

GROWING Together

14th Series

SALVATION AND THE WORLD RELIGIONS

Canada has long prided itself on its multi-cultural and multi-lingual identity. In recent years, our neighbourhoods have become increasingly multi-religious as well. The religions of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism are found in large numbers in many Canadian cities, and raise profound questions for the Christian community similar to those of the first centuries of Christianity.

Living next door to people who are obviously good and caring, and yet live a different faith is a source of confusion for many Christians. When those who are different live far away, it is easy to label “them” as heathen, and disregard their religious experiences as meaningless. When they live across the lane and work in the same office, it is not so easy.

Christianity has traditionally taught that salvation is a gift of God made possible by Jesus’ death and resurrection. Due to their close friendships with people of other faiths, Christians are asking themselves whether their friends will be saved. Contemporary thinking on this subject falls into three general perspectives: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

Christian Exclusivism

Jesus said “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) Peter said “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) For the exclusivist, these texts clearly indicate that only through baptism and a clear profession of faith in Jesus Christ can anyone be saved. This position is represented by the early church maxim “outside of the Church there is no salvation.”

Christian Inclusivism

Christians believe that all the world and its peoples are God’s creation. Whether or not we profess the name of Jesus, each of us will strive to know the divine. As such, there is some spiritual truth to be found in each religion.

A Christian inclusivist seeks dialogue with people of other faiths in order to learn from their experiences and might refer to Paul’s speech to the people of Athens:

From one ancestor, he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth ... so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26-27)

The inclusivist insists, all can achieve salvation as long as they live up to the portion of God’s truth which their own religion teaches. They are saved through the grace given by God, and because of Jesus’ redeeming death and resurrection. The inclusivist refers to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (Mt. 5:17)

Religious Pluralism

To assert the truth of one’s own religion is like the parent who says “Mine is the most beautiful child in the whole world.” This is certainly true to the happy parent, but other parents would be equally true to say the same of their child. Even the parent understands this. The pluralist treats the statements of Jesus that appear exclusivist in much the same way. The pluralist recognizes that not all religions are concerned about salvation. From the pluralist’s perspective, each valid religion is true within its own context and history.

A Safe Home

According to Canadian Anglican Bishop Michael Ingham: “Genuine inter-faith exploration is the work of deeply committed believers, ... walking along other tried and proven paths with trusted and wise guides, all the time knowing how to get home.” Dialogue begins when we truly listen to one another. No longer satisfied with stereotypes, we ask our neighbours to share their perspectives. In humility, we too share our perspectives.

Additional reading:

Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, (Geneva: WCC, 1985).
Michael Ingham, *Mansions of the Spirit*, (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1997).
Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (London: SPCK, 1989).
Calvin E. Shenk, *Who Do You Say That I Am?*, (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1997).
Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, *Being Christians in a Pluralistic Society*, Nov. 25, 1997.

GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five monthly Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ’s faithful.



Gathering the Family of Jesus

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