

TheForum – Straight answers to straight questions

How can there just be one true religion? Handout

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[0 : 00] Welcome to the forum. This is our second forum where we spend one hour discussing together some of the big questions of life and the Christian response to them.

For those who don't know me, let me introduce myself. My name is Mark Jackson. I am the Assistant Minister of Grace Church Dulwich, an Anglican church which meets here on Sunday mornings. And it's one of our personal convictions that the Bible does have meaningful, real, true answers to the questions we're asking.

And that's why we've started up this forum, so we can ask our questions. Last month we were thinking about suffering, Jesus' response to suffering. Today we're looking at how can there just be one true religion.

Next month, if God's so loving, why send people to hell? We want to ask these tough questions and see what Jesus says in response to them. So let me say something about format. Format-wise, we split our time into three parts.

Each part, some speaking from me, then some good healthy discussion round tables. Let me also reiterate what I said last time. We want it to be relaxed and as informal as time as possible.

[1 : 16] So round your tables, please feel free to be as quiet as you like. Be as loud as you like. We have got table leaders that will keep some level of order.

But what we say is if you've got a question, please ask it. If you disagree with anything, let your table leaders have it. This is a forum. We want you to share your ideas.

Now, okay, that's my way of introduction. Let's look at the question on the table today, which is, how can there just be one true religion?

And in this first part, part one, I'd like us to consider the arrogance behind such a claim. The arrogance, that is, of claiming to have, to know, to be the one true religion.

I was talking to someone about this just last week. We got on to Jesus, religion, other faiths. And this person said to me, I'll be honest with you, Mark. I just think you Christians, you're just so arrogant.

[2 : 33] So arrogant to think that, you know, you've got the monopoly on truth. That you think you're right, and everyone else is wrong.

Now, it could be that you're here today because you think, you know, in just the same way. You saw that question, you know, how can there be just one true religion? There's so many religions in the world. It's arrogant. It could be you think all religions are just the same.

All sort of, people describe it, don't they, as going up a mountain. Many paths leading up to the top. All the paths are different religions. All the paths go to the top of the mountain. All religions lead to God.

Well, let's have a look and see what Jesus has to say about this. About this arrogant thing. About all religions being the same. Pick up these John's Gospels. And they're on your table. These are for you to have, to take away with you.

And turn with me to chapter 14 on page 43. As you're doing that, let me just say that this guy, John, was one of Jesus' disciples.

[3 : 41] He spent time with Jesus. And at the end of his life, he wrote down an accurate account of all that Jesus said and did and claimed about himself. That's what this is.

It's part of the Bible. And in chapter 14, we see Jesus make a claim about himself and about other religions that really stands out. Chapter 14, verse 6, page 43.

Jesus says this. I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

There's the claim. Straight from the lips of Jesus. And do you see what Jesus is saying? He's saying there, you want to know how to get to God? I am the way.

You want to know what God is like? I'm the truth about God. You want eternal life, life with God? I am the life. Jesus says this is only true of him.

[4 : 52] Do you notice that in the second part? No one comes to the Father God, that is, except through me. No one. No Jew, no Muslim, no Buddhist, no Sikh, no agnostic, no atheist, no good person.

No one comes to God except through me. Now that is an outrageous claim, and we're going to be looking at that in more detail in parts two and three.

But in this first part, I just want us to see the claim for what it is. This is Jesus saying it. It's not Christians coming up with it. He is the one that says he's the only way. He is the one making a clear distinction between himself and other religions.

In Jesus' eyes, we're not all climbing up the same mountain to God. Jesus says he's on a different mountain altogether. Dr. Ravi Zacharias, an expert in the philosophy of religion, put it like this. All religions are alleged to be fundamentally the same and superficially different. The fact is, however, the reverse is true.

[6 : 05] They may be superficially the same, but they are fundamentally different. For example, Jesus claims to be God.

In Judaism, he's a blasphemer. Definitely not God. In Hinduism, there are lots of gods. Jesus says he's the only God.

In Christianity, Jesus rose from the dead. Proof that he's the son of God. In Islam, he stayed dead. He's just a prophet. Buddhism speaks of an impersonal, ultimate reality.

Jesus speaks of a personal God who calls us into relationship with him. Those are the five major world religions. They are fundamentally different.

And therefore, thinking about this issue of arrogance, can we see it's not really a question of who's arrogant or not. But who is right or not?

[7 : 12] It's not a question of who's arrogant or not, because actually all religions, they're not the same. They're different. They're each claiming to have the truth in that way. Each of them can be accused of being arrogant. The issue of who's arrogant or not, the issue is who is right.

And actually, if you think about it, just pushing this sort of accusation of arrogance, you might think, well, that's all just for those who claim it, and for the religious types.

But actually, no matter where we're coming from this morning, we can be accused of this thing of arrogance. Because you say, well, it's arrogant to say, Jesus is the only way to God. But isn't it just as arrogant to say, well, there are many ways to God.

And if you think about a person who may think that, well, what actually are they saying? They're saying, well, you know what? All Christians have got it wrong. Jesus has got it wrong. He's not the only way to God. And Jews have it wrong. And Muslims have it wrong.

And everyone's got it right. And I've got it right. Because I know that actually, all paths lead to God. Well, there is no God. Now, all I'm saying here is, the issue is not arrogance or not.

[8 : 22] The issue behind all this is who is right or not. Is Jesus right to say he is the only way to God? And I just think it's an important point to highlight in this first part.

Given the very tolerant age we live in, where tolerance is highly treasured, where you're not meant to say that somebody else's view is wrong, that it's arrogant. But you can't avoid it.

When you've got truth claims, you're saying either there's one way to God, or there's many ways to God, or there's no way to God. We're all making claims. We can all be accused of being arrogant.

The issue is not who's arrogant or not, who's tolerant or not.

The issue is who is right or not. Let's take a pause there. And we'll have some discussion around tables for about 12 minutes or so.

And then we'll see why Jesus claims to be right afterwards. Great. Great. And let's move on to part two of the handouts.

[9 : 21] So hopefully we saw in part one that the issue is not so much who's arrogant, whether Jesus is arrogant or not, but whether Jesus is right or not.

So why does Jesus make this claim to be the only way to God? Two reasons, Jesus says. We'll look at the first one now in part two, and the second one in part three.

And the first reason Jesus gives is to do with his identity, because Jesus uniquely claims to be God. I'm the only way to God because I am God.

Again, I remember having a conversation with a different person this time just about the existence of God and whether God exists, whether we can know what God is like. And essentially they said, look, I am humble enough to admit that if God exists, and that's a really big if, but if God exists, well, then he's infinite, and he's outside time and space, and he's transcendent and all amazing, and I'm just finite and small and his creature.

How could I possibly ever claim to know or truly understand what God is like, let alone be certain of what he's like? I think it's a fair point, isn't it?

[10:52] How can we ever know truly, you know, what God is like? Even Mahatma Gandhi, the famous holy man, just on his deathbed, one of his relatives came to him and said, you know, Mahatma, you've been looking for God all your life.

Have you found him yet? And Gandhi said, no. I'm still looking. Here's the question then.

How can we ever know for sure that God exists, what God is like? And that's what I'm trying to do with diagram one on your handout. That's about as fancy as my diagrams get, I'm afraid. Took me ages.

If there is some sort of higher power, let's call it God, whatever, you know, how can we, that's us there in that black circle on earth, how can we ever hope to get beyond our own understanding out, you know, God's outside time and space.

All our attempts to understand him, get to him, all they keep bouncing in on themselves. We ask our questions. Is it Buddha? Is it Allah? Is God out there? How can we ever be sure? You know, we're sort of constrained.

[11:53] The only way we could know for sure that God exists or the only way we could know for sure what God is like would be if God revealed himself to us.

If God broke in into space and time. If God came down to our level, so to speak, and said, here I am. Here's your proof that I exist. This is what I'm like.

And that is exactly what Jesus claims for himself. That he is God in human form. In chapter one of John's Gospel, you might want to have a look at that in your discussions next, Jesus describes, he's described as the word made flesh.

He is God in human form. God himself born into this world. God himself walking the earth. Two thousand years ago, God visited us and walked this planet. And that's what diagram two is doing. It's saying that in the person of Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself to us fully. That's how we can know he exists. That's how we can know what he's like. And that's why Jesus makes the claim that he is the only way to God.

[13:10] One of the reasons, the first reason. Because he is God. Now, some of you may say, well, you know, anyone can make a claim to be God, can't they?

So you may remember, some of you may remember David Icke. He used to be a sports presenter for BBC's Grandstand until he decided that he was the Son of God and announced that.

And the public just laughed him off as something of a madman. And the claim could be said of Jesus as well. But actually, if you read through the account of John's Gospel, I'm not sure if you have, if you read through, take that away, read through Jesus' life, he'll read of the most loving, the most kind, the most wise, the most compassionate, great, I don't know, greatest person that's walked this planet.

The poet Tennyson said that the greatest miracle of all was Jesus' character. Not the fact that he could feed the 5,000, not the fact that he could walk on water, heal the sick.

It was his perfect character. Even Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist, admitted, if we all lived as Jesus did, the world would be paradise.

[14:29] In other words, Jesus, he's no madman. He speaks like God, he acts like God, he's as wise as God, he has the perfect character of God. Look at Jesus Christ, and you're looking at God himself.

Jesus uniquely claims to be God. And only in Christianity is this the case. Only in Christianity is it true that its leader claims to be God.

Judaism, King David, Moses, Islam, Muhammad, that would be blasphemy. Only in Christianity do we see what's going on in Diagram 2 where God himself, he reveals himself to us personally and fully.

And that's why Jesus makes the claim that he does in chapter 14. Just look at it one more time with me and I'll read on to verse 7 this time.

This is why he says that he is the truth about God. I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Listen to this.

[15 : 41] If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. See what Jesus is saying? Look at me, you're looking at God.

Know me, you know God. First reason, Jesus is the only way to God. He says, it's because he is God. Let's turn now to discussions again and I'll call us back for the third part in a moment.

Okay, let's move on to part three on the handout. Because there is another reason why Jesus claims he is the one true religion.

Not only because of who he is, his identity, which we saw before, but also because of what Jesus has done for us, his mission. Now this is getting at the second part of verse 6 in chapter 14.

14, Jesus says, I'm the way and the truth and the life. The second part, no one comes to the Father except through me. Now how can Jesus say that? How can Jesus say that only he brings us to God?

[16 : 52] Well, it's at this point we need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture of what the Bible says about God's character and our character. The Bible is clear that God is perfect.

He's all loving, He's all powerful, He's all just, He's holy. And by holy, we mean that God cannot stand any evil, God cannot stand any injustice, God cannot stand any wrongdoing.

For God to be God, He's holy, He's perfect. We, on the other hand, are not perfect. Anyone here claim to be perfect? There we are.

Prove your point. None of us are perfect. The Bible's word for this is sin. Sin is not loving God as we should. We turn our backs on Him. Sin is not loving each other as we should.

Sin is pride, it's jealousy, it's greed. Sin is living for the things of this world rather than the God behind them. So God is perfect, we are sinful, we're not perfect, and that's a problem.

[17 : 59] It's a problem because we just said God is perfect, God's holy, He can't stand sin. He must deal with sin, He must do away with sin. So He must do away with us if we're sinful.

He must punish sin. It is as if you like, if God's up there at the ceiling and this here is us and this red book is our sin, it is as if our sin separates us from God.

God is perfect, we are sinful, He must punish sin, so our sins separate, we can't know God, we can't be friends with God because of our sin. And what makes the problem even worse is there's nothing we can do about it.

None of our good works will help us. One of my mates got caught speeding the other day, 50 pound penalty, three points on his license, there was nothing he could do about it.

He could be the best driver in the world after that day, but he still had the fine, still had the penalty, it still needed to be paid. There was nothing he could do about it and it's just the same with us, we're sinful.

[19 : 03] We've mucked up, we've let God down. He's holy, He must punish sin. No amount of our good works, will help us even if we were totally perfect for the rest of our lives.

Now, it's into this context of God being perfect, of us being sinful, that Jesus says that he alone can deal with the problem of sin, that he alone is prepared to pay the penalty for sin, that he alone will die for us so we can be forgiven, so we can know God.

actually, the early one in John's Gospel, chapter 3, verse 16, it's the heart of the message of the Bible. Turn there if you want, it's on page 8.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, that whoever believes in him should not perish because of our sin, but have eternal life.

God so loved the world he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish because of our sin, but have eternal life. So if we go back to here, if this is us, if this is our sin, if our sin separates us from God, if this is Jesus, we said before, he lived a perfect life.

[20 : 22] Perfectly new God, perfectly relationship with God, he is God. And when Jesus dies, Jesus is dying for our sin. All our sin here, it goes on Jesus when he dies on the cross. He pays the penalty for sin, he takes the punishment for sin, and look where we are now.

Forgiven, relationship with God, life with God. And only in Christianity is this the case. Only in Christianity is it true that God says, I will save you.

I will do what you can't do for yourself. I will deal with your sin. Harry Ironside, he was a famous Canadian preacher. He sometimes gave sort of talks, I suppose like this actually, and people would interject and say, you know, there are hundreds of religions.

How can there just be one true religion? How can you determine which is the right way? And he would say, in all his time, he's noticed this. He would answer by indicating he knew of only two religions.

One, he would say, covers all who expect salvation by doing. The other, all who have been saved by something done. The whole question is very simple, he would say.

[21 : 35] Can you save yourself, or must you be saved by another? And this is what gets really to the heart of how can there just be one true religion?

Because apart from Christianity, all other world religions are about what must I do to save myself. I must keep the Jewish Talmud.

I must keep the five pillars of Islam. I must reach the Buddhist Nirvana through abandonment of my desires. I must reach the Hindu goal by practicing the four yoga sutures.

I must be a good person. All attempts to get to God by our own effort. But as we've said, we're sinful. We can't be. We're not perfect. We can't be perfect. Only in Christianity does God do for us what we can't do for ourselves.

And he saves us. And he pays for our sin. And he pays the penalty for it. And that's the second reason why Jesus says he's the only way to God. Because he's the only one who's dealt with the problem of sin.

[22 : 38] He's the only one who's dealt with the issue that separates us from God. And that's why Jesus says, no, I'm the way. I'm the truth. I'm the law. No one comes to the Father except through me.

This is not a fundamentalist preacher shouting this out. This is someone who loves us, who has died for us, who calls us to him. Why don't we turn back to our discussions around tables.

Well, the aim this afternoon has been to discuss together the Christian response to this question, how can there just be one true religion? Hopefully, well, hopefully we've seen three things, I suppose, from those three parts.

It's not a question, actually, of who's arrogant or not. Is Jesus right or not? And we've looked at two reasons he gives for why he claims to be the only way to God because of who he is, his identity, God himself, because of what he's done dealing with our sin.

It could be that, you know, you're just scratching the surface in your discussions, cutting in all the time. So please do stay around. There's tea, coffee, if you want to chat some more. I'll certainly be around for another half an hour, so if there's any question you particularly want to ask me, please do.

[23 : 45] Let me say what I said before, that these are free for you to take away and keep and read. There are a couple of books as well on the table. They're not free, but let me tell you about them.

This first one, The Reason for God by Timothy Keller. He's a pastor in New York. He interviewed a load of people there and for sort of their one question they would ask God, came up with the top seven objections to the Christian faith and he wrote a book about it.

It's very good. I'd recommend it if you want to go into more depth with that. And this is sort of a British version. If you could ask God one question, it's much shorter, but they managed to answer 13 questions, so you could go for that as well and it's cheaper.

If you want to buy that, do pay James. James, just wave your hand. There we are. Pay James. Our next forum is on Sunday, the 6th of December, where we are looking at the question, if God is so forgiving, why does he send people to hell?

There we are. I thought this week was tough. So until then, thanks very much for coming. Thanks for sharing your views. I look forward to seeing you next time. See ya.