

Following Jesus in an Age of Many Faiths

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John 14:1-10

¹ “Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² My Father’s house has plenty of room; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.”

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “**I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.** ⁷ If you really know me, you will **know my Father as well.** From now on, **you do know him and have seen him.**”

⁸ Philip said, “Lord, **show us the Father** and that will be enough for us.”

⁹ Jesus answered: “**Don’t you know me,** Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? **Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.** How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

¹⁰ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.

Acts 14:15-17 Paul to people of Lystra trying to sacrifice to him and Barnabas.

¹⁵ ...“We also are humans, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these empty things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

¹⁶ In earlier generations he allowed all the nations to go their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”

Acts 17:24-28 Paul in Athens telling of the “Unknown God” whom they worship.

²⁴ The God who made the cosmos and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made with hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one every nation of humanity to live on all the surface of the earth, having marked out ordered seasons and the limits of their dwelling, ²⁷ that they should seek God, if perhaps they might feel after him and find him, though actually he is not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for ‘*In him we live and move and exist*’ [Epimenides, 6th c. bc]; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘*For we are indeed his offspring*’ [Aratus 3rd c. bc, Cleanthes, 3rd c. bc].

Ephesians 1:9-10, cf. Colossians 1:19

⁹ He has made known to us the mystery of his will ... which he set forth in him, ¹⁰ as a universal plan for the fullness of times, to sum up together all things in the Messiah, things in heaven and things on earth.

Romans 2:14-16 Gentiles and the Law

¹⁴ Gentiles don’t possess the law as their birthright; but whenever they do what the law says, they are a law for themselves, despite not possessing the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. Their conscience bears witness as well, and their thoughts will run this way and that, sometimes accusing them and sometimes excusing, ¹⁶ on the day when, according to the gospel I proclaim, God judges all human secrets through Messiah Jesus.

Amos 9:7 God, Israel, and the Nations

⁷ “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?” declares Yahweh. “Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Crete and the Syrians from Kir?”

Matthew 5:43-45

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor' and 'hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be like your Father in heaven, since he causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

Nearness – The Challenge and Mystery of other Faiths

As a child, I grew up in a sectarian world. We joked about being the only ones going to heaven, but thought it likely true. A small heaven. The religious "others" were Baptist, Methodist. The Nat. Geographic still explored unknown regions of earth. Now we're all next door.

I've learned a lot by study and relationships: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, vast cultures and literatures. I've learned the vast variety in Christianity. There's so much I'll never grasp because I don't live inside the world of Vishnu or Pure Land Buddhism or Greek Orthodoxy. We can't escape human limitation. A continuing journey, drawing on resources of faith.

We live in a secular world that deals with faiths by saying none/all are "true." I partly share in that. I put little trust in "religion" as a general phenomenon in human culture. It's both good and bad. My faith stakes all of life on Jesus, on the God of Israel known in Jesus, on the God who as creator is the source of all existence, the lover of all, giver of life & hope.

Modesty – Learning from other Faiths

I grew up in strong exclusivism: total agreement in all details of belief and practice required. There's power in strong boundaries, but it's not true to the NT. The Gospel, however, has a radical core in Jesus: incarnation, death, resurrection. Staking all on the reality of it.

At the same time, the NT itself points to a vast vision of the implications of that story. God is God of all nations. All things are reconciled in Jesus. God is doing more than we think.

We need modesty not about the Gospel but about our own understanding. Other faiths are important parts of the quest for God and help us to understand the needs of humanity and aspects of the Gospel that we have not seen. Power of suffering and desire. The interplay of religious law and society. One God and many gods, angels, saints. Etc., etc.

The task of learning requires real listening. We do not understand what it is to live in the world of another faith. How life fits together and works. Why it is powerful, attractive. We are destined to misunderstanding even as we struggle to listen and understand. That means welcoming people of other faiths into real conversation, exchange, sharing faith.

Wholeness – Letting each Faith be true to Its own Understanding

Faiths are specific and diverse. They have power as wholes. In wanting to understand other faiths, I'm striving to be true to God's inclusive love, not to create a universal theology.

It is loss on every level if I try to install Jesus as one among many helpful guides to "truth."

Buddhists are not desiring to go to a Christian heaven any more than I am worried about reincarnation in a lower caste or entering the Pure land or dissolving in Nirvana.

Power – Jesus' Challenge to Love and Trust

People often feel that the great danger of religion is in truth claims, exclusivism, treating others as dangerous outsiders to be coerced or destroyed. The danger is visibly real.

As Christians our challenge is actually to learn & trust the power of God's self-giving love, not trust the power of state coercion so deep in our history. Real trust in Jesus or love for God and neighbor cannot be coerced. We are still learning the message of the cross.