

# Apologetics – Other Religions and the Unreached

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Because Christianity preaches the Lord Jesus as the only way to God, Christians face two related objections:

**1) What about all the people belonging to all the other religions of the world? Aren't they all sincerely trying to be "good" people? Can they be blamed for growing up in the "wrong" religion?**

**2) What about all the people who have not/cannot/ will not ever hear the gospel message?**

In some ways, these questions are subsets of the problem of evil. They refer back to questions like "Why is there sin in the world? Why didn't God make a world without sin? Why didn't God save everyone?" For these questions, we refer back to our study on the problem of evil.

This study deals with the more specific questions about the proliferation of religions, and the culpability of the "ignorant"?

## **A. Why Are There So Many Religions? And Could Jesus Really Be The Only Way to God?**

1. The proliferation of religions is not really an argument against God. It is an argument for the existence of the supernatural. Man is obviously a worshipping being. Wherever he has scattered on the earth, he begins worshipping.

2. Beyond this, man is described as lost (Lk 19:10). Something has happened to the human condition that causes man to make up gods that suit us. As Calvin said, man's heart is an idol factory.

3. Lurking behind the idols of the nations are often real, and fallen, spiritual beings, who desire to deceive.

1 Corinthians 10:19 What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? 20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.

Deuteronomy 32:8 When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.

4. Some of the proliferation of religions is a judgement on man for rejecting the light he had.

Romans 1:22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor

their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

5. So much for the proliferation of religions. However, Scripture actually classifies religions into only two categories:

1 Corinthians 1:20 Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

1 Corinthians 1:27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

There is religion which seems wise to man, and glorifies man, and there is the religion which seems foolish to man and glorifies God. Man-centred, human-empowered systems of thoughts and deeds, which glorify the adherents through their works. God-centred, Spirit-empowered relationship of love, which glorifies God.

6. If God truly became man in a certain time and place, then this event rules out pluralism (unless He taught it when He came). God becoming man centres all attention on that event, and the words He spoke. Every religion that contradicts what He said must be false.

Before Christ came, the object of faith may not have been as specific. After Eden, God's requirement of man continued to be repentance and faith in God, through His revelation. However, it seems that the content of that faith remained a mixture of what was made known in general and special revelation.

After Christ's coming, the object of faith is now centred on Him.

Acts 17:30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

7. Jesus Himself said that He was the focal point of salvation, and the exclusive means of knowing God (Jo 14:6). People who lived before Christ, were still saved *by* Christ, even though the object of their faith was not yet in Him as Jesus of Nazareth.

## **B. What About Those Who Have Never Heard the Gospel?**

1. God has revealed Himself directly to every human being with an implanted sense of God's existence (Rom 1:19, Joh 1:6). John Calvin: "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity [*divinitatis sensum*]. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty (I.3.1).

2. From this implanted knowledge, every human intuitively understands that the works of creation reveal God's wisdom, goodness and power.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, (Romans 1:20).

3. Similarly, this implanted knowledge, alongside the conscience, teaches every human that God is a Lawgiver.

who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them (Romans 2:15).

The goodness of providence also teaches that God is good and faithful:

Acts 14:16 who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."

4. He or she may not know God's name, works in history, or gift of salvation, but every human knows that God exists, God is a Person, God created everything, and God is morally good. This means every human has an inward obligation to show gratitude to the Creator, and to honour Him, and attempt obedience. When man does not respond to this knowledge, he is already guilty.

Romans 1:21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

5. Man adds to his sin of ingratitude and dishonour to the Creator by actively suppressing the truth.

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Suppression means intuitive truth is deliberately ignored, rejected, and dismissed until it is buried deep enough in the consciousness to seem non-existent. On top of this buried truth, the sinner may build his own systems of truth and religion and claim he cannot see any other.

6. Against this background, no human being "deserves" the gospel. He has already rejected the "pre-gospel". He slams the door in the face of general revelation; special revelation (the Bible, the Gospel, Christ) is not obligated to knock on his door. The human race must be seen in light of its native aversion to truth. Its willingness to believe lies, suppress truth, refuse inconvenient facts shows that the problem would not be solved by adding more detailed facts, or by exposing all people to exactly equal amounts of special revelation.

7. We have to assume that God's special revelation was present for believers such as Job and his friends, Melchizedek, and believers from Seth to Noah. Whether they were dreams, visions, angelic messages, voices, prophets, we do not know. God special revelation continued to particularise in Israel, culminating in the Incarnation and the Canon of Scripture.

8. As this revelation particularised, the need to globalise its message became imperative. The further away from the time of the Incarnation, and the more the message is known, the less scope exists for general revelation as the content of the faith, and the greater the requirement for people to respond rightly to special revelation. The sense in which God knows the overlap and relation of the two seems to be implied by Acts 17:30. God did not overlook sins, but He overlooked the vagueness in men's faith when present.

9. For those who never hear the Gospel, their situation must be analogous to people from Adam to Christ, who had varying degrees of exposure to special revelation. General revelation has made them culpable. They are still required to repent and believe in what God has revealed to them.

10. God may use special revelation in surprising ways, where the church has not penetrated. Again, we can say on the basis of Cornelius, the magi, and Acts 17:27, that God will graciously reward light received with more light. What is normative is that men are today saved by the direct preaching of Christ.

11. Are there second chances after death? Some believe that 1 Peter 4:6 suggests this. However, Hebrews 9:27 also implies judgement occurs after death, as does the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The text is very obscure, and it is dubious to construct a doctrine from such a verse.

God alone knows the combinations of general and special revelation, in each generation, that constitutes rejection of Him, and also constitutes a merciful invitation to mankind to fellowship with Him.