

**UNDERSTANDING WORLD RELIGIONS:  
The Wise Men**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

*God has always used people  
of other faiths for God's purpose.*

A sermon preached by  
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Growing up in LA (Lower Arkansas), I had very little acquaintance with people of other faiths. There was a Jewish family in town that I knew of, but the nearest synagogue was in El Dorado, over half an hour away. When we talked about “other religions,” we meant the Baptists or maybe the Catholics. They were different, right?

The world is a much different place today. The population is much more diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion. Global communication is instantaneous, so we can be in touch with every part of the world in real time. The changing world is reflected in the diversity of religious expressions, although this is nothing new.<sup>1</sup> There have always been many religions. Christianity has the largest number of people, with over 2.3 billion Christians in the world. That is about 31% of the earth’s population. Islam is the next largest religion, with 1.8 billion, about one in four people on earth. Hindus are third, with 1.1 billion people, followed by Buddhists, with 500 million, then Jews, with about 15 million. Almost half the Jews are in Israel, and almost half in the United States, with a few scattered elsewhere around the world.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, only 16% of the world’s population is not affiliated with any sort of religion, which of course, means 84% of humanity claims some sort of belief system.

Our world is a divided place. Hostility, violence and terrorism are everyday occurrences in many places. Many of these hostile acts are fueled by religious differences. Jews can’t get along with Palestinians, some of whom are Christian, but most Muslim. In India and southeast Asia, Muslims and Hindus fight each other. In Northern Ireland, historic conflicts between Catholics and Protestants surface from time to time; and they’re all Christians.

Religious hatred, conflict, and violence is not the way of Christ. Our bottom line is love. So how can we live together better with our brothers and sisters in the human family who believe in other religions? How can we show everyone the love of Jesus, no matter what they believe?

In Steven Covey’s classic leadership book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, one of the fundamental practices of an effective life is “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”<sup>3</sup> If you want to be in a relationship with someone who is different or thinks differently than you, the first task is to understand where they are coming from. Once you “get” them, then you can try to help them understand where you are coming from. If we want to share

the love of Christ with other people, first we have to try to understand what their beliefs and values are, then move toward *mutual* understanding.

That's the point of this sermon series, to help us understand, in a thumbnail sketch kind of way, what other religions believe. We can't cover much in twenty minutes; we'll cover a little more on Wednesday nights, but hopefully it will be a start that could lead to some interfaith dialog right here in Fort Smith, or at least an attitude of respect, grace and charity toward other faiths.

In order to approach other faiths, we have to develop what Adam Hamilton calls a "theology of religions." We have to figure out a common language to use as we discuss belief systems that are very different. Hamilton suggests four questions that a theology of religions seeks to answer:

- Why are there so many religions?
- What is the relationship between different religions? (That's what we will spend the next four sermons discussing.)
- How does God look at people of other faiths?
- What is the eternal fate of people who believe in other religions?<sup>4</sup>

Why are there so many religions? Because nobody gets all of God. God is far beyond anything human minds can experience or human language can describe. There is always going to be something hidden and mysterious about God.

Nobody was closer to God than Moses, but one time Moses asked God, "*Show me your glory, I pray.*" Yahweh said, "*I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,*" he said, "*you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.*"<sup>5</sup> So God put Moses in a crevice in the mountain and put his hand over the rock while he passed by, so that Moses could only see the back of God's glory. It's a strange little story, but the point is, God is more than we can handle.

The multitude of religious expressions in the human family (and we are only covering five of hundreds) does not mean that God is a bad idea. It actually means that there is something about being human that causes us to give expression to a reality that is bigger than us. We know that there is something "out there," and historically that something has given birth to religion.

There's a fable that comes from the Buddhist tradition about 6 blind men who encounter an elephant. Each one tries to describe the elephant according to the part of the elephant he touches. The man who grabs the trunk thinks the elephant is like a snake. The man who grabs the elephant's ear thinks the elephant is like a fan. The one who stands beside the elephant and feels its side says the elephant is like a wall. The man who grabs the elephant's leg thinks the animal is like a tree. The man who grabs the tail thinks the elephant is like a rope. And finally, one of the blind men touches the elephant's tusk and declares that the elephant is like a spear. Each one was describing the elephant according to his experience, and each one was right in a sense, but each one only had a partial experience.

In some ways, that's how religion works. God is above and beyond our human understanding, and the best we can do is to describe God the best we can, knowing that the whole truth is still something more. It's like Paul said in the "love chapter," I Corinthians 13: "*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*"<sup>6</sup>

The good news is, this God who is beyond all understanding wants to be known. God wants to be found. God wants to be in relationship with human beings. That's why we were made. That's why God gives evidence in every aspect of creation—from the structure of the galaxy to the Grand Tetons to the particles of sub-atomic physics—that God is real. That's why God ultimately sent his Son Jesus to show us the nature of God and way to God. Jesus is the Word made flesh, God taking on human form, to redeem a broken creation. We believe Jesus is the ultimate way to know God, but we also know there are many ways that humans have sought to know God, all because our common experience is that there is something more to life.

How does God view these different ways of seeking to know God? What about all these other religions? Drawing on our own faith, we believe that God has love and concern for all people. God told Abraham, "*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*"<sup>7</sup> Isaiah repeats over and over that Israel's mission is to be a "*light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*"<sup>8</sup> The Old Testament has several figures that were outside the faith community, yet they were instrumental in accomplishing the purposes of God: Melchizedek, a local priest in the land of Canaan, blessed Abraham.

Rahab the harlot hid the spies of Moses. Ruth from Moab was King David's grandmother. Cyrus the Persian let the Hebrew people go home after exile. Everyone matters to God. Everyone can be used by God.

So when God becomes flesh in the baby Jesus, who, according to Matthew's Gospel, shows up to celebrate his birth? Not the shepherds, not the angel choir, but the Magi, a group of holy men from Persia, astrologers who had been watching the stars and followed the sign in the heavens. Given their location, they were probably followers of a religion called Zoroastrianism, founded by a Persian prophet named Zoroaster. Their god was named Ahura Mazda. They were not Jews; Christians weren't even a thing yet; and no conversions were recorded. They just acknowledged the truth that Jesus was born to be King of the Jews. Their gifts foretold his royalty, his divinity, and his sacrifice. And then they went home.

What is the point of this odd little group of foreigners showing up out of nowhere? Basically it's a boundary-breaker. The Magi demonstrate the universal appeal of the Gospel. Jesus is someone everyone can celebrate. This event of his birth, later to be followed by his teaching, death, and resurrection, is much bigger than just a footnote in the history of the Jews. Like God's original words to Abraham, in Jesus all the families of the earth would be blessed, because he is Savior of all the world.

So what then can we say about the believers in other religions? What will be their eternal fate? We are Christians. We believe Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God. We believe that through his death and resurrection, a way to heaven is opened up for us. We believe that if we have faith in Jesus, we will inherit eternal life. This is the mission of God's love in the world: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*"<sup>9</sup> This is a big deal, and we believe we are right on this.

How then do we relate to people of other faiths? Adam Hamilton suggests three perspectives. One is **universalism**. This is the attitude that says the different beliefs don't matter. All religions are talking about the same thing, and we're all pretty much going to the same place. There are many ways to approach God, and they are all equally valid. Sometimes this is also called religious pluralism. But this attitude ignores the real differences in faith traditions. We are not all saying the same thing. There are commonalities for

sure, but some of the ideas are mutually contradictory. One God or many gods or no god are not all the same idea. To say all religions are the same is disrespectful of the unique history and thought within each faith system.

Another way to approach other religions is **exclusivism**. This is the idea that Christians (or whatever religion you're a part of, but we're Christians) have the right answer. All the other answers are wrong, and if you don't become a Christian and put your faith in Jesus, you will go to hell when you die and be punished for all eternity. You've heard that expressed.

There is some Scriptural warrant for this. In John 14, Jesus says, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*"<sup>10</sup> And in Acts, Peter tells the Jewish Council, "*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.*"<sup>11</sup> But these verses have to be placed alongside God's concern for all nations and all the families of the earth, as I mentioned. Then there are verses like 2 Peter 3:9, which says God is patient and does not want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance. Even the exclusivists usually make exceptions to the rule: children who die without making a profession of faith, and people who never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel. What does God do with them?

And then there are the other words of Jesus, where he said, "*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.*"<sup>12</sup> This leads us into the third attitude toward other religions which is called **Christian inclusivism**. We believe Jesus is the one true Savior, but we also believe God is God. God can give God's grace to whomever God wants. It's like God said to Moses, "*I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.*"<sup>13</sup> Or the owner of the vineyard in the parable of the workers who get paid a full day's wage for only an hour's work: "*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*"<sup>14</sup> As I have often said, I am not going to tell God who should receive mercy or not. That is a management decision; I work in sales and customer service.

C. S. Lewis, in his explanation of the faith called *Mere Christianity*, put it this way: "As in arithmetic there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong; but some answers are much nearer being right than others."<sup>15</sup>

Christian inclusivists hold two ideas in tension: (1) Jesus is Lord—Lord over the church, Lord over the universe, Lord over all other faith expressions. But (2) God’s vision for the completion of creation is that all people of faith will be redeemed and share in the glory of a community that worships and glorifies God for all eternity. We see this in the Book of Revelation, talking about the new Jerusalem: “*The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.*”<sup>16</sup>

So why should we share our faith? Why even enter into dialog with people of other religions? If it’s not to save them from burning in hell, what’s the point? Adam Hamilton writes, “I’ve been asked from time to time: If faithful people of other faiths might enter heaven, why do we bother to share the gospel? I don’t share the message of Christ with people of other faiths because I’m afraid that they might be tormented for all eternity if they don’t say yes to Jesus. I share the gospel because I believe it is true, and if it is true that in Christ, God came to us, then Christ offers the definitive truth about ourselves. In him we find grace and mercy, light and life, hope and joy. I share the gospel because I think it offers the clearest picture of who God is and what God wills for our lives.”<sup>17</sup>

Having the courage to have a gracious, respectful conversation with a person of another faith is simply fulfilling the second part of the great commandment of Jesus: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” The first time he said that, someone asked, “Who is my neighbor?” And Jesus said, “There was this Samaritan...” who didn’t believe as they did.

*Let us pray. Eternal God, you have given us a big, beautiful, wonderful, diverse world, and most of us are trying in some way to give expression to our relationship with you. Help us always to seek first to understand, then to be understood, and to always be aware of your creation in every single human and our call to love them with the love of Jesus. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-population-of-the-world>.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Fireside, 1989), 235ff.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions, Revised Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 33:18-20.

<sup>6</sup> I Corinthians 13:12.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 12:3.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 49:6.

<sup>9</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>10</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 4:12.

<sup>12</sup> John 10:16.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 33:19.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 20:15.

<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001 edition).

<sup>16</sup> Revelation 21:24-26.

<sup>17</sup> Hamilton, 29.