**Absolute truth in a Postmodern World**

Is there such a thing as truth? Does that truth affect only those who hold it or does it affect everyone, everywhere? What should we think about Jesus’ claim that He alone is the way, truth, and life and that no one comes to the Father except through Him? What does that mean for the people in the world who have never heard the gospel? Doesn’t it seem more fair and less arrogant to say that all religions lead to the same place? Or can’t we all just COEXIST? You've seen those bumper stickers right? The underlying question in all these seems to be is truth absolute or relative?

**Have you ever been troubled by any of these questions or similar ones?**

**What has been your experience interacting with people who answer these questions differently than you?**

These are some of the questions Christians face as we interact with people with different belief systems and cultural values. This can also be talked about in terms of the exclusivity of religion. Each religion claims to have a hold on “the truth” and requires that everyone follow that truth in order to live rightly or to go to heaven. Many people today will point to religion as the main inhibitor to achieving world peace. The thinking goes like this. If every religion continues to make claims to exclusive truth then that will cause people to treat those of different religions as inferior, which can lead to all sorts of evil. And for the most part I think they are right! It does seem that holding to something you view as an exclusive truth can lead to a downward spiral developing feelings of superiority and oppression of those who hold to a different belief. So what can we do about this? Tim Keller says in his book, Reason for God, that civic and cultural leaders have put forward three different ways to stop religion from dividing us. He says they have tried outlawing religion, condemning religion, and radically privatizing it. He says they all ultimately will fail and I agree with him.

**Have you seen any of these 3 methods at work in your life? If not what would they look like in our society today?**

The attempt to outlaw religion is what we have seen put forward as the solution by many communist societies such as the Soviet Union as well as China. These countries thought that religion only served to divide society and undermine the power of the state. So they effectively banned it. What was the result? Did they achieve peace and unity in their society? Of course not, in fact, this removal of religion only led to more oppression and violence. It is estimated that during the 20th century the effort to outlaw religion and establish a communist society driven by science rather than religion led to the murder of around 100 million people… That’s horrifying. And the other crazy part is that these horrible acts didn’t actually diminish the number of people who considered themselves religiosus. In fact we saw the opposite in some cases. After World War 2, communist China deported all western missionaries, massively persecuted Chinese Christians, and believed they had effectively killed the church. However, much to everyone’s surprise, when missionaries were allowed to come back 30 to 40 years later they found that the Christian Church in China had grown far more than at any other period of time. This, along with the continued growth of nearly all religions through the 20th and into the 21st century, has disproved the idea that science and technology would do away with our need to adhere to a religion.

What about efforts to condemn religion? Have they succeeded? Most of this effort has focused on making it culturally unacceptable to make claims to exclusive truth and certain statements have gained massive popularity. Statements such as: All religions are valid and basically teach the same thing, each religion sees part of the truth but none can see the whole truth, and religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be the “truth”. Let’s look at each of these statements and see if they make sense.

**Have you ever heard these claims before? How did you respond?**

**What is the underlying issue that all of these statements face?**

First, the idea that all religions are valid and teach the same thing is blatantly false. Often people who say this, when asked what they all teach, say that we should adhere to the golden rule and that God is a God of love. Well this is simply not true! Many religions, like Buddhism, don’t believe in a personal God at all. The God of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism certainly cannot be reduced down to just a God of love. For example, all three also believe that God will judge all people and will send some to heaven and some to hell. So what is lying underneath this statement is a doctrine of God that is certainly not universally accepted by religions. **It is just a different truth claim.**

Many people use the illustration of blind men and an elephant to describe the second claim. They say that each blind man touches a different part of the elephant and comes to a different conclusion about what an elephant is like. Then they say each religion is the same way. Each one has an understanding of a certain part of God but doesn’t understand him fully or correctly. This seems to be a compelling illustration.

**Can you see any issue with it?**

Answer: In order for the story to make sense it has to be told from a perspective that can see the whole picture. So this statement is actually saying, if it is saying anything at all, that I have the whole picture about what God is like and you only know part of the story. That is an incredibly exclusive and offensive statement.

The last statement, that beliefs are too conditioned to be reliable, can be the most troubling. But at its core we see the same thing. Someone might say you are only a Christian because you were born in a Christian family. If you were born in Saudi Arabia you would almost certainly be a Muslim. While it is a fact that our circumstances and surroundings certainly have a big influence on our beliefs, it is also true that if this statement proves anything at all it proves too much. You see, if all of our beliefs are only the product of our surroundings then so is that belief! So if this statement is true then the only reason you hold to a relativistic stance is because you grew up in a situation where that was viewed as the correct belief. So, why is there any reason to believe anything that you say?! This statement ultimately proves itself to be self refuting. It can only be true if it excludes itself from its own scrutiny.

The unavoidable truth is that everyone is making truth claims. That means that either we live as intellectually lazy people and say everything is relative or we do the hard work of evaluating each truth claim to see which is right and which are wrong.

The final way to keep religion from causing divisiveness is by radically privatizing it. Many people want to keep the government from having any religious bias. Proponents of this belief would say that we just need to come together to find a way that works and benefits everyone. However, this is impossible. Every person comes to an argument with a worldview that shapes how they think about that argument. For example, let’s talk about divorce and marriage. Depending on what we view to be the purpose of marriage we will come to vastly different ideas on what the laws regarding divorce should be. If we believe that marriage is primarily for building families and raising children for the benefit of the whole society then you will make divorce harder and the community will be more important than the individual. But, if you believe marriage is primarily for personal happiness then you will make divorce easier and value the individual more than the community. The first understanding is supported by many religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Confucianism. The second comes from an enlightenment understanding of things.

**Do you see how it doesn’t work to privatize religion? What are some other examples where it isn’t possible to be completely unbiased?**

Ok, so what do we do then? The wonderful truth is that within Christianity there are great resources for fighting this tendency of exclusive truth to lead us to oppression. The biggest resource for this is found in our belief that we are saved by grace and justified by faith alone without works. This is one of the differences between the standard understanding of religion and it is crucial to this topic. In most religions it is understood that you achieve righteousness by your effort and work. Basically, you do the right things and you can be saved. Well, this thinking certainly can lead to feelings of superiority and ultimately oppression. But the gospel of grace says that we are all completely unworthy by our own efforts and record of performance. Rightly understood, this should never lead to feelings of superiority or oppression. We can look at someone who holds different beliefs than us and not see someone who is inferior or stupid. Instead, we will see someone who is incredibly valuable because they are made in God’s image and are no better or worse than you but are in need of God's grace.

**How does the gospel combat the view that we are superior to someone who holds a different belief than us?**

In review, **why doesn’t relativism ultimately work as a belief system?**

Answer, it is inherently self refuting. If all truth is relative, then so is that one.

**What is the underlying issue with saying that making exclusive truth claims will undermine our desire for word peace?**

Answer: Outlawing religion has resulted in massive oppression and evil. Each proposed solution makes a different truth claim.

It is ultimately impossible to be a consistent relativist. But within Christianity there are great resources for developing a society that can function and be loving to those of different beliefs while still making exclusive truth claims.