

# Missionary Encounters with Other Faiths

## A Christian view of Religion

### The Reality of Pluralism

1. Globalization, migration, technological advancements in travel and communication have put us in touch with people of other faiths far more than previous generations.
2. Muslims are growing at the highest percentage rate in the world. Buddhists are growing at a near equal rate as Christians
3. Nominal Christians and disillusioned former Christians have sought other forms of spirituality beyond Christianity

Conclusion: People of other faiths are our friends, neighbors, and co-workers. No longer is the Muslim or Hindu “over there.” Thus, our church conversation about other faiths is no longer relegated to the testimony of a missionary or the detached academic lecture.

**What are the particular challenges or obstacles you face in sharing the gospel with people of other faiths?**

### A Western View of Religion

#### 1) Religion under the Wider Tent of Modernism

##### Religion as just one part of life

*Religion in the West is usually used to describe practices and beliefs regarding the Transcendent. It's a small department of life: another compartment alongside of others that deal with prayer, worship, afterlife, spiritual realm...seen as private, individual...separated from most of human life.<sup>1</sup>*

Implied in this is the accommodation of any religious vision into a more ultimate and comprehensive one. It puts the Christian faith within a larger system of understanding religions.

Since Kant the modern world is left with an impenetrable barrier between the things we can experience with our senses and the things of the mind/spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Goheen, “The Church and Religious Pluralism: Living Faithfully Amidst the World Religions” Lectures at RTS Orlando, Feb 2013 available on iTunes U.

reality. When we segregate our practices and dogmas to a compartment of life, we assume that the rest of life is a neutral interacting with the material world.

When religion is compartmentalized, the rest of your life operates in a public sphere where you are not (or should not be) influenced by your belief system.

*“Let’s take marriage and divorce laws as a case study. Is it possible to craft laws that we all agree ‘work’ apart from particular worldview commitments? I don’t believe so. Your views of what is right will be based on what you think the purpose of marriage is. If you think marriage is mainly for the rearing of children to benefit the whole society, then you will make divorce very difficult. If you think the purpose of marriage is more primarily for the happiness and emotional fulfillment of the adults who enter it, you will make divorce much easier.”<sup>2</sup>*

## **2) Beliefs versus Facts**

### **Which is a fact?**

- $2+2=4$
- The earth revolves around the sun
- Marriage is created to be a union of one man and one woman
- Jesus Christ is Lord

We constantly relegate our faith claims to a matter of taste or opinion because our society has narrowly defined what we can claim as “fact.”

*We are frequently told that we are living in a secular, pluralist society in which Christianity, along with other faiths and ideologies, has the freedom to exist and express itself, but in which it cannot claim to be the faith of the nation. The two key words are ‘secular’ and ‘pluralist’. Let us take the second first. In what sense are we a pluralist society? Only in respect of what are called ‘beliefs’ and ‘values’. In respect of what are called ‘facts’ we are not. If we have a disagreement about beliefs and values, we may discuss it but in the end we accept the fact that beliefs and values differ; we live in a pluralist society. But if there is a disagreement about what are called ‘facts’ we proceed differently. We argue, carry out tests, go on arguing until we agree. We do not take it as an opportunity to celebrate the blessings of pluralism.<sup>3</sup>*

*We do not ask whether the belief is true, but whether the believer is sincere in holding the belief. On the other hand, it does not occur to us to ask whether a person is sincere in his or her belief about physics; we ask whether the belief is correct.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller *The Reason for God*, 17

<sup>3</sup> Lesslie Newbigin “Witnesses to the World,” 6

<sup>4</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 15

### 3) *The impulse to unite beliefs*

Universal religious claims have caused conflict, a conflict many secular people just cannot understand or justify. From their perspective, we are just all following the same God.

John Hick's: Three blind men and the elephant: One feels a snake, the other a tree, the other a rope, yet it really is an elephant.

Often this line of argument is used to assert that all belief is culturally conditioned. Yet, sociologist Peter Berger in his book *Rumors of Angels* makes the point that relativists can't claim that their relativism isn't culturally conditioned. We cannot avoid religious claims by hiding behind the maxim: "There's no way to know the Truth."

As Keller comments, "We must still do the hard work of asking: which affirmations about God, human nature, and spiritual reality are true and which are false? We will have to base our life on *some* answer to that question."<sup>5</sup>

### An Alternative Understanding of Religion

We can stand together with people of other faiths in rejecting the materialistic, humanistic, secular worldview that is imposed on us.

We must understand people of other faiths like we (hopefully) understand our own faith.

1. It is **Comprehensive**: Religion can't be marginalized to one aspect of life. It will shape your view of everything and strongly influence your behavior. Goheen notes, "Culture is religion made visible."
2. **True for all people in all times**: Religious claims are making statements about universal history. They cannot be set alongside each other in a consumer marketplace; each will challenge and impinge on the other.
3. **Claims spiritual power**: Each religion makes a claim that goes beyond mere practices and dogmas; it claims a real spiritual realm.

### Christian Claims to Universalism leads to a Missionary Encounter

*For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human who gave himself a ransom for all-- this was attested at the right time. 1 Tim.2:5-7*

1. Not seeking compromise or blend
2. Ultimately better understanding of other and the truth
3. "A missionary encounter involves a clash of ultimate and comprehensive religious commitments and ways of life." Michael Goheen

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<sup>5</sup> Keller 10