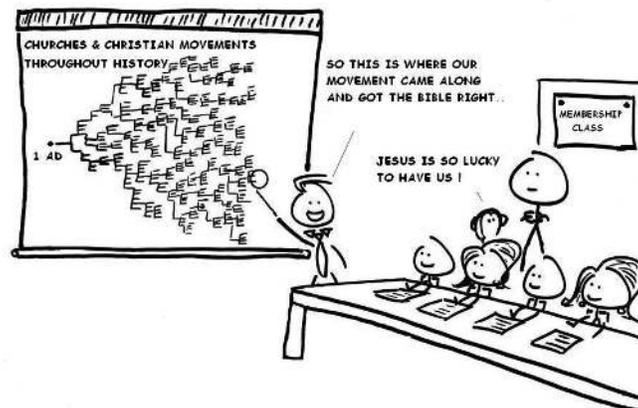


“Questions for God: Why So Many Religions?”  
John 4:1-26

Today is the last part of the sermon series about “Questions for God.” I have to admit that this topic is of special interest for me as someone who grew up in the Middle East and knew religious pluralism from the perspective of a minority. I grew up in a Christian household with my mom being Roman Catholic and my father being Presbyterian. Yet, I lived in a neighborhood that was mostly Muslim and went to school with Muslims and Jews. Interacting with people of other faiths and celebrating the different religious holidays was part of my daily life. The church of my childhood always saw itself as part of God’s diverse ways of speaking to humanity instead of being the one and only voice of religious truth. So it is always disturbing to me when one group of people claims that their religious teachings and practices are the only ones that are true. Here is a cartoon to illustrate this point (screen):

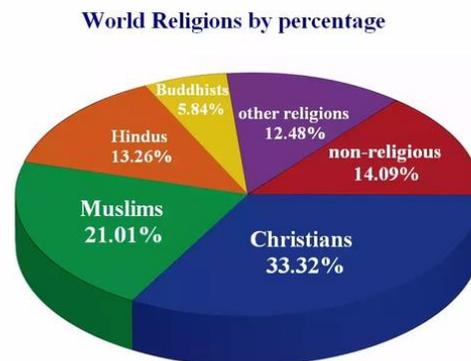


Worse yet is when people claim that they are the only ones loved by God, while the others are going to hell because they don’t believe or think like them. Here is another cartoon to make the point:



Religious differences have been and continue to be used to divide people and so the question about why so many religions in the world is especially relevant to our time. It is estimated that there are at least 19 major religions in the world with over 270 branches

of those faiths. But in terms of overall numbers of religions, there are around 4300 religions. Here is a graph of estimates of the main religions.



And so when we see the diversity and the many wars that have used religious groupings to fight others, how do we respond to the question about the reason behind the diversity of religions in the world? I think it is important as we respond, or at least engage this question, that we ask why we ask this question in the first place.

Why do we not ask about the diversity of languages in the world. There are at least 7000 languages in the world today. Yet, people don't usually assume that a language could make us enemies. No one says, "Because you speak a different language, you must be inferior to me. Your language is wrong and mine is right." What if we approached religious pluralism in the same way we approach the diversity of languages in the world? Instead of saying one is better than the other, we instead look at them as part of our specific culture and world and that we could be curious about the languages of others, maybe even become bi or tri lingual. Language is something that human beings develop based on their regions and climates and the point of a language is to help them communicate. One should not get stuck on the superiority of one language over another. Instead the focus is on its function. The Jewish mystical teacher Rabbi Rami Shapiro writes: "To me, religions are like languages: no language is true or false; all languages are of human origin; each language reflects and shapes the civilization that speaks it; there are things you can say in one language that you cannot say as well in another; and the more languages you speak, the more nuanced your understanding of life becomes. Judaism is my mother tongue, yet in matters of the spirit I strive to be multilingual."

I know that one big factor for not saying that other religions are true is that we tend to think in binary (dualistic) ways. If I am right, we think, then you must be wrong. But in language we focus on the function instead of the thing itself. If we focus on the function of a religion, which is to help us open up to the sacred in our lives and to be transformed into more loving people, then we don't need to get too stuck on having only one way to do that. The best description I heard about religion comes from Richard Rohr who once said that "religion is the container" and not the content. Rohr cautions against spending all of our time on the container with all of its doctrines, boundaries, beliefs, and rituals. If

religion is to do its job properly, it is about helping us move beyond its limitations to trust the mystery of God in our lives.

Such was the invitation of Jesus to the Samaritan woman he encountered at the well in Sychar. The woman comes at noon as a symbol of the fullness of light and faith. Unlike Nicodemus in chapter 3 who comes to Jesus at night, the woman is an example of faith. The way this story has often been interpreted is that the woman was promiscuous and had a shady sexual past and that Jesus forgave and saved her from her immoral ways. Yet, the story itself does not support such interpretation. Recent biblical scholarship (in the last 50 years) has moved away from looking at the Samaritan woman as a prostitute. Instead the focus has been on the radical encounter between a Jewish rabbi and a Samaritan woman. The text does not really support a view of the woman as a prostitute or as someone with a shady past. Jesus does not ask the woman to repent from her past. (first service) Let's watch a dramatization of the Bible story for today from John 4:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzC5yCHvSSY>

The woman's encounter with Jesus was about life-changing faith. This woman who would have considered Jesus to be an enemy on so many levels received the gift of seeing the presence of God in Jesus. The Samaritans were considered resident aliens in the land and represented to the Jews the accommodation and compromise of the Jews who stayed behind after the Babylonian Exile, married foreigners and followed the religions of other nations. There were so many differences and disagreements between the Jews and the Samaritans that Jesus couldn't have picked a worse enemy of his people to ask water from. He had compassion for her circumstances of having to depend on several men for her existence. Jesus saw through her plight and had compassion. He offered her the gift of the living water of life. What was interesting in their conversation is her question to him about the correct place of worship. According to her people and religion, true worship could only happen on Mount Gerizim, but according to the Jewish teachings the temple in Jerusalem was the place of true worship. Jesus invited her to worship in spirit and truth because the path to the transformation and the healing of our world is through encountering the living God. It is not through doctrines or belonging to the right church or group. Jesus helps us to see that true worship was not about a religious practice or space, instead it was about being in the Spirit of God. Opening one's heart to the spirit of truth was the key. That was very radical for that time, and to some extent, it is still radical for us. We guard our differences so carefully. We even fall into the trap of worshipping the container (how we worship, what we believe, and what we value) instead of worshipping the living God. Instead of allowing religion to help us transcend our limitations, we make religion another way to control and limit God, life, and others.

What if we followed the example of Jesus about true worship to help us approach our religious affiliation and the religious affiliation of others like we approach languages? Rami Shapiro describes Perennial (enduring or eternal) Wisdom as "the fourfold teaching at the mystic heart of the world's religions":

1. All life is a manifesting of a single Reality called by many names: God, Tao, Mother, Allah, Nature, YHVH, Dharmakaya, Brahman, and Great Spirit among others;
2. Human beings have an innate capacity to know the One in, with, and as all life;
3. Knowing the One carries a universal ethic of compassion and justice toward all beings; and
4. Knowing the One and living this ethic is the highest human calling.

I invite you today to follow the example of Jesus of crossing boundaries, of loving beyond our human limitations and fears, and of learning to see God speaking to all of creation around us.

(First service) Here is a clip from the movie, "The Big Sick" about a Pakistani American man who falls in love with a European American young woman. His parents try to find him a match because they want him to marry someone from his own religion and ethnic group. But love pushes this young man to challenge the cultural and religious assumptions of his parents:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsmP1h809F4!>

I would like to end with the words from the Apostle Paul as written in 1 Corinthians 13:9-12. These words speak to me deeply about trusting God's wisdom which is always beyond our control and finite minds, "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Amen.