

Is belief in Jesus Christ the only way to know God?¹

I suspect this is one of the most pressing questions of our time. To *not* address the question of faith and religious pluralism in our present global and post-modern context would be to avoid the “big 900 pound gorilla” in the room! That being said, religious pluralism is *not* a new experience for either Old Testament Israel or the New Testament church. Both were born into the context of religious pluralism (a world of “many gods and many lords” according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:5), even from a global perspective, Christianity has never existed outside of pluralism. What IS new is that western Christendom, for a time culturally isolated from the religious worlds of the eastern and southern hemispheres, is just now reawakening to this reality because of the more recent phenomena of “globalization.” Moreover, what is also new is the philosophical context of “post-modern” pluralism, which as Lesslie Newbigin has explained, “denies the possibility of making any universally justifiable truth-claims on any matter, whether religious or otherwise. It is this development which gives a distinctively new character to the contemporary debate about religious pluralism.”

It should be acknowledged as well that embedded in the question of pluralism is fear—whether unconscious or not! For in such a philosophical context, the claim to know a universal truth is perceived as an exercise of the will, even the will to power! And we should be absolutely honest at this point, the Christian religion, no less than other religions, has been guilty of religious imperialism – whether by political, social, or military might— which is the attempt to impose religious belief by means of coercion. The religious wars, yesterday and today, certainly feed the fear that gives post-modern pluralism its traction, at least sentimentally.

And so what is a Christian response to religious pluralism? Is belief in Jesus Christ the *only* way to know God? Forgive me if my answer is both “yes and no.” Here again, please indulge me for a moment, as this is not an equivocation of theological or intellectual compromise, but rather reflective of the very real way that we understand revelation from the Christian point of view! And as I hope to demonstrate, even if summarily, the Christian view of revelation will want to cherish the kind of knowledge that is available to people of all faiths and none, even while preserving the universality of Christ as perhaps the most fundamental of all Christian beliefs!

Before we talk more about the Christian view of revelation in relation to the question of religious pluralism, I want first, if but briefly, to respond to the context of philosophical pluralism. And notice: I distinguished the “fact” of pluralism from an “ideology” of pluralism. It has been argued that the ideological pluralism espoused by post-modernism is at its core fundamentally nihilistic. For if the scientific and rationalistic foundationalism (Descartes’ “critical principle”) of the “modern” era removed the possibility of all metaphysical knowledge, Nietzsche rightly foresaw the inevitable “post-modern” conclusion that ultimate truth is unknowable which then opened the door to philosophical pluralism—namely, that ideology wherein since there

¹ I am indebted to Lesslie Newbigin, for some of the argumentation of this answer. All Newbigin quotations is taken from *Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach* (1993) unless otherwise noted.

is not justification in holding to an ultimate truth, everyone is entitled to an opinion, one that is born out of one's experiential preference. Lesslie Newbigin the ideological situation of post-modernism this way:

The kind of western thought which has described itself as "modern" is rapidly sinking into a kind of pluralism which is indistinguishable from nihilism - a pluralism which denies the possibility of making any universally justifiable truth-claims on any matter, whether religious or otherwise. It is this development which gives a distinctively new character to the contemporary debate about religious pluralism.

Our response then to ideological pluralism (or post-modernism) is this:

First, we would want to observe that ideological pluralism as a universal truth claim itself is a violation of its own ideological premise. As Newbigin has said, *it is, of course, a self-contradictory belief, since one cannot assert that ultimate reality is unknowable without knowing what ultimate reality is!*

Second, we would want to affirm that while ultimate and metaphysical reality may not be knowable by the apparatus of modern science and autonomous rationalism, this is not to say that there is no another apparatus that makes perfect sense of the appearance of things. For instance, can we speak of the ultimate reality of human worth as a "fact" that transcends the utilitarian value of a given person, wherein we come to a conclusion about human worth that is grounded in what we experience to be true based on our participation in humanity? And yet I can't put "worth" into a test tube! Or likewise, we speak of human love and romance as a "fact" that has the power to transcend personal preference and personal flourishing even (as in the case of a person giving their life for someone they "love"), and this is rendered a reasonable conclusion based on the appearance of things vis-à-vis our participation in human relationships? IN short, is there a kind of "epistemology of participation" wherein we come to know a thing by means of participating in it, that is "reasonable" if not something we can "reason" by means of the scientific method or some irrefutable syllogism? (c.f. "How can I believe?")

Third, We would certainly desire to distinguish the necessity for social and political "tolerance" for the fact of religious pluralism (if not a real appreciation for the sake of preserving the possibility of discovering true faith based knowledge), without then being subservient to the "intolerance" of ideological pluralism wherein "tolerance" can become misconstrued as reducing all dialogue to merely a dialogue in personal values. Again, as observed by Newbigin, *there is no neutral" or "objective" approach to religious pluralism. Any claim to such neutrality conceals an imperialism which is all the more dangerous for being unacknowledged.* Within such a context, *tolerance becomes the supreme virtue and 'doctrine' becomes a slightly suspect word.*

In sum, “it will no longer do to confuse the fact of plurality with the ideology of pluralism—the view that since no one can really know the truth we must be content with the multiplicity of opinions.”² Recognizing the “fact” of religious pluralism, Is belief in Jesus Christ the only way to know God? And so having briefly addressed the issue of pluralism as an ideology, we now turn to the fact of pluralism and a Christian response. And to this point, the Christian view of revelation—more specially, two kinds of revelation-- open the way for genuinely open dialogue with people of all faiths and none, while at the same time respecting the amazing, if not culturally offensive universal truth claim of Christ, *I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me. (John 11)*

19th century Princeton theologian A. A. Hodge once observed that from the perspective of the Bible, God reveals himself in two very different contexts aimed at two very different aims. It is as if the Christian understanding of revelation believes in not one, but *two* books of revelation—one of nature (natural history) and one of grace (redemptive history). The first is universally accessible to all people of all faiths and none, the other to those who participate in God’s plan of redemption as ultimately accomplished by Jesus Christ. Thus, Hodge observed how:

Both [are] from God and will be found when both are adequately interpreted to coincide perfectly. . . . Apparent discrepancies in established truths can have their ground only in perfect knowledge. God requires us both to believe and to learn. He imposes upon us at present the necessity of humility and patience.

And so a Christian understanding of divine revelation is that there is a kind of “speech” from God that transcends all categories of faith in God or none! In this sense, no one religion or culture has a corner on truth! This “common” or “universal” revelation is alluded to in Psalms 19, for instance,

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

I am reminded here of the verses by Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush aflame with God;
But only those who see take off their shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

The present point then is that we do not believe that all revelation from God is exclusive to any one religion. God is everywhere speaking, even it we all hear the same voice from different contexts as to necessarily form a plurality of conclusions.

² Can the West Be Converted? P. 16.

As such, the first thing that a Christian answer to the question of pluralism ought to affirm is the necessity of genuine dialogue with people of different faiths and none! This dialogue, if an honest dialogue, is not interested in minimizing our different vantage points, but rather to learn from our different vantage points. Willis has said as much this way:

*Genuine pluralism [will] respect other view points and guard their right to be heard in dialogues from which all parties learn something not realized before. And yet, this genuine pluralism means that we are free to insist as much on my convictions as... [for them] to insist on theirs.*³

Willis is concerned for a kind of dialogue that is as “clear as possible about the basis of their respective truth claims and about their motivations for listening attentively to each other.” Willis then clarifies about dialogue in a post-modern and pluralistic context that our dialogue must be “quite different from discounting all truth claims made by whatever religion or claiming that all are saying the same thing without knowing it- which of course is a truth claim in itself.”⁴

Therefore, the kind of dialogue with people of other faiths and none that we ought to cherish will both, and at the same time, cherish the dialogue itself for the sake of mutual benefit and learning, even as the point of this dialogue is not with the aim of concluding that the participants are “really saying the same thing.” It is the possibility of believing some things that we would not have otherwise believed that motivates our dialogue!

So are there things that Christians can and should learn from other religions! Yes! Does Christianity have a corner on all truth? No! And notice also how this rejects the agenda of certain “fundamentalist” variations of religions that will seek to impose religious hegemony upon a society by political or even military means. Rather, if what has been said thus far is true of the Christian perspective, then we would not only want to “tolerate” cohabitation with people of other faiths and none, we would even want to cherish it! The fact of plurality of peoples, cultures and even religious sects is something to celebrate. That is what I mean when I answer the aforementioned question with “no,” belief in Christ is *not* in conflict with the *fact* of pluralism. And yet, if by “pluralism” we mean that there is *nothing but* that kind of knowledge that is universally available to all *without* special intervention by God, then we will have to say “yes” to our question. For if in fact there is a God, it is entirely possible, and perhaps even necessary, that there is a kind of knowledge that we can know *only* by supernatural intervention into our human history. Stated differently from the Christian point of view—it is the unique miracle of the incarnation, wherein God is really and truly made flesh as to dwell among us—that must concluded that in Christ, there is a kind of universal truth that is being revealed as uniquely manifest in Jesus Christ. In so far as this knowledge is redemptive in nature, it is then the knowledge of how to be

³ David Willis, *Clues to the Nicene Creed*

⁴ p. 15.

reconciled to God, which of course assumes that humanity has been estranged from God vis-à-vis a disposition to deny or even turn away from God.

Before then we look more carefully at what I will call the “universality of Christ” related to why there is a kind of knowledge of God that can only be discovered in Christ (e.g. that Christ is not just a sectarian leader or spiritual guide, but the savior of the whole world as uniquely qualified by his divine-human nature), let me first illustrate Biblical instances where these two types of revelation—one which necessitates real dialogue for mutual benefits, the other which necessitates proclamation—are found to be compatible. In the Old Testament, Moses received instruction from his Medianite father in law concerning a more wise organization of Israel (c.f. Exodus 18. The Medianites were the “enemies” of Israel according to Number 25:17. And yet Moses would instruct him concerning the mighty acts of God’s deliverance vis-à-vis the Exodus such then to result in Jethro eventually confessing faith in Yahweh! Likewise in the New Testament, Paul acknowledged the wisdom and truth of various Greco teachings concerning an “unknown God” in Acts 17:21 and approvingly quoted from their religious poets in vs. 28. And yet he goes on to tell them about that special knowledge that was manifest in the super-natural based knowledge that was being revealed in Christ which in turn called for their faith in order to be restored to the otherwise “unknown” god! There was as well the encounter that Peter had with Cornelius in Acts 10, where it is explicitly stated that God heard the prayers and accepted the gifts of a pagan Roman soldier (vv. 4, 31, 34f). And yet, Peter was later commanded by God to “give him the news of what God has done in Jesus Christ (Acts.10:4, 31,34). The point of this survey is to illustrate the point that we need not answer the aforementioned question by an either/or, yes or no! It was both/and within the Biblical context of pluralism, no less so than it is today.

And so we turn to the second book of revelation, that book which is not accessible to anyone except by super-natural origin, which we believe is uniquely manifest in Jesus Christ with the unique result of being reconciled to God. There is of course much that needs to be said that I will leave to another time—e.g. The whole human dilemma that rendered it necessary for a special revelatory intervention by God in order to reconcile us to Himself and the problem of “sin.” But if in fact there is a problem between God and humanity (at the very least suggested by the problem of evil and suffering in the world), then what would be needed in order for humanity and God to be reunited in harmony. The Biblical answer for this is a uniquely qualified mediator—one that could by nature represent the interests of both parties needing reconciliation, both God and human. This is then what makes Jesus Christ so uniquely relevant as ultimate context for a special kind of redeeming revelation. His person (as both God and man by the super-natural miracle of the incarnation as later verified by the super-natural miracle of his resurrection in history) enables him to be more than a mere spiritual guide, but to actually substitute for both parties in transacting a redemptive contract so to speak—one wherein both God and man are satisfied in a way that allows for the two parties to be reconciled. This is exactly the apostle Paul’s point in one of his letters to his protégé pastor, Timothy.

*For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humanity,
Christ Jesus, himself human who gave himself a ransom for all--this was attested
at the right time.*

1 Tim.2:5-7

From the point of view of the Christian narrative, it isn't that we are simply headstrong in our sectarian sympathies, it is that if in fact our narrative is true, that Christ was both God and man, and that he was raised from the dead, then we are not merely dealing with the relative favorability of Christ's teachings compared to other great human guides as if pertaining to the formation of personal values. Rather, we are dealing with the historical reality that there was someone who came to earth from the realm of God (a spirit) as to be a special kind of revelation event that transcends any one sect that is based on the plurality of interpretations vis-à-vis the book of nature. If the incarnation is true as historically attested, then Christ is the savior for all humanity, not just a sect of humanity—thus the “universality of Christ.” That being said, Christians, while against any form of political, social or military coercion such as to be guilty of a type of coercive proselytism, is bound for the sake of the world to want to witness to this reality. The Christian will then affirm that there IS a kind of knowledge about God- a redemptive or reconciling knowledge—that can *only* be discovered in the revelation of Jesus Christ. The nature of his unique person in direct correlation to his unique work as a mediator leaves us no alternative! As Lesslie Newbigin has perfectly summarized,

We cannot accept for Jesus Christ a place merely as one of the world's religious teachers. We are but learners and have to listen not only to our fellow Christians of other cultures, but also to our neighbors of other faiths, who may teach us much that we have not understood. But the crucial question is: Which is the real story? To that question... there is no neutrality. The answer has to be given... in a life which follows the way Christ... We are commissioned to bring good news, to tell the story of God's marvelous mighty acts for the salvation of the world. We must not withhold this story from anyone. To keep it to ourselves, as though it were a private "in-house" story of the Church, as though Jesus were the lord of Christians but not the lord of all, would be intolerable sectarianism. We have no right to keep silent about it, and if we try to do so we deny its truth. But it is not our work to convert any human soul to Christ. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this.

