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Are All Religions Alike?

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Introduction

I am isolating one challenging, indeed, embarrassing thought from the prayer life of Jesus in John 17.21. With reference to His present and future followers he prayed “*that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...*”¹ This is a prayer for unity, togetherness among Christians, a prayer that continues to be an embarrassment and a challenge for the multitude of denominations locally, regionally and globally.

In a deep spiritual sense, the Church of Jesus Christ *is in fact one*, in spite of us in our exclusive denominational camps and in spite of us in our rugged individualism within our local churches. This is what one can call *the essential reality* of Christian unity.

In another sense, at the level of functional reality the Church of Jesus Christ needs to be one, i.e. to behave as one and that depends on all of us within local churches and within denominations.

My suggestion is that God is asking all of us from our various denominations to rethink our doctrinal distinctives and rethink dialogue between and among us.

¹ All italics original.

RETHINKING DOCTRINAL DISTINCTIVES

I believe God is asking us to rethink our doctrinal distinctives. Historically; denominations have mushroomed here and elsewhere because individuals and groups wish to emphasize or specialize in certain things or ‘truths’ that we regard as our denominational distinctives. That’s not a problem, so long as we do not allow distinctives to lead to divisiveness, where we sit in our particular camps and look down on others or speak unkindly against each other without even an intention of talking to or with one another.

The approach to distinctives which I would ask us to reject lovingly or surrender willingly is that approach which views our denominational distinctives, objectively, as ‘what *ought to be prized* and thus what is *prescriptive for all Christians*’.

Even if this approach were correct and defensible there could still be far fewer denominations within Christendom and more Church mergers and there should be greater togetherness between and among churches because much or most of what many of us prize as distinctives is held in the same way by others.

The problem is that, denominationally, we do not talk to each other enough to know that we share common distinctives or we might not be as humble, honest and sensible as the Disciples of Christ and the United Church brethren in Jamaica who merged as one denomination several years ago.

The approach to distinctives which I recommend is that which views denominational distinctives, subjectively, as ‘what **we** prize and thus what is simply *descriptive of us*.’ The other approach I remind, views our denominational distinctives, objectively, as ‘what *ought to be prized and thus what is prescriptive for all Christians*’.

But you might say to me ‘come now Chisholm, surely you know that what we prize and thus what is descriptive of us could be what God commands or expects of all of us and therefore ought to be what all Christians prize and regard as prescriptive.’

My answer? You are dead right, it **could be**, operative word, *could*. But you must bear in mind that some things are possible, or probable or likely or certain if we have the evidence to move it along the spectrum.

My recommended approach does not deny the likelihood even of one’s denominational distinctives having the backing of Scripture but my approach leaves room for openness to being corrected by others.

Let me illustrate the need for humility and openness re denominational distinctives. I move from the humorous to the more serious.

I heard that there was, at one time, a denominational group in Kingston, Jamaica called ‘Straight Way Baptists’. Their major denominational distinctive which was consistent with their name could be detected in the way they baptized. They would lower you into the waters of baptism vertically (no bending) and take you up out of the water vertically, or straight way and they had scriptural justification for this odd practice in the baptism of our Lord.

Mark 1.10 says of Jesus, “And straightway coming up out of the **water...**” They did not know and could care less that Mark used a word in Greek that means ‘immediately, right away’; they thought it had to do with the position of the body in baptism.

There is a group, still around I am told, that takes pride in their distinctive approach to Holy Communion or ‘breaking of bread’. They never share at the Lord’s Table in a morning worship but always in the evening because it is the Lord’s Supper not the Lord’s breakfast.

There are two denominations that deserve commendation in this regard for their public willingness to rethink and change their doctrinal distinctives at least in part, significantly in the case of the other. I speak of the Church of God of Prophecy, which until about 1991/2 forbade its members to wear jewellery on the basis of their understanding of 1 Peter 3. The Church admitted that its traditional approach to the text was not as accurate as it might have been.

My recommended approach to dialogue is consistent with the approach of the Church of God of Prophecy; leave room for the possibility of error or imprecision in our denominational distinctives.

The Worldwide Church of God was until several years ago Sabbatarian, non-Trinitarian and held to several other distinctives which the Church has now renounced. Sincere dialogue between and among us can lead to correction of error and sharpening of imprecision in doctrine. Let's have genuine dialogue, non-confessional or confessional, and we just may discover that some of what we regard as unique to us is shared by others of us.

If the denominations within each of the umbrella groups like the JEA, or JCC were to examine the baseline reality beneath their being under such a general umbrella then they could all be one denomination, but for denominational pride perhaps.

Please do not let denominational arrogance or prized ignorance block you from the approach to distinctives and dialogue that I am recommending. The Church must not encourage the view that ignorance is a virtue.

That's my word to the denominations within Christianity. Now a word to Christians in a world of several religions just like the 1st century of this era was. The 21st century like the 1st century, has little use for religious distinctives and the call is for all religions to recognize that all

religions can and should engage in common worship based on two assumptions/propositions.

One such assumption/proposition is that *the fact of a plurality of religions means the essential sameness of all religions.*² Another related assumption or proposition is that *all religions lead to God or the same God.*

There are some basic problems for these two assumptions/propositions. If by ‘sameness’ we mean more than the superficial idea that they are all ‘religions’, then the assumption is not true since some of the truth-claims of the various major religions, as articulated by their most serious adherents, *are different and often contradictory of each other.*

Islam’s belief in one God is not the same as the Christian concept of one God, nor is either of these views of God compatible with that of a polytheistic religion (cf. ancient Egypt) or animistic religion (cf. ancient and modern sections of Africa apart from Egypt) or non-theistic religions (cf. forms of Buddhism).

It is therefore unfortunate that scholars like John Hick, R.C. Zaehner³ and others, try to homogenize all religions by suggesting that the same basic divine reality is behind all religions.⁴ As the Anglican scholar Alister McGrath advises, “The idea that all religions are the same, or that they all lead to the same God, is thus little more than an unsubstantiated assertion that requires a refusal to acknowledge that there are genuine and significant differences among the religions. . . . Only in Western liberal circles would such an idea be taken seriously.”⁵

It must be noted too that one cannot seriously argue for the equality or sameness of any two or more things without coming to grips with what

² The song ‘One God’ reflects this mindset.

³ See John Hick (ed.), *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth-Claims* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 1974, 1-19, 140-155.

⁴ Cited and critiqued in Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God & Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), 1993, 112ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

equality or sameness really means, philosophically. If two things are really equal or the same, then whatever is true of one *is of logical necessity* true of the other. If anything can be affirmed of one which is not true of the other then the two things are not equal, not the same.

By this token Christianity may share commonalities with, but could not be equal to Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism or Taoism or even Judaism or any other religion for that matter, because Christianity, *uniquely and perhaps arrogantly, affirms that Jesus Christ is God incarnate who died a sacrificial and substitutionary death and rose again three days later.*

The fundamental and distinctive Christian doctrines of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ were as unique and radical in the religiously pluralist first-century world as they are in the 21st century.

Modern attempts to water down or explain away the meaning and cruciality of these two doctrines for the early Church, in the interest of multi-faith non- confessional dialogue, flounder on the texts of the New Testament documents, and those who urge the watering down of these two doctrines cannot surface a good reason why the early Church would have developed these ‘obnoxious doctrines’ in the first place.

There is no question about the fact that the intensely monotheistic New Testament writers put on the lips of Jesus claims to be God or equal to God. (‘The very boldness of Jesus’ claims concerning his deity and the centrality of his personhood to his claims render him unique among the greatest religious leaders of the world’s major religions.)

A. J. Hoover has a point when he contends,

Moses didn’t claim to be Yahweh; Socrates didn’t claim to be Zeus; Zoroaster didn’t claim to be Ahura Mazda; Mohammed didn’t claim to be Allah; Buddha didn’t claim to be Brahma. Only Christ claimed to be one with the God who sent him (John 10:30) Familiarity has dulled our ears to the wonder of his claims.⁶

⁶ *The Case for Christian Theism*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 169.

Jesus was no mere guide to truth or to God. No, he claimed to be much more than that and ties himself to his teaching and claims.

Mahatma Gandhi once declared that whether or not there was a historical Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount would still be true for him.⁷ But note some crucial claims in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in Jesus' teachings that raise hard questions for Gandhi's approach.

Jesus inextricably linked his claims to his person by saying 'Blessed are you if you are persecuted **on my account**' (Mt. 5.11); 'lose your life **for my sake...**' (Mk. 8.35); and the unique, if arrogant and exclusivist, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me' (Jn. 14.6).⁸ Though we can't stress every 'the' (**the** way, **the** truth, **the** life), because this may just be a case of Hebrew parallelism in the New Testament, yet this is quite a claim on the lips of Jesus.

Even if these statements are not the *very words* of Jesus, it is difficult to see them as less than the *very voice* of Jesus, and either way these claims are bold and unique!

There is something uniquely shocking about the claims of Jesus at his trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin. Hear the critical question of identity, 'I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God?' (Mt. 26.63). The answer in the Synoptics is 'You have said so' (Mt. 26.64 and Lk. 22.69) or 'I am' (Mk.14.62). But there is a crucial additional element which all three synoptic evangelists mention, on the lips of Jesus, with reference to himself; the Old Testament reference to the son of man seated '**at the right hand of power**'.

The expression 'at the right hand of power' is a Hebraism suggesting the immediate presence of deity! Jesus was claiming to be equal to God and Caiaphas, recognizing this shocking 'blasphemy' recoiled by doing

⁷ Ibid, 170.

⁸ Compare the more liberal statement of the Bhagavad-Gita 'In any way that men love me in that same way they find my love: for many are the paths of men, but they all in the end come to me', 4.11. Note as well the elements of similarity between 9.18 and John 14.6!

something shocking as well; contrary to Levitical law (Lev. 21.10) he rent his priestly garments!

Even if the claims made for Jesus are not true, the fact that the New Testament documents purport them to be true means that Jesus Christ cannot be put on par with any other religious leader or god *as far as the New Testament writers are concerned*. For these writers Jesus is unique because he is God incarnate.

The doctrine of the bodily, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ *in historical time and in a specified geographical location* was/is quite unique despite the erroneous views of some scholars about the commonness of resurrection belief in the 1st century and the equally erroneous view that the Christians copied the resurrection idea from other cultures and religions.

The notion of the commonness of resurrection belief in the 1st century can be refuted by recollection of the fact that the Sadducees denied the idea of a resurrection (cf. Acts 23.6-8) and the Pharisees and people in general believed in a general resurrection *on the last day*, at the end of history (cf. Martha in Jn. 11.24).

The idea that the Christians borrowed the resurrection idea from other cultures or religions lacks supporting evidence. The death/resurrection of Jesus is said to be drawn from the accounts of one or other of several allegedly dying/resurrected gods.

The major resurrected god that critics claim provided the model from which Christianity borrowed, or by which it was influenced, is the Egyptian Osiris, husband of Isis.⁹ As the myth goes, Osiris was murdered by his brother Seth who sank the coffin with Osiris' body in the Nile. Isis discovered the body and returned it to Egypt whereupon

⁹ Diop says, without supporting documentation. "[Osiris] rises from the dead to save humanity (from famine!). Osiris is the god of redemption.. .Osiris is the god who, three thousand *years* before Christ, dies and rises from the dead to save men. He is humanity's god of redemption; he ascends to heaven to sit at the right hand of his father, the great god. Ra. He is the son of God", 1991, op. cit., 312.

Seth found the body and cut it into fourteen pieces and scattered these widely. Isis found every piece.

Versions of the story vary from this point on. Some versions of the myth simply have Osiris as king of the Underworld. Plutarch, writing in the second century AD has the most complete version of the myth of Osiris, including a two-fold resurrection by Isis.¹⁰

A major problem here concerning Osiris as a model for Jesus' death and resurrection, pointed out by one Christian scholar (Yamauchi),¹¹ is that *immortality for an Egyptian does not require resurrection of the body, only that aspects of his personality like his Ba and Ka¹² continue to hover about his body*. To accomplish this, the body had to be mummified (always the case with portrayals of Osiris), food put in the coffin or depiction of food on the tomb walls and magical spells buried with the body (hence the Pyramid texts, Coffin texts or *Book of the Dead* from the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms, respectively). Ronald Nash identifies several critical differences between Jesus' death/resurrection and the death of the gods in the so-called mystery religions. We isolate two of these for mention.

1. "Jesus' death was an actual event in history. The death of the god described in the pagan cults is a mythical drama with no historical ties; its continued rehearsal celebrates the recurring death and rebirth of nature. The incontestable fact that the early church believed that its proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection was grounded upon what actually happened in history makes absurd any attempt to derive this belief from the mythical, non-historical stories of the pagan cults."¹³

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 137, also Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, 5 and Finegan, *op. cit.*, 48-49.

¹¹ Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, 5.

¹² According to Finegan, "The *kha* is the gross, mortal, perishable body. The *ba*, *ka*, and *akh* are subtle, immortal elements *op. cit.*, 45.

¹³ Nash, *op. cit.*, 17 1-172. See also A.D. Nock's similar statement, "In Christianity everything is made to turn on a dated experience of a historical Person; it can be seen from 1 Cor. XV. 3 that the statement of the story early assumed the form of a statement in a Creed. There is nothing in the parallel cases which points to any attempt to give such a basis of historical evidence to belief," cited in Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, 6.

2. Jesus' death is voluntary and for others, to deal with sin, whereas death overtakes the gods of the mysteries and none dies a substitutionary death.'¹⁴

Biblical Christianity then cannot be defensibly seen as the same as, identical with or equal to any other religion, because of the unique Christian doctrines of the deity, incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not enough to say all religions are equal because they are all religions. That is as foolish as saying all scientific theories are equal because they are all scientific theories. The contradictory truth-claims of religions have to be reckoned with just like the contradictory aspects of scientific theories. The call for inter/multi-faith worship or even dialogue cannot be based on a presumed equality of all religions for the reasons we have explored earlier.

It is perhaps only with reference to things religious that so many people suddenly become confused, agnostic or skeptical about the possibility of knowing truth. In life in general we seem to be able to identify truth from falsehood. The courts of every country thrive on the ability to discover truth and differentiate truth from falsehood and so do all of us in evaluating statements, making important decisions on data purporting to be true, and much more, to get on with our lives.

If we had the time I would have loved to advance a defense of objective truth as *the correspondence of what one knows or says, to what is independent of the knower and his/her consciousness, language¹⁵ or 'community.'¹⁶ I am aware that there are several theories of truth that could be considered, like the coherence theory, or the rationalist theory or the empiricist, pragmatic or emotivist theories, but for me the correspondence theory has fewest weaknesses.*

¹⁴ Nash, op. cit., 17 1-172.

¹⁵ Cf. the essence of language for reality in Wittgenstein, Hauerwas and Kallenberg (see Scott Smith, *Virtue Ethics and Moral knowledge: Philosophy of language after MacIntyre and Hauerwas*, Ashgate, 2003.).

¹⁶ Reflective of postmodernism's rejection of meta-narrative and the limitation of reality or truth to one's 'community'.

Evaluation of the truth-claims of all religions is critical and for that job one needs a working theory of truth.¹⁷

Christians should realize that apart from Satanism, all or almost all of the world's major religions contain much truth, commendable ethical principles, and useful practices from which Christians can learn much. There ought to be a profound respect for adherents of these other religions and especially for their doctrines and practices *even though one may disagree with said doctrines or practices*.

Since there is usually much criticism of Christians for not being tolerant of other religions it is important to clarify what tolerance and intolerance really are.

The classical sense of the principle of tolerance, strictly speaking, is one's respectful attitude *to persons with whom one disagrees*, that is persons whom one regards as holding views (religious, scientific, philosophical or whatever) that are wrong or false. One does not tolerate people with whom one is in agreement.

The modern version of tolerance, according to Moreland and Craig, "goes beyond the classical version in claiming that one should not even judge that other people's viewpoints are wrong."¹⁸ This modern position cannot really be maintained with any degree of consistency unless one believes that all truth-claims, in any field of inquiry, are of equal value. If it is possible any at all, in any field of inquiry to adjudge error, then the modern version of tolerance is fatally flawed.

On this line of reasoning, one is intolerant if and only if one shows *disrespect for* (not simply disagreement with) another, with whom one disagrees, that is, one whose views are regarded as wrong or false.

¹⁷ See the recent excellent book by Christian US Attorney Craig Parton, *Religion on Trial: Cross-Examining Religious Truth-Claims*, Concordia Publishing House, 2018.

¹⁸ J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press), 2003, 416.

There is a clear response precedent to the challenge of interfaith and multi-faith worship in Paul's behaviour in Athens found in Acts 17.

For me worship is a serious act of recognition of and response to the 'otherness and worthiness of a deity who is at least described or defined as possessing distinguishing or differentiating characteristics.

If there is no philosophical equality in the description or definition of the deity of any two religions, then adherents of those two religions cannot **sensibly** engage in a planned joint worship experience *as of the same deity*.

There are passages in the Bible that speak, explicitly and implicitly, against the Jew or Christian being involved in what we now call inter or multi-faith worship.

Paul's experience at the Areopagus in Acts 17 is very suggestive. The idolatry in the context is clear: many gods are being worshipped, and the Athenians are so scrupulous in their religious devotion that they tried to show recognition of and respect for, even an unknown god to 'whom' they erected an altar.

Paul's response to the scene in Athens emerges in v. 16; he was provoked in his spirit. Paul's practical response was to engage in reasoning (confessional dialogue) with Jews and Gentiles in their meeting places and with anyone he found in the marketplace (v. 17).

In v. 18, Paul runs into two philosophical groups- Epicureans and Stoics- who seemingly concluded, from listening to Paul, that he was promoting two foreign or new gods – Jesus and *Anastasis* (Gk. for resurrection), v. 18. The philosophers invited Paul to address them (vv.19-20). Paul begins his address complimenting the philosophers on their religious devotion, evidenced in their "objects of worship" including an altar with the inscription "to the unknown God" (vv. 22-23). He indicates that he would declare to them the God whom they worshipped in ignorance (v. 23b).

Paul chides them, philosophically, for betraying a belief that a crafted object could be God (vv. 24-29). He informs them that God would overlook their past ignorance but “now commands all men to repent” (v. 30). His stated reason for the call to repentance is propositional and decidedly confessional, that is, designed to change the wrong views of his listeners.

Repentance, Paul urges, is necessary for those who hear the truth, because God would judge the world by the resurrected Jesus (v. 31).

In a sense then Athens provided a golden opportunity for multi-faith worship yet Paul, as a Jew and a Christian, did not glibly participate; instead he rebuked the falsity of a plurality of idols in Athens and proclaimed the cruciality of the resurrected Jesus for one’s eternal destiny.

It should be noted that Paul, implicitly, rejected the approach to God which says, ‘relate to God whomever/whatever you perceive God to be’. For Paul there were defining and differentiating characteristics about God that could not be glossed over. If God has no defining or differentiating features how do you distinguish that God from a slice of salami?

What Paul did at Athens was quite consistent with the Old Testament fussiness about the gods people worship (Ex. 20.3-4; Deut. 6.13-14). The strong ban on worshipping the celestial bodies indicates that the Bible is not ambivalent about the object of one’s worship (2 Kings 21.3, 5; 23.4-5).

It would be difficult to find any support for inter or multi-faith worship in the Bible. What is countenanced in the Bible is inter- or multi-faith dialogue of the confessional kind. This kind of dialogue, designed to share one’s beliefs or truth-claims *with a view to persuading others of their truth-value*, is and ought to continue to be normative in all disciplines and areas of human inquiry but should always be shrouded in an atmosphere of respect.

I ask you then, remember the words of our Lord, “Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be wise as serpents and [not harmless] but blameless as doves.” Watch your mind (how you think) and watch your life; ensure that it is white as lily.

Hold lightly your denominational distinctives, be open to being corrected but don't undervalue Christianity's distinctives and differentness; and prepare yourself to dialogue confessionally and respectfully with adherents of other religions. To accomplish this, our churches have to show greater respect for teaching and for apologetics (the discipline of defending the faith).

We show respect for apologists only when the church is under serious attack, and when the attack has been repelled we throw away the apologist like a dish towel.

©Rev. Clinton Chisholm, May 2018