



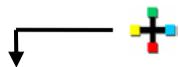
A Question To Ask; A Story To Tell

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Christianity was born into a pluralist society in which different philosophies and religious practices were held together in the grip of Roman power. But most people in most periods of history have lived in relatively uniform cultures, as western Christendom was for a long period. Today we are impressed by the pluralism of our society, brought about by the easy movement of people and ideas.

Since Christianity ceased to be the public doctrine of Europe and was replaced by the new ideas developed in the 'Age of Reason' it has been customary to regard Christianity as one among a group of entities called 'religions'. In earlier times 'religion' meant 'piety'. The things now called 'religions' have very little in common with each other except that they dissent from the reigning 'public doctrine' – the doctrine which denies the reality of anything that cannot be handled with the tools of modern science.

Finding the truth

The discussion of the relation of the 'other religions' to Christianity has been skewed by mixing it up with the question 'Who is going to be saved?' The fact that we are obsessed by this question is one expression of the selfish individualism of our kind of society. The real question is 'What is the truth about the human situation?' The Christian answer is that you are on the way to finding the truth when you follow Jesus – and this is a practical as well as an intellectual matter. There are many other answers to the question, some of them 'religious', some not.

If we are serious in seeking the truth, we shall be eager to explore all realms of human experience in the light of Jesus, and to face the issues raised by those who follow other clues. We cannot hold our belief as merely private opinion. We have to commend it to others, test it out, discuss it. So 'dialogue' is an authentic part of discipleship.

In conversation with those who hold other beliefs we do not pretend to have all the answers, but we do not behave as those who grope in the dark. We have the master-clue. To confess Jesus

as the 'true and living way' gives us freedom and the confidence to explore everything that claims to be real, knowing that it all belongs to him. So we come with minds that are open - but not open at both ends.

Because of Jesus we can be sure that God's love is as wide as the world. So we can rejoice in all the signs of God's grace at work in the lives of people of other religions or of no religion. When Peter and his six friends went into the home of the pagan Roman officer Cornelius, he said: 'I now understand that God has no favourites but that in every nation those who are godfearing and do what is right are acceptable to him' (Acts 10:34f). That is something that some people have still to learn. But, of course, the point of the story is that Peter went on to tell the story of God's supreme act of love, the story which made Cornelius and his household Christians.

There is no substitute for that story. It is God's unique deed in Jesus Christ which enables us to believe (in spite of everything) that God's love is without limit.

If we persist in asking the other question: 'Who will be saved?' we get some hard answers from Jesus. 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved.' There is a broad (and popular) road leading to perdition; the other road is narrow and not many find it. The branch of the Vine (the good Christian) which does not produce fruit will be cut off and burned.

Yet there are the other sayings which tell us of the wideness of God's mercy. God requires everything and he gives everything. As Paul puts it: 'He has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all' (Rom 11:32).

Judgment and mercy

The Christian life is lived in the magnetic field between the judgment of God and the mercy of God. That means that we need both a godly confidence and a godly fear. If we try to find a place outside of that field, we get either an ungodly complacency or an ungodly anxiety about ourselves.

Like all human beings we are on a journey and we do not see the end. But we have a path that can be trusted. It is marked by the footsteps of Jesus as he went from Bethlehem to Calvary. Because we know that this path is to be trusted, we want to call others to come with us on the way.

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