

Who Is Jesus?

The Only Way to God

Conflicting Claims

In a world where “two people who believe in God may believe radically different and incompatible things about God,¹” to claim belief in God has little significance. Each religion not only portrays God differently, though there may be some overlap, each also portrays access to God differently. Although religious diversity is not a problem in itself, at least some of the claims made by the major religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—make them mutually incompatible. They cannot all be true. Yet religious pluralism, namely the claim that all the major religions are equally true and effective ways of relating to the divine, is often upheld as the best way to understand religious diversity. Although religious pluralism may be attractive in theory, it does not accurately describe the relationship among the major religions.

For example, all the major world religions acknowledge that there is a problem with how the world is now. However, the worldview espoused by each presents a different view on both what the human predicament is and how salvation from this predicament is to be obtained. For some the human predicament is ignorance that leads to suffering for which the solution is enlightenment, for others it is rebirth due to karmic imbalances for which the solution is breaking the conditions that cause karma, and for yet others it is disobedience to Allah for which the solution is resisting evil and remaining faithful to Allah’s will. Thus, different religions portray the essence of the human situation differently. Furthermore, while not all religions explicitly claim that they exclusively hold the truth or the way to salvation, like Christianity does, other major religions have exclusivist tendencies that regard their perspective as distinctively true and superior to others. In such a religious climate of conflicting truth claims, it is then our responsibility to evaluate the claims and determine which is truthful². We can start by asking, who is God and how do we relate to Him?

Separated from God

God described himself to Moses when, standing on Mount Sinai, “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation’” (Exodus 34:6-7). Thus, God is perfectly forgiving, patient, loving, faithful, and just. Furthermore, God desires and is jealous for His people. He says, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Isaiah 49:15).

Though God desires to be in a relationship with His people, we have been separated from God because of our sin. Isaiah 59:1-2 says “Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear to dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” Sin, however, is not merely moral failure as many understand it to be. Instead, sin is ultimately our failure to acknowledge and embrace God’s authority over our lives. Thus sin is not only a matter of what we do, but of what we think and feel. Matthew 15:18-20 says “But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean;’ but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’” By this definition, every person has trespassed against God by sinning, and because of this sin, we are separated from God. And until God intervened, there was no way to bridge this gap between man and God.

However, God did intervene, coming down from heaven as the Son, Jesus Christ (John 6:38). John 1:1, 14 puts it this way, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” This Son, also described as the Word of God become flesh, is Jesus. Jesus came to the world to reveal God. He said, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (John 14:7). Jesus revealed the Father in that he lived a life completely free from sin, and in perfect accordance with God’s authority and desires. Having lived such a life, Jesus did not earn death, according to God’s justice, “For the wages of sin is death...” (Romans 6:23). However, he chose to die, taking on himself the punishment for all humanity’s sin. Isaiah 53:6 says “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Thus, although we are the sinners, Jesus chose to take our punishment upon himself when he was crucified. His resurrection sealed this divine substitution and the conquering of death.

Although Jesus died for all of us as sinners, not all people today have a relationship with God. This is because not all people accept that they are separated from God, accountable to God for their sin, and in need of Jesus. Faith in Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins is the means by which God grants us this relationship. We deserve eternal separation from God, “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). John 3:16 says “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” God sent Jesus Christ, so that those who have faith in him as the one who has taken the punishment that we deserve for our sin, should inherit eternal life. Faith in Jesus Christ is not simply one of many paths to God, it is the only way to God. Jesus said in John 14:6 “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus is the only way to be reconciled to God for all people and for all time, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all...” (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Faith in Jesus is also a gift from God, but it is a gift that we can ask for. We are told that we do not seek God in vain (Isaiah 45:19). God promises, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). So ask that God would reveal himself.

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¹ R. Douglas Geivett, *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*.

² Harold A. Netland, *Jesus Christ and Religious Diversity*.