

Sunday Sidebar- July 7, 2019

Aren't All Religions Basically the Same?

There is a famous old fable (of either Buddhist or Jain origin) that has been used through the centuries to illustrate the basic idea that all religious paths are equally valid...

Several blind men were led into a rajah's (king's) courtyard, where they encountered an elephant. One felt a tusk and concluded that an elephant is like a spear. Another touched a leg and thought that an elephant is like a tree. Yet another bumped into the side of the beast and thought that it was like a wall. And so on. The rajah heard the activity, came out on his balcony, and told the blind men that they were each encountering only one small part of the magnificent whole.

The lesson by analogy, of course, is that the different religions of the world are all stumbling upon different aspects of ultimate reality, but are blind to the total picture. But all religious hands are touching the same essential truth.

It's easy to see the appeal of this unifying approach to the broad spectrum of religious beliefs. After all, exclusive claims to religious truth are seen by many to be the root of so much violence and suffering in the world, as believers of one faith fight against believers of another. If at their core all religions are the same, or each is heading toward the same end, then there isn't any real reason for conflict or quarrel, is there? We can all just do our own thing, and believe whatever we want and we will all end up the same.

The Truth is Revealed from Above

Ironically, this fable has built into it an element that is not highlighted in the traditional interpretations: how is it that the blind men discover the truth about their encounter with the elephant? It is revealed to them from above! The rajah steps out on his balcony and from his transcendent perspective, and with his ability to see all, communicates to those below the full picture of their experience. So a better question might be: Where is our "Rajah" who can see all and can reveal to us the truth that is not accessible from our own limited perspective?

Jesus Christ is the World's Rajah

God has revealed the truth to humankind, from above. All that we know about God - the words of God in the Bible and how God wants us to love him with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and how God wants us to love and honor and respect each other, etc. - all of this has come through God's self-revelation in Scripture, and in the sending of his son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation we have of who God is and what God is like. Jesus Christ is the only religious leader who claimed to be the one eternal God in human flesh. He knows the beginning from the end and knows the deepest religious yearnings of all people. He said definitively there is only one God and only one source of salvation: Jesus Christ himself. And Jesus did not leave us with "blind faith" as the only means to know that his claims are true. Rather, Jesus established the truth of his claims objectively through his glorious resurrection from the dead - the central miracle of human history. No other religious leader's tomb is empty. Only Jesus'!

So the fable has some truth to it. There really is a Rajah who has spoken to humankind and has given us the transcendent perspective we need to know the truth.

All Religions Are Not the Same

So as a Christian, one does not need to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all the way through. All of them contain at least some hint of truth. As C.S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*, As in arithmetic - there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong; but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others.

Be patient with those who are walking a different path, even while engaging them in conversation and telling them about Jesus. For in truth and fact, the King has indeed spoken from on high. All religions are not the same. And although we are all blind in sin, we can still hear the Savior calling....

Let those who have ears to hear, listen to the voice of the King, Jesus Christ!