

## JESUS AND OTHER RELIGIONS

Scriptures: Acts 17:16-31; John 14:1-6

A couple weeks ago I mentioned a novel called *Life of Pi*. Pi, the narrator of the story, is 16 year old boy from India whose full name is Piscine Molitor Patel. He is devoutly religious. On Fridays he attends a Muslim mosque, on Sundays a Catholic church, and during the week a Hindu temple. His parents don't know about any of this. One day Pi and his parents are walking along the street and by coincidence they run into the Catholic priest, the Muslim imam, and the Hindu pandit (or holy man) all converging toward them on the street. Pi says,

After the “Hellos” and “Good days”, there was an awkward silence. The priest broke it when he said, with pride in his voice, “Piscine is a good Christian boy. I hope to see him join our choir soon.” My parents, the pandit and imam looked surprised. “You must be mistaken. He’s a good Muslim boy. He comes without fail to Friday prayer, and his knowledge of the Holy Qur’an is coming along nicely.” So said the imam. My parents, the priest and the pandit looked incredulous. The pandit spoke. “You’re both wrong. He’s a good Hindu boy. I see him all the time at the temple coming for darshan and performing puja.” My parents, the imam and the priest looked astounded. ... All eyes fell upon me. “Piscine, can this be true?” asked the imam earnestly. “Hindus and Christians are idolaters. They have many gods.” “And Muslims have many wives,” responded the pandit. The priest looked askance at both of them. “Piscine,” he nearly whispered, “there is salvation only in Jesus.” “Balderdash! Christians know nothing about religion,” said the pandit. “They strayed long ago from God’s path,” said the imam. “Where’s God in your religion?” snapped the priest. ... “We like to know that God is truly with us.” “Is that so? Well, a whole lot of good it did God to be with you—you tried to kill him! You banged him to a cross with great big nails. Is that a civilized way to treat a prophet?” ...

The pandit interrupted them quietly. In Tamil he said, “The real question is, why is Piscine dallying with these *foreign* religions?” The eyes of the priest and the imam properly popped out of their heads. They were both native Tamils. “God is universal,” sputtered the priest. The imam nodded strong approval. “There is only one God.” ... “What it comes down to,” the priest put out with cool rage, “is whether Piscine wants *real* religion—or myths from a cartoon strip.” “God—or idols,” intoned the imam gravely. “Our gods—or colonial gods,” hissed the pandit. It was hard to tell whose face was more inflamed. ... “Hmmm, Piscine?” Mother nudged me. “How do you feel about the question?” ... “I just want to love God,” I blurted out, and looked down, red in the face (pp. 66-69).

That kind of conversation might have taken place in Athens in the time of the apostle Paul. Acts 17:18 says, “Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babblers want to say?’ Other said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’” It sounds a like the debate between Pi’s spiritual advisors. Actually, the people of Athens sound like Pi himself. They tried to cover the religious waterfront. They worshiped ever God they could think of. They even built an altar “to an unknown god,” a sort of generic “to whom it may concern.”

Several questions of faith submitted this summer concerned the Christian faith and other religions. One person wrote, “If Jesus is the only way to salvation, can people of other religions go to heaven?” Another asked, “If Jesus was the King of the Jews, why are we not Jewish?” Both of these questions are asking: how should Christians relate to people of other religions?

The first answer is respectfully. Christians should always relate to people of other religions respectfully. Did you notice how respectfully Paul addresses the people of Athens in our scripture reading? In verse 22 he says, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” Paul even quotes from one of their religious teachers, a poet named Aratus. Verse 28: “For ‘in him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”

C. S. Lewis once said that only atheists must believe that all other religions are totally mistaken. Only atheists must believe everyone else has it wrong. Christians are free to believe that all religions contain some hint of the truth (*Mere Christianity*, p. 43).

But how do we discern that hint of the truth in other religions? Recently the Pope created quite a stir by pointing out some of the violent, warlike history of Islam. Muslims promptly responded by mentioning the Crusades. The truth is that we all have skeletons in our religious closet. Christians, in the past, have been responsible for things like the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the Holocaust in Germany, apartheid in South Africa and slavery in America. As a follower of Christ I am not proud of these things. I am ashamed. I am ashamed that we as followers of Christ were guilty of such things.

But here is the question: How do we know to be ashamed of these things? How do we know that these are not the proudest moments in our history? How do we know that violence, massacre, slavery, and genocide are not the things God wants us to do?

The answer is Jesus. When you look at Jesus, his life, his actions, his death for us on the cross—when you look at everything the Bible tells us about Jesus, it is obvious that Jesus is not the kind of person who would join the Crusades. Jesus is not the kind of person who would own slaves. Jesus is not the kind of person who would herd Jews into a gas chamber and then collect their gold fillings before they were cremated. Read the gospels and tell me if you can imagine Jesus participating in any of those things.

Jesus is the standard by which we realize that even some of our actions as Christians have been wrong. That is exactly what Paul means when he says to the people of Athens in verse 31, “God has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” When we claim Jesus as our Lord, we are not saying that Christians are always right or that Christians are better than people of other religions. When we confess that Jesus is Lord, we are saying that Jesus is the one who judges all religion, including our own.

This judgment also applies to other religions. Some of you may remember a few years ago when Philip Prasad preached in our church. Philip Prasad is an Untouchable from India, who grew up being taught by the Hindu religion that it was God’s will for him to be a lowly

impoverished Untouchable whose sole purpose in life was to clean out the latrines of higher caste people. It was from Christians that Philip Prasad learned a different identity. Christian missionaries in India taught Philip that his life was so important and so precious that God would send his only Son to save him. Philip was taught by Christians that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Philip was taught by Christians, “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” That message set him free to become an educated follower of Christ, someone who is now providing education, job training, and dignity to Untouchables all across India.

Jesus is the standard by which we judge all religions, including our own. When we see Muslims being respectful of women’s bodies, and when we see Muslims giving enormous amounts of money to help the poor, we look at Jesus and say, “Yep, that’s what Jesus would be doing.” But when we see some Muslims, not all but some Muslims, forbidding girls to go to school or threatening to execute someone who converts to Christianity, or blowing themselves up in order to kill as many people as possible, we can honestly say, “That’s not what Jesus would do.” Jesus did not sacrifice his life to kill people; he did it to save them.

Now back to the questions of faith. If Jesus is the only way to salvation, can people of other religions go to heaven? I believe the answer is yes to both parts of that question. In our first scripture reading from John 14, Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus is the only way to salvation. The New Testament is clear about that. But earlier in the gospel of John, in John 10:16, Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” Since Jesus is talking to his Jewish disciples when he says this, the other sheep are probably Gentiles—people who at that point had other religions, like the people in Athens. But one day, Jesus says, those people will also come to believe in me and be part of my family.

How that will happen, he does not say. But this much we know: we are not saved by our religious devotion. We are not saved by our superior philosophical wisdom. We are not saved by our exemplary character. We are saved only by the grace of God given to us in Jesus Christ. But the fact that we are saved by grace means we do not yet know all of the people whom God will save. God’s grace in Jesus may eventually touch the lives of all kinds of people who don’t know him now, just as it did some of those people in Athens.

And that brings me to the last question. If Jesus was the King of the Jews, why are we not Jewish? Philip Yancey tells a wonderful story about a Jewish friend who led tour groups of Christians visiting the Holy Land. As he listened to them talk about Jesus’ second coming, it surprised him how similar it sounded to the Messiah he had learned about in Hebrew school—a righteous King who would bring justice and peace to our badly fractured planet. He said to Philip Yancey, “Wouldn’t it be amazing if we found out we were all waiting for the same person?” (*The Bible Jesus Read*, p. 213).

The truth is that we are waiting for the same person. The difference is that when he comes we will recognize him, because we have met him before on a cross. - Ken Onstot