

Why Are There So Many Religions?

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BUDDHISM. CHRISTIANITY. JUDAISM. ISLAM. HINDUISM. In Canada, one does not need to look very far to see different religions. Religious traditions interact, coexist, and dialogue with each other. But why are there so many religions? Can they all be equally true? Why do some atheists argue that the existence of *so many* of these religions in fact disproves God?

Some religions and philosophies see no conflict between systems of belief; their belief systems do not exclude a plurality of understandings. Others have exclusive understandings of their place in salvation, to varying degrees. Christianity, like Judaism before it, arose within a world of religious pluralism. It has since expanded across the world, often as a religious minority. It continues to have a special relationship with Judaism and Islam.

The ancient Greeks had a philosophical concept they used to describe the principle that was behind the entire universe: the *logos*. This force left a mark on the universe, called the *logos spermatikos* ("seeds of the word"). For the Greeks, these seeds left a sense and a longing for the creative force within creation itself, and this is why humanity has, since the beginning, struggled to understand the reality of the Divine Creator.

We who are Christians can affirm that much religious expression grows out of an authentic experience of the Divine. St Justin Martyr argued that it was the "seeds" of the *logos*, the Word and Son of the Living God, which Christians understand to be Jesus Christ, implanted on the hearts and minds of all of humanity that resulted in all of these religions. As a result, Christians looking at other religions can recognize goodness within them, as they seek to describe the One God who is the source of all life. St Justin wrote that these "seeds" were innate to all humanity, uniting them and allowing them *all* to participate in God's

revelation. St Justin was not alone in this approach. St John Chrysostom, too, wrote about the existence of other religions, writing that God is the "Father of all", giving the Israelites the "written-law" and other nations a "natural-law".

In fact, this understanding is rooted in Christian Scripture. Saint Paul writes about the concept of God, written on the hearts of humanity, in his letter to the Romans:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.
– *Romans 1:19-20, NRSV*

Saint Paul even preached the Gospel of Christ by identifying with the "unknown God" in which the Greeks believed. (Acts 17:23)

Some atheists argue that the presence of a plurality of religions and their frequent incompatibility demonstrates that "while they can't all be true, they can all be false." Traditional Christianity, without a doubt, affirms the centrality of Jesus Christ within the salvation of the *entire* world. Drawing from that point, it would agree with the objection that not all aspects of every religion are true. Christians believe in an absolute truth, not a relative truth. Christians believe that Jesus Christ, the *logos*, is this Truth. However, most Christians vehemently disagree with the atheist understanding that all religions are false. In fact, it would be difficult to find a religion or belief system that had no elements of truth within it.

Christians firmly believe in God the Holy Spirit, who acts wherever the Spirit desires. This, in principle, can be beyond

the borders of Christianity. In fact, if we believe that Christ came to die for all, the Spirit necessarily *must* act beyond the visible borders of Christianity. At the same time, Christians hold a scriptural understanding of Jesus Christ as "*The Way, The Truth, and The Life.*" (John 14:6, NRSV) "There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind." (1 Tim 2:6, NRSV) It is the name of Jesus Christ that gave the disciples power. (Mark 16:17)

Studying and dialoguing with other religions helps Christians come to an understanding of the immensity of the Divine Reality, the natural and innate search for the Divine, and the experiences and realities common to all Humanity. Men and Women of faith can come together to proclaim the dignity of the human person and to fight for justice and peace. Dialogue also helps Christians appreciate the reality of the Loving God, through whom all salvation occurs, and "who desires everyone to be saved."

(1 Tim 2:5, NRSV)

In the words of the Baar Statement from the World Council of Churches:

Our theological understanding of religious plurality begins with our faith in the one God who created all things, the living God, present and active in all creation from the beginning. The Bible testifies to God as God of all nations and peoples, whose love and compassion includes all humankind. We see in the Covenant with Noah a covenant with all creation. We see His wisdom and justice extending to the ends of the earth as He guides the nations through their traditions of wisdom and understanding. God's glory penetrates the whole of creation.

—*Baar Statement, no. 2, World Council of Churches*

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Questions for discussion

1. What are some things that Christianity has in common with other world religions?
2. What things do world religions offer as an example to Christians?
3. What does the saving message of Jesus Christ offer the religions of the world?