

August 28, 2022

“Jesus as the Way”
John 14:6

FCF: Discomfort with exclusivist claims

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.
(magnet) And so the only way to the Father is through Him.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Some statistics. In 2000, there were roughly 1,200 mosques in the United States. Within 20 years, that number more than doubled, with another opening each week. From 1990 to 2001, Buddhism grew in the United States by 170 percent and is now the fourth most practiced religion in America. Moving out to the global scene, one-third of the world’s population identifies itself as Christian. That, of course, is a lot. But two-thirds, roughly four billion people, does not.

In such a setting, to claim to have the truth and others do not brings charges of arrogance and elitism. “*What makes you think you have the corner on truth?*” we are asked. Perhaps you are asking that now. What does Jesus say? What does Jesus say and what are the implications?

SCRIPTURE READING: [John 14:1-7](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Let’s be clear. This is an exclusivist claim. The difficulty of this text is not that we do not understand it. The difficulty is that we understand it all too well. “*To the Father is where I am going. And I am how you will get there. I am the way. And I am the only way to Him.*”

“*I am the only way to God.*” This is an exclusivist claim. And it can be offensive - not just now but then. To Jewish hearers, Jesus is saying He is the fulfillment of their hopes. All the old ways have been fulfilled. A new era has come with Him. Then there was the Greco-Roman world, made up of many cults and saviors, a culture in which it was said there were many “ways” and so no need to be committed to any one of them. And Jesus is saying ([READ John 14:6](#)).

He is the way. You can parse and diagram these sentences however you like, but that’s what Jesus is saying. To anyone with ears to hear, now or then, this is recognized to be exclusive and offensive. And anyone who would say such things is said to be exclusive and offensive. “*What makes you think you have the corner on such things?*” How should we respond to that?

We’re going to look at two common illustrations used in opposition to this claim and then one that may move us to accept it. First, two popular illustrations often used to argue against Jesus’ claim here. And then, another illustration that may serve to open us up to Him.

I. NOT THE ELEPHANT

The first is the story of the blind men and the elephant. Here’s how it usually goes.

A) Explanation

1. The image

A group of blind men came upon an elephant. “*It is long and flexible like a snake,*” said the first blind man as he held the elephant’s trunk. “*No, it’s thick and round like a tree,*” said the second

blind man, feeling the elephant's leg. "No, no, it's large and flat," said the third blind man, touching the elephant's side. Each of them could feel only a part. None had a take on the whole.

2. The point of the image

The point of the story? It's meant to say that, in just the same way, the religions of the world each have a grasp on but a part of the truth about spiritual reality. But none of them can see the whole "elephant." None of them has a comprehensive view of the truth. None sees the whole.

B) *Analysis*

Okay, what do we make of this? What are the strengths and weaknesses here?

1. Commend

Positively, this does acknowledge the real differences between the religions of the world. And, along with that, at least on the surface, it is meant to encourage a bit of humility on our part.

2. Critique

But, as Tim Keller points out in *The Reason for God*, the problem is this. The story is meant to show no one can see the whole truth. But how can you know none of these blind men is right unless you, like an all-knowing narrator watching from above, can see the whole elephant? Think with me here. The only way you can know that all the different religions can see but a part of the whole picture is if you can see the whole picture yourself. That's the only way you can make such a claim. Which is just what you said no one can see and so, just taking this argument on its own terms, that then becomes a pretty arrogant and, frankly, hypocritical thing to say.

So the image of the blind men and the elephant is a clever story and it does need to be thought through. But ultimately, it reaches too far and collapses on itself. So what then?

II. NOT THE MOUNTAIN

Another popular image has to do with different paths going up a mountain.

A) *Explanation*

1. The image

Here's the idea. God lives at the top of a mountain. At the base of the mountain are different paths. Some paths are winding. Others are direct. But all converge at the same place – at God. The mistake some travelers make is to become rigidly committed to their particular path. After all, no path is better than another. Each is said to be an equally valid way to get to the top.

2. The point of the image

Well, you can see the point of the image. As with the paths, so with the different approaches to God. Each approach to spirituality is said to be equally valid. None is better than another.

B) *Analysis*

Again, what do we make of this? What are the strengths and weaknesses here?

1. Commend

Well, the diversity of the different paths is acknowledged. Each one is allowed its own unique history and teachings. And, again, the analogy is meant to encourage humility on our part.

2. Critique

But, as J. P. Moreland and Tim Muehlhoff point out in *The God Conversation*, there are two problems. First, this alters the claims of key religious figures. What would Muhammad say to this? It's by Allah alone. What would Jesus say to this? It's by Him alone. The only ones who might agree would be Hindus since this blends all truths into one. So that's the first problem.

The second problem is that the mountain paths fail to deal with contradictions. What's the purpose of life? Why is there suffering? What separates us from God? Who waits for you on the mountain? Each gives very different answers. Buddhists – no one. Hindus – thousands of gods and goddesses. Muslims – only one God, Allah. Jews – only one God, Yahweh. Christians – one triune God. To just ignore these contradictions is too convenient and a bit condescending. It's to say to billions of people, "*The distinctions of your belief systems don't matter.*" Really.

III. BUT THE MAZE

Okay, so the story of the blind men and the elephant falls short. As does the story of the travelers up the mountain. But what if we tried the image of a maze? Might that capture it?

A) Explanation

1. The image

Moreland and Muehlhoff point out that one of the most famous mazes in the world is in the gardens of Hampton Court near London. It consists of eight-foot high hedges planted back in 1702. It covers a third of an acre, its paths stretch out more than a half mile. Which path should you take? Your goal is to reach the center of the maze, but which path will get you there? Some paths lead quickly to a dead end. Others take you deep into the maze before they stop. Others run parallel for some time until one of them hits a wall. Only one will get you to the center.

2. The point of the image

You get the idea. The point here is that the varying religions of the world, all the varying approaches to spiritual reality, are like a maze with different paths heading in different directions.

B) Analysis

Again, what do we make of this? Is this a helpful model? It is candid and honest.

1. Acknowledges parallels

It acknowledges parallels between different religions. There are times in the maze where some paths head in the same direction or run parallel. And the same for certain religions. Hindus and Buddhists believe in karma and reincarnation. Muslims, Jews, and Christians believe in one god.

Application:

We can acknowledge these things in conversations with others – just as we Paul did in Athens. This is in Acts 17. Paul looked for bridges, common ground, parallels in the paths. He

acknowledged that his audience had something of the truth, even if only partially understood. He says (**READ Acts 17:22b-23**). The object of their worship was wrong but their longing to worship was right. So what then? Paul quotes from some of their poets (**READ Acts 17:28**).

What might this look like for us? Acknowledging and commending individuals central to other faiths. Think of Gandhi's compassion for the Untouchables in India's caste system. Or Muhammad's generosity to the poor. Or Buddha's insight on suffering. That is all worth noting.

As are practices of other faiths. We can acknowledge the Dalai Lama's forgiveness of the Chinese for murdering his Tibetan people. We can acknowledge the Muslim practice of prayer five times daily, prayer which is focused primarily on praise. Of course we have real differences with these practices. But we can see the parallels and seek to commend what we can.

2. Faces dead ends

And, as we do so, we must pray for opportunities to talk of the dead ends. For that is what they are. Back to the maze. Not all paths make it to the center. Some go far but still come up short.

Application:

In conversation with others, this too can be talked about. Think of Buddhism and the law of karma. The idea here is that what a person reaps in this life, good or bad, is the result of actions committed in a previous life. You can't undo what you've done. The repercussions are going to be felt. Which can have a twofold effect. First, regarding ourselves, it can tend to fatalism. We know we're going to mess up so why bother? This also can have an impact on social activism. Buddhism says the reason for our suffering is a karmic debt from a past life. Really? What then does that mean in terms of whether we should help people in their suffering?

Moving to Islam. Muhammad taught that salvation is secured by a lifetime of effort at the end of which all actions will be weighed, good and bad. But you will never know until then. There are no guarantees. So even if you're doing well, what if you lapse? What if you slip?

My point is that even while we can find the parallels in these varying paths - and they are worth talking about - in the end they will all come to a dead end. All but one. And that is Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

(**READ John 14:6**) However exclusive or offensive we find that to be, that's what Jesus is saying. The question is, "*How should we respond to what He is saying?*" There is a wrong way. To reject it and walk away. The right way? To bow, embrace His words, and share this message.

And how should we share it? If we are followers of the One who is the way, the truth, and the life, it is then our charge and our privilege to go forth with hearts of compassion as heralds of this good news - the truth and the life into which He has drawn us and is drawing us, the truth and the life He has shown and is showing us. His words then are His words now. "*I am taking you home to my Father. That's where you're going. And I am how you get there.*"

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