

WHY DOES THE BIBLE APPEAR TO PRESENT A CONSISTENTLY NEGATIVE VIEW OF OTHER RELIGIONS? IS THIS A SUFFICIENT REASON FOR A SIMILAR ATTITUDE TO OTHER RELIGIONS TODAY?

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1 Introduction

Both the Old and the New Testament indeed offer a consistently negative view of other religions. This is inter alia a corollary of monotheism and also because other faiths have adverse consequences, are linked to Satan and/or are human constructs unable to save. As a Christian I consider that a similar approach is indeed justified today, and seek to provide a justification for this. However, I note that some aspects of the Old Testament approach (iconoclasm) need to be replaced by New Testament virtues (tolerance).

2 The Bible and other religions

The fundamental basis of Biblical opposition to other faiths is the first commandment, Exodus 20:3-5, Deuteronomy 5:7 “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God” Complementing this, in the New Testament Jesus claims that faith in him is the sole way of fulfilling the first commandment (John 14:16), “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In this sense the most basic reason for the negative view of other religions is God’s word per se. But the 10 Commandments are not instituted as simple rules with no reasoning to back them.

The further, positive argument for following the commandment is God’s mighty acts for the Israelites as 1 Kings 17:36 “the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt with mighty power and outstretched arm, is the one you must worship. To him you shall bow down and to him offer sacrifices.” The New Testament adds the mighty act of Jesus in defeating Satan and

offering a means of salvation as Acts 4:12 "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

The Bible provides also a framework for understanding why people would make errors and follow false religions, namely the fall when Adam and Eve rejected the proffered relationship with the true God. This is the origin of the argument in Romans 1:20-22 that man has the evidence of "general revelation" needed to know God: "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse". However, man failed to worship God "although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him" owing to man's sinful nature and "their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened".

Other religions are condemned for offering temptation, as was the case for the gods of Canaan for the Israelites. This is linked partly to the first commandment above, which implies as a corollary that serving other gods rules out true worship of Yahweh. See Joshua 24:15 "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve....But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." In Isaiah 1:13 God indicates that syncretistic worship of other gods make for ethical impurity that nullifies the value of worship of him "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies."

One may also highlight that the Bible condemns other faiths such as Canaanite religions for their adverse consequences such as sexual immorality and human sacrifice. See Hosea 4:14 "the men themselves consort with harlots and sacrifice with shrine prostitutes--a people without understanding will come to ruin!" and also Isaiah 57:2 "You burn with lust among the

oaks and under every spreading tree; you sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags." A corresponding key passage in the New Testament is Romans 1:23-24 which also talks of the folly of worshipping impotent images and the adverse effects on behaviour; "although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another."

In the light of the temptation they will offer, as well as their adverse effect, the Israelites were bidden to destroy symbols of the Canaanite religion (iconoclasm) as Deuteronomy 7:5 "Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles." We note, however, that this is a unique case and not bidden for other faiths such as those of the surrounding countries of Philistia and Moab, nor of Babylon or Assyria.

A further reason for condemnation of other faiths is that their idols are for the most part mere objects, with no supernatural power to save the worshipper, see Isaiah 44:19 in the context of wood used for Babylonian idols "'Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" It is shown in this section of Isaiah that the idols cannot move, reward, predict future events, act and are a burden to their makers (LBC 1998). The contest of Elijah with the prophets of Baal can be seen in the same light of a god who does not exist (1 Kings 18:27) "At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.""

These points do not mean that idol worship can be treated lightly. Daniel 3:16-18 implies that the appropriate response of faithful believers to being forced to worship idols is choosing death. In the New Testament Paul notes that God has been patient with idolaters in the past before the coming of Jesus in Acts 17:29, but now this would change “we should not think that the divine being is.....an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”

One reason for this severity is that despite the mockery of idols, the Bible does not deny the potential power of the spiritual world, power which is not from God. In Exodus there is shown to be power to produce miracles not only in Moses and Aaron acting on God's authority but also in the Egyptian magicians, and that power is not from God and hence harmful, see 7:22 “the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts”. Hence also the command in Leviticus 20:27 ““ `A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.' ”” The activity of such people is clarified in Deuteronomy 18:11 “practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead” and is seen actively in 1 Samuel 28 when Saul evokes the spirit of Samuel, which leads to his doom.

Indeed, there is an identified role for Satanic powers in the “other religions” seeking to “counterfeit” religious expressions and experiences, as witness Deuteronomy 32:17 “They sacrificed to demons, which are not God”, while demons are also seen as the cause of child sacrifice in Psalm 106:37 “they sacrificed their sons and daughters to the demons”. In the New Testament, the role of Satan in the empty religion of the Gentiles is stressed in Acts 26:33 when Paul reports how Jesus said to him “I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God”. The corollary is

that other religions are devised by Satan to deceive mankind and turn man away from worship of the true God. This is made explicit in 2 Corinthians 4:4 “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

Worship of other gods has a political as well as spiritual significance, as it is on the one hand given as a justification for giving the Promised Land to Israel (Genesis 15:16) “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” and on the other for the exiles of the two kingdoms (Jeremiah 25:8-10) “Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north...This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years”.

The Bible also warns that other religions but also Biblical Judaism and Christianity can lead to empty “religiosity” following Isaiah 1:13 quoted above and Amos 5:21 “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.” Note that these quotes relate on the one hand to syncretism but on the other failure to show love for the poor as God commanded.

Many of Jesus’ debates with the Pharisees were on a similar topic, in that he was pointing to the emptiness and man-made nature of the religion they had created, as Matthew 15:8-9 “These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”

The point is that both “other religions” and also man-made forms of Judaism and Christianity are empty constructs that cannot save and the Bible opposes them.

3 Are we justified in following a similar attitude today?

It has been shown above that the Bible is definitely hostile to other religions. I would contend that a similar attitude is appropriate for a Christian, following a “particularistic” point of view (McGrath 2001). The Bible is the word of God; God remains one and the sole true God; We have Jesus’ command in Matthew 28:19-20 which commands Christians to make converts from other faiths “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Note that this is out of Jesus’ love for humanity and opposition to the errors into which Satan has led them. The “Great Commission” does not allow for the idea that the other faiths may be a way to salvation, as indeed is also stated by Jesus in John 14:16 as quoted above. Nor can other faiths resolve the difficulties of the human condition on earth (Cottrell 1990). As noted by Barth, quoted in McGrath (2001), such particularism need not exclude the eventual victory of grace over unbelief at the second coming; as indeed prophesied in Old Testament passages such as Jeremiah 3:17 and Isaiah 60:3 claiming the nations will come to know the one God.

Supporting this point of view, the Bible warns that false religions will continue to be a problem until the end times, as for example 1 Timothy 4:1 which states that “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.” Following Krahnert (1938), other religions are to be seen as “self justifying human constructions” that have no power to save.

This may be further justified by showing how the Biblical reasons for rejection continue to hold. For example, other religions can be seen to have adverse effects, as witness September 11th as motivated by the Koran (e.g. Sura 48:29 “Mohammed is God’s prophet; those who follow him are ruthless to the unbelievers...”), persecution of Christians by Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists, and acts contrary to the 10 Commandments that these religions permit, such as

the caste system and widow burning in India under Hinduism and infanticide in China under Buddhism. Even the gods of Canaan have been revived in the Wicca tradition which has gained many adherents in the US, involving magic, belief in reincarnation and the “divine spark” in humanity, (i.e. the concept that we are all gods and anything is permitted) (Gleghorn 1999).

There are cults that are derived from but twist the message of Scripture in respect of the Sonship of Jesus such as Mormonism, Christian Science and Jehovah’s Witnesses, as predicted in 1 Timothy 4:1 and Romans 1:21. It is also true of the many distortions of the Biblical message in the Koran, and again notably the denial of the Sonship of Jesus (“Far is it removed from his (Allah’s) transcendent majesty that he should have a son” (Sura 4:171)). That such messages denying Jesus are not from God is stated explicitly in 1 John 4:2-3. Furthermore, there are spiritual aspects of other religions, notably but not only Satanism per se that may put adherents’ souls at risk. This is why Christianity needs a continuing ministry of deliverance.

Having said these things, we can, and should affirm that there are moral and theological truths that we share in common with followers of other religions. For example the eightfold path of Buddhism enjoins followers to pursue honesty, charity, and service, and to abstain from murder and lust. Islam and Judaism believe in one God and in judgement. We must acknowledge, however, that in no other religion is any saving truth to be found, and rather use these points of agreement to help and persuade others to follow true Christian faith.

In discussing other religions today, I would add that secularism and materialism might be seen as having negative consequences in the same way as other religions. These may erect

idols barring the individual from salvation as effectively as other religions per se, as seen in Christ's confrontation with the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22).

In following a particularistic point of view we would tend to reject the "inclusivist" and particularly the "pluralist" approach to other religions as contrary to Scripture. Inclusivism maintains that Christianity is an absolute religion, and the only way to salvation, but balances this with God's universal saving will as 2 Peter 3:9 "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." Hence writers such as Rahner (1966) allow there to be saving grace and truth in other religions, until the Gospel is made known to its members. They are considered to "positively respond to the truth they have" e.g. in respect of general revelation of Romans 1:20, which saves them (Rood 1999). I would rather believe that God might save some of those from other traditions who had no chance to reject Christ, but solely from his grace rather than granting any special status to the religion itself – and mostly that the gospel will come to all those whom God knows would be prepared, like Cornelius in Acts 10, to receive it. Following Romans 10:17, "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" not from some other religion.

Pluralism is in my view even more objectionable, suggesting that all religions offer a way to God. At the least, this requires an abandonment of the centrality of Christ as "opposed to" God in the Christian faith (Rood 1999). It also confronts the difficulty that all religions do not worship the same God, and some such as Buddhism exclude a role for a saving God entirely.

On the other hand, the particularistic view should not be seen as rejecting religious tolerance, which supersedes iconoclasm. It is clear from the New Testament that Christian faith can only lead to salvation if it is freely chosen rather than forced on an individual. This is the essence of Revelation 3:20 "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and

opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” We note that Christ waits to be invited into the believer’s heart and does not force his way in. The corollary is that other faiths have to be permitted, while the believer should seek with the power of the Holy Spirit to persuade others of Christ’s salvation. We may reject their religion but are commanded by Christ to love the person by offering them the Bible message – living out the second commandment to “love your neighbour as yourself”(Luke 10:27).

To the extent other faiths are rule-based, as are most traditions of Islam and Judaism, they also meet the difficulty that deeds do not show what is in the heart and cannot themselves save (see Matthew 5:28, 15:18, 18:35). Equally, in this context it remains important to add that Christians should oppose “empty religiosity” in their own faith as well as seeing it as a difficulty for other faiths. This follows the point made in the Bible as quoted above. Mere observance of dogma may actually be a revolt against God, as suggested by Barth (1975). He saw it as a form of self reliance that is man made, shaping God to man’s agenda. The “religious” in this sense are actually godless. Only “revelation”, which is from God, is actually inspired and stands opposite to religion in this sense. Modern Christianity can be criticised from this point of view, for unbiblical features such as exclusivity (cf. James 2:3) and denominational division (cf. John 17:23). Besides being unable to provide salvation for the Christian, such inauthentic faith is also a barrier to those of other faiths who need Christ, as they are put off by the observed hypocrisy of “believers”.

4 Conclusion

We have shown that the Bible takes a negative view of other religions and I have maintained that a particularistic attitude is appropriate today, entailing an obligation on the part of the Christian to evangelism out of love, to be exerted by persuasion. We note in particular that other religions continue as in Biblical times to have adverse consequences, to be linked to

Satan and/or are human constructs unable to save. We note nonetheless that some criticisms of other religions can be applied to “religious” Christianity also, entailing a need for vigilance on the part of Christians themselves to “keep their own house in order” in the light of Biblical criticisms of other faiths.

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