pushed him a bit, asking if the little children were saved by God’s grace because they were too young to understand, was it possible that this same principle might apply to others who had never heard, or perhaps could not understand, the gospel as it was presented to them?

Christian Inclusivism

Most mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and a sizable number of evangelicals reject the idea of *Christian exclusivism* in favor of a view called *Christian inclusivism*. According to this view, Jesus is the only Savior of the world. No one comes to the Father except by his saving work. But here’s where inclusivism makes a decisive break from exclusivism—this view insists that Jesus’ saving grace can be given to whomever God chooses based upon the criteria God chooses.

As Paul explains it in the New Testament, all human beings are sinners who fall short of the glory of God. We are delivered from our sin and judgment not by anything we have done or

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can do, but by the free gift of grace from God. It is not a gift we deserve, nor can we earn it, but by faith we can accept that grace and let it work within us so that it changes our lives and affects the lives of those around us. We don't even need a boundless faith to accept the gift of saving grace; Jesus spoke of having faith the size of a mustard seed.

If saving grace is a gift, and God's generosity is boundless, then, the inclusivist suggests, it is possible that God may give the salvation Jesus wrought by his life, death, and resurrection to anyone God chooses based upon what God sees in this person's heart—in essence, based upon the faith that they do have.

Christian inclusivists believe that, at death, every human stands before Christ: Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike. In that moment, even those who followed other faiths will realize that Jesus was in fact the Savior they had been seeking their whole lives; they simply did not recognize him until then. This is the picture we have in Paul's words in Romans 14:11-12, when he paraphrases Isaiah 45:23: "It is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, *every* knee will bow to me, and *every* tongue will give praise to God'" (emphasis added).

Christian inclusivists believe this is what Revelation describes in the end of the Bible when it speaks of the new heaven and the new earth, and how in that place, "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there. They will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it" (Revelation 21:24-26).

Inclusivism is seen by many people as the view of some of the early church fathers. Many people believe it was the view of John Wesley. It was the view of C. S. Lewis, John R. W. Stott, and many other evangelicals, just as it is the view of many mainline Christians and Roman Catholics today. Note this does not mean that everyone will be "saved." But it appears in Scripture that

many who sought to know and love God, but who did not know Christ, will, in the end, bow before him and receive the gift of his saving grace.

I've been asked from time to time: If faithful people of other faiths might enter heaven, why do we bother to share the gospel? I don't share the message of Christ with people of other faiths because I'm afraid that they will be tormented for all eternity if they don't say yes to Jesus. I share the gospel because I believe it is true, and if it is true that in Christ God came to us, then Christ offers the definitive truth about God and the definitive truth about ourselves. In him we find grace and mercy, light and life, hope and joy. I share the gospel because I think it offers the clearest picture of who God is and what God wills for our lives.

Loving Through Understanding

In a world where there is so much conflict over religion, I think it is critically important for Christians to come to understand our non-Christian neighbors better, so that we can better love them as we love ourselves.

In a world where two out of every three human beings are not Christian, we have to figure this out if we're going to keep our world from continued hostility and conflict over religion. We have to get to know one another better so that we can fulfill what Jesus called the second great commandment. And it is really not so difficult. It's as easy as breaking bread and sharing stories. In the process of doing so, you may find yourself growing as a Christian. You might just meet your own magi, or you might play the role of the magi for someone else.

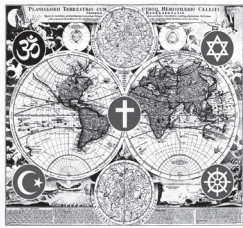
C. S. Lewis powerfully captured the idea of inclusivism in the final installment of his children's novels, the *Chronicles of Narnia*. In these stories, Jesus is portrayed as the magnificent

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lion, Aslan. At the end of this seven-volume series of novels, Aslan returns for the last judgment. As the judgment begins, Emeth, a follower of another god, comes face to face with Aslan. Upon seeing Aslan, Emeth realizes that he has followed the wrong god his entire life. He falls on his face, anticipating he'll be destroyed. Listen to how Emeth describes what happens next:

The Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead...and said, "Son, thou art welcome." But I said, "Alas, Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of [another god]." He answered, "Child, all the service thou hast done to [your god], I account as service done to me." Then...I...questioned the Glorious One and said, "Lord, is it then true...that thou and [the other god] are one?" The Lion growled...and said, "It is false." ... I said... "Yet I have been seeking [the other god] all my days." "Beloved," said the Glorious One, "unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek."³

This picture of the grace of God in Jesus Christ strikes me as profoundly biblical. It is what I see of the heart of God when I look at the story of God inviting the magi to come and see. God continues to beckon us today to show the mercy he showed, even as he invites all the world to "come find me."





Timeline

Hinduism and Christianity



Dates	Hinduism	Christianity
2000 BC	Migration to the Indus River Valley (3000-2000 BC)	Abraham and Sarah (ca. 2000 BC)
1500 BC	Vedas composed and passed down orally (2000-1000 BC)	Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt (+/-1300 BC)
1000 BC	Vedas committed to writing (1000 BC)	King David (ca. 1000 BC)
	Earliest Upanishads composed (600 BC)	Hebrew prophets (850-450 BC)
500 BC	Bhagavad Gita written (550-500 BC)	Babylonian Exile (586-539 BC)
0		Life of Jesus (4 BC-AD 29)