

How can there be just one true Religion?

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[0:00] Good morning, church. It's school holidays, and so we're sort of doing this segue into from one series to the next. And so in the holidays, we're doing this.

Good questions. This week is, how can there be just one true religion? And we'll ask for hands in a moment. Have you ever had the experience of someone saying something like this?

I don't understand a word they're singing. Music these days is too loud. It isn't like when I was growing up. These days, music all just sounds the same to me.

Anyone ever thought that or said that? Come on, be honest. All right, okay. When it comes to religion in our culture today, there seems to be an economy of effort.

I'll explain what I mean in a moment. If you get chatting with people, they may say things like these. They all look the same to me. They all speak of a higher power, being kind.

[1:00] They're all about a deity. It might not be true for me, but if it's true for you, that's okay. Aren't we all children of God? Isn't the divine within us all? This is an economy of effort.

In other words, there's a long-held Australian tradition of choosing the easier of two options. What I'm suggesting here, hopefully not too impolitely, is that our society's keenness to affirm all religions stems in part from an aversion to think too deeply about any one of them.

It's actually a bit apathetic. It comes down to a perception also of fear of coming across as intolerant. People become, it's increasingly fashionable in our society to emphasise how similar the faiths are, but stressing the sameness of world religions gives actually honour to none of them.

And there's a semantics game going on in society that requires the meaning of words to be redefined. This is what tolerance actually means. Accepting that everyone has a right to their opinion, and while not all opinions are well informed, true or even correct, you can still disagree with people who hold contrary beliefs and still treat them with friendship and respect.

However, in our cancelled culture, tolerance has become, you must accept and even affirm that all opinions are equally correct. And if you don't, you're branded intolerant.

[2:39] The irony of that is that's actually intolerance. When it comes to religion, even the atheist Bertrand Russell said this, it is evident as a matter of logic that since the great world religions disagree, not more than one of them can be true.

So how can there be just one true religion? What do you see in this picture here? Have a little look. A duck. Good one.

Anyone see something different? A rabbit? Hands up if you see the duck. Hands up if you see the rabbit. Hands up if you see the duck and the rabbit.

Okay, right. For the person who lived on an island all their life and had only ever seen ducks, they will only ever see a duck, even if you try to point out the rabbit to them.

And for the person who lived in the prairies somewhere who'd only ever seen a rabbit, and when they look at that, they'll only ever see a rabbit, even if you try to point out the duck to them. Now, these are considered micro-truths, but the macro-truth is we step back and see it's actually a picture drawn to look like a duck rabbit.

[3:53] For the pluralist, John Hick, it's like saying all roads lead to Rome. It's like saying, well, all religions, all paths lead to God. So John Hick goes on further to talk about the elephant in the room.

He says, In other words, we're actually blind to the ultimate reality.

We're just making sense of the world and groping our way through life through our own cultural lens. We're blindfolded. But, he'll go on to say, all people's truths are equally true for an individual or person, depending on their cultural perspective.

So as we're wearing blindfolds, everyone experiences life and reality differently. And so these are all considered micro-truths. For some, it's a spear.

For others, it's a fan, a snake, a wall, a tree, a rope. Because we're groping through life. This will do. But the big picture is, the macro-truth, the ultimate reality, we step back, it's an elephant.

[5:12] They're all wrong. Yet the pluralist will say, they all still get there in the end, wherever the end actually is, or whatever they think that is. Now, it makes sense that humanity has searched for the transcendent and divine.

If you see an amazing sunrise or sunset, if you see lightning strike or a volcano erupt, if you see clear skies and a rainbow after a furious storm, or you gaze at a starlit night, it makes you wonder. World religions have been humanity's attempts to approach the throne room of God and touch the divine. Their beliefs are like standing at the bottom of a mountain and trying to find a way to the top. This makes sense. Modernism may have brought about a rise in atheism, but statistically, atheism is actually on the decline. Very few people globally have concluded that the universe, our planet, and life could happen by chance and do it all by itself.

There may be a growing trend in our society on census day to ascribe to no religion, but this doesn't mean people don't spiritually try to make connections or that they're not spiritually aware.

[6:33] General revelation is the understanding that the gods or God have revealed themselves or himself through what we observe in nature. The scripture speaks of this.

In Romans 1.20, we read, For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

If I do this right now, a forensic person will be able to come and say, John French was here, but that isn't me. That's just my thumbprint.

And creation, the universe, is God's giant thumbprint to point us to God. Chris McGilligan in a journal article concluded this, The very diversity of religions speaks to a truth that all people in every time and place have felt the need to respond to the infinite.

The various religious traditions are the how of that response. The pluralist considers each faith tradition claims truth was revealed by a power greater than themselves, that something infinite calls us finite things above and beyond ourselves.

[7:50] That world religions claim to possess the truth, they do so in the knowledge that the vast number of other religions claim to possess the truth.

Pluralists then assume that while religions are entitled to their perception of reality, they conclude they know reality is indefinable and so claim a truth which is considered far more important than the little falsehoods of the vast world religions.

Now this is hugely presumptuous as pluralism makes assumptions without justifying its premise. They cannot answer the following questions. How do you know that no particular religion grasps reality itself?

And how do you know that this reality is unknowable and out of reach? The question remains, how could there be just one true religion?

On a global scale, there are a plethora of beliefs. How do we know which one is right, if any? Do we just fudge it?

[8:57] Do we just sort of close our eyes and spin and go, this one will do? It's like going to the supermarket and having a variety of cereals to choose from.

Do we just go with the one we've traditionally favoured? Cornflakes? Or do we get daring and try crunchy nut? Cornflakes.

Same with religion, pick and choose. It's a pretty popular idea in an individualistic society to cherry pick and tailor make and design your own spirituality.

As people consider their wellbeing, they grasp at little bits of teaching from each religion and blend them into a stew of spiritual ideas that they claim are true for them. There's a problem with this though.

There's no accountability. It's hard to stay committed to something based on feelings or when you're being easily swayed by the latest trends or spiritual cultural gurus.

[10:00] It's momentary. And it goes back to what I was saying earlier. It's really an economy of effort. Not willing to really look too deeply into what each faith tradition actually teaches and the desire to affirm all things so that you don't come across as intolerant.

and there's almost a complete disregard for actually the quest for truth. To get to the point and conclude whether or not there can be just one true religion, we need to do a brief overview of some

key players.

We don't have time to go into all the details and what they all teach in specific doctrines or origins or significant people and foundations but we do need to ask some important questions.

If there is truth to be found we don't want to make a mistake on this. It's like speaking Chinese. If I said to you Here we go.

I'd be saying I love you. But if I said I'd be saying I hate you.

[11 : 12] Listen carefully. I'm getting this right. Wo-a-ni. Wo-hen-ni. They sound the same don't they? Wo-a-ni. Wo-hen-ni.

They sound the same to me. Anyway. But they have completely different meanings. So too with world religions. We can't get this wrong.

We can't say they're the same when they're actually asking completely different questions about life. In his book *The Universe Next Door* James Sire recognises we should filter our beliefs through these five questions.

Where am I? Who am I? What's wrong? What is the solution? And what happens in the end?

Religions can ask similar questions but arrive at radically different answers.

For Buddhists and Hindus they have different answers to how I can escape this physical world.

What happens in the end? Excuse me. Religions are often not asking the same questions.

[12 : 18] How can I find favour with a creator? Doesn't even register with Buddhists who believe everything always existed and don't believe there's a creator where I am right now.

And several faiths arise in reaction to perceived errors of what came before them like Islam and the Quran out of a disunity of polytheistic Arabic tribes.

Or Buddhism opposing the caste system of Hinduism and developing a middle path. Who am I?

What's wrong? So some religious origins.

Some are based on myth and they'll even teach that this is a myth. Yet they hold to it. Like in Hinduism. A lotus flower grew from Lord Vishnu's navel with Brahma sitting on it.

Brahma separated the heavens and earth and sky and out of loneliness Brahma split himself in two to create a male and female from whom all things were created. For the Buddhist Siddhartha Gautama, real person, an Indian prince, after a sheltered life in the palace of hedonism, he walked the streets and was exposed to poverty, old age, infirmity and death.

[13 : 25] He concluded life is suffering and this is caused by desire. So to end suffering you must eliminate desire by detaching yourself and following the eightfold path. His enlightened experience came while fasting and meditating under a Bodhi tree where he concluded reality is all an illusion.

Nothing was written down about him for 400 years. He may have had this experience but we can't verify it. For these religions the physical is bad.

We need to escape the physical. Karma carries into the next life. You reap what you sow. If I lie in this life someone will lie to me in the next life. You reincarnate and you re-paid for your previous life's bad karma.

It's a cycle that can't be broken. There's no evidence for this cycle by the way. But the ultimate goal is the moksha or nirvana, the blowing out and cessation and extinguishing of self because the physical is bad.

We must escape the physical. Muhammad was an orphan six-year-old and he grew up with his merchant uncle and saw how monotheism united Jewish and Christian believers as they did trade routes around through the Mediterranean.

[14 : 39] He saw how Arabic communities were warring and divided, each holding their belief in one of the 360 gods that they thought existed. He apparently had a vision from an angel of God and concluded his moon God, Allah, was the one true God.

Years of bloodshed saw Arabic communities united to some degree under monotheistic beliefs in Islam. There is no way of verifying his visit from an angel.

In a nutshell, religion requires faith, devotion, sincerity, moral effort, submission. And these are like a checklist to earn divine favour.

Try harder, do more, chant, pray, fast, meditate, wash, go on a pilgrimage, give generously to charities. Some Christian churches even demand works to earn divine favour, not out of love, but out of duty.

These are works required to earn favour with the deity or deities or to attain some higher spiritual connection. Another way of putting this is ladder up theology.

[15 : 47] Humanity is at the bottom of the mountain. If we're going to get to the top and reach God, it's going to be on our terms. And so we're going to work and we're going to try harder and prove our worthiness.

Our devotion and sincerity are key. I can be really devoted and really sincere. I can get there. I hope. So what about Christianity?

Who do you say Jesus is? What about Jesus? More to the point for other religions, who is Jesus to them and really what's wrong with Jesus for them?

For the Buddhist? Jesus was far too attached. He was afraid. He cried. He got angry at injustice. He was captivated by desire.

He's supposed to get rid of that. And there's no self who sins. There's no judgement. There's no creator who forgives. For the Hindu, Jesus is just another incarnation of one of the many gods, not the one true God, unique son of God.

[16 : 51] There is no judgement, just a cycle of reincarnation until moksha, you become one with everything, cessation of self. There is no grace. Sinful actions must reap appropriate consequences.

For modern Judaism, there is a promised Messiah. Jesus is a pretender. In the Talmud we read, Jesus of Nazareth was hanged on the day of preparation for the Passover for practicing sorcery and leading Israel astray.

And for Islam, Jesus is only a prophet, not the son of God, God come to us, nor was he crucified. 700 years after the event, no eyewitnesses, just a notion.

The Quran records, they did not kill Jesus, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did. They knew nothing about him that was not sheer conjecture.

They thought an imposter stood in Jesus' place on the cross. There is judgement in Islam, but to be saved, there are cosmic scales. And our good deeds must outweigh our bad deeds.

[17 : 58] For each of these faith traditions, and honestly, globally, all spiritualities and all beliefs, except Christianity, there's no grace. There is no grace.

Grace is unique to Christianity. The unearned favour of God. It's a free gift. It's beautiful, and it's irresistible, and it's contagious.

I just want us to watch this clip now. It goes for about a minute. Fifteen seconds. How other religions began. Someone had a private idea about God.

Or, someone had a private dream about God. Or, someone had a private encounter with an angel. Then that single someone told the rest of the world. This makes other religions impossible to verify because there are no eyewitnesses of the prime event.

[19 : 01] How Christianity started. Jesus spent three years doing miracles and teaching publicly. Jesus was executed publicly.

Jesus was buried and rose from a public tomb. Publicly. Jesus showed that he was alive.

Publicly. Then it was the public that told the rest of the world. Christianity is the world's most testable religion.

How can there be just one true religion? We would need an act of God. Some kind of revelation. Christianity is unique and true. It's plausible and verifiable.

It's able to be tested. Unlike religions that begin with private dreams or private angelic encounters or private experience or ideas about God, Christianity comes out of Jesus' public ministry where he was publicly killed, publicly rose from the grave, publicly showed himself to the public and the public then went and told everyone what they saw.

[20 : 14] What is truth? Dictionary definition. The quality or state of being true or in accordance with fact or reality. When Jesus was arrested and on trial, he had an encounter with the Roman governor of Judea at the time Pontius Pilate who at one point says, So you're a king then?

And Jesus answered, You say that I'm a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.

Pilate retorts, What is truth? What is truth? Jesus just spelled it out to us. Absolute truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to Jesus.

All through John's gospel. John makes it clear. Jesus is full of grace and truth. And each encounter we see Jesus speaking and displaying grace and truth. Christianity is the only faith tradition that adequately answers James Syer's questions.

Where am I? I'm God's created world. Who am I? I'm a created image bearer of God. What's the problem? Sin. What's the solution? Because God really loves us.

[21 : 25] God embodies the physical. He takes on our sin on the cross and absorbs his own judgment in our place. And what happens in the end? We resurrect into new life.

This is the elephant. This is the ultimate reality. This is the macro truth. Religion is about humanity trying to get to God on their own terms. Christianity offers a unique view of salvation.

And in the process invites us uniquely not to be religious, but to be in a relationship with God. We are saved by sheer grace. We are saved by sheer grace and Christ's work, not ours.

We cannot contribute to salvation with moral effort, religious observance, prayers, or transformed consciousness. Using the mountain imagery. God comes down from the mountain top in the person of Jesus.

And he finds everyone scrambling. Washing in the Ganges. Praying five times a day. Doing their best. Sincerely and devotedly. But we're all lost.

[22 : 32] He dies to create a way to the top. He says, stop doing. Stop trying. And start trusting.

Because I've done all the work for you. Salvation is received. It's never achieved. In John 14, 6, Jesus makes it clear.

I am the way. And it's a definite article in the Greek. I am the truth. And I am the life. And no one comes to the Father except through me. Christianity is the one true religion.

God loves us and came to us. And Jesus shows us the way. So where are you putting your faith?

We put our faith and confidence. We place it in someone or something.

We place it in ourselves and our own deeds. It's misdirected. We must wholeheartedly put our faith in the works and person of Jesus. And Jesus alone. Yes, Christianity is exclusive.

[23 : 35] You're either in or you're out. If this is offensive to you, or you find it offensive, let's cut Christians some slack. They're just repeating what Jesus said.

And they're seeking to follow his teaching. But before we get too uppity about this, in reality, we need to self-reflect. Because there's no way we can save ourselves.

We need a saviour. And while Jesus is the only way to God, Jesus is completely inclusive.

Everyone is invited. No matter your race, your culture, your age, your sexuality, your gender, your occupation.

No matter how bad or even evil you've been. No matter how good and moral you think you are.

Jesus is the only way. Now I'm conscious I'm pretty much currently preaching to the convinced and converted.

But before we go off, phew. I'm on the right side of history. Remember, we're no better than anyone. We're only ever saved by grace.

[24 : 38] And this is a gift from God so that none of us can boast. What a privilege to be called a child of God. And if you know this to be the truth, and your faith is in Jesus, you know what the future holds for people who don't know Jesus yet.

So what are you doing about that? Jesus is the truth, the life, and the only way to God. By faith, let's seek to glorify God as we treasure Jesus together for the joy of all people.

I'll finish with this verse from Acts chapter 17. Therefore, since we are God's children, we should not think that the divine being is like an idol, gold or silver or stone, an image made by human design and skill.

In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man Jesus he has appointed.

He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. Amen.