

# Is Jesus the only way to God?

Wilbert R. Shenk

**T**he question, Is Jesus the only way to God? is provocative in our modern intellectual climate, which has intensified the issues surrounding questions of religious faith. But neither those who answer that question in the affirmative nor those who counter in the negative can prove that their answer is correct. I will argue that the answer to this question can only be a statement of faith.

**The question, Is Jesus the only way to God? sounds presumptuous in a culture where religious and cultural pluralism is taken to be not just descriptive of reality but a normative value.**

The relationship between religions has been at issue wherever religiocultural streams meet, and it has been contested from the beginning. Indeed, the Abrahamic faith tradition emerged amid the religions of the Chaldeans in Ur. Abraham's response to

Yahweh's call involved a double leaving: he left Ur, and he left the gods of the Chaldeans. Abraham's leaving was in response to the call of Yahweh in behalf of the nations. The Abrahamic faith tradition is thus the prototype of missionary faith. A missionary faith introduces an alternative to the indigenous religions. Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam have never been primal religions. All have engaged in missionary witness. Each has been grafted into a preexisting indigenous religious environment.

The grafting of Abrahamic faith into ancient Palestine was problematic at best. The Israelites were continually tempted to abandon the covenant relationship with Yahweh by imitating their neighbors and appropriating their religious rituals and beliefs. Whenever the Israelites succumbed, the prophets spoke out against the people's apostasy; the Decalogue expressly forbade idolatry, and worship of the Baalim abrogated the Israelites' covenant with Yahweh. They could not maintain their identity as children of Abraham unless they kept faith with Abraham's God.

When the messianic movement led by Jesus of Nazareth emerged within Judaism, only a handful of Jews recognized him as Messiah. He was officially denounced and rejected. As a prophetic figure, Jesus represented a new-old message: he drew on the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew prophets, but his witness had an uncharacteristic authority and urgency that challenged the status quo. The Gospel of John presents Jesus as the one sent by God to the world, and this consciousness of being sent by God powerfully infused his identity.

As a missionary faith, Christianity wherever it has gone has challenged the truth claims of whatever religious reality was found on the ground. But in the West where the Christian movement became Christendom, a fully domesticated and established religion, it has largely lost its capacity to prophesy. We do well to recall the observation of Martin Buber, Jewish philosopher and theologian, when he contrasted Christianity and Judaism: "Christianity *begins* as diaspora and mission. The mission means in this case not just diffusion; it is the life-breath of the community and accordingly the basis of the new People of God."<sup>1</sup> Of course, the church can forget its beginning point, as history amply demonstrates. But without this life-breath, the Christian faith loses its birthright spiritual power and authority to contest the status quo.

### **Are we asking the right question?**

Since 1983, discussion of Christian perspectives on the religions has been dominated by the typology suggested by Alan Race in *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.<sup>2</sup> Here Race characterized Christian responses to other faiths in terms of three groups: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. Scholars quickly accepted this taxonomy, and it has become shorthand for saying that *exclusivists* seek to guard the primacy of their religion, *inclusivists* acknowledge that other religions can point to God but Jesus Christ remains the ultimate source of salvation, and *pluralists* insist that all religions are on an equal footing as means of salvation. The last has the merit of guarding the dignity of all religions, a position with great appeal for those with a modern sensibility.

Some scholars have subjected this taxonomy to rigorous critique. Because it forces complex data into a simple analytical scheme, it is reductionistic. In fact, it was developed by pluralists

to show the weaknesses of other positions and the reasonableness of theirs.<sup>3</sup> The question, Is Jesus the only way to God? sounds presumptuous in a culture where religious and cultural pluralism is taken to be not just descriptive of reality but a normative value.

Modernity drilled into us a distrust of faith and personal experience; only rational argumentation can lead us to reliable knowledge. Matters of faith and experience are subjective and should be treated as private opinion only. Instead, the goal is to identify universal principles that govern all areas of human activity and thus are valid for all people everywhere.

This calculus has seemed to be the driving force in the work of John Hick. He has argued that the religions of humankind are manifestations of a single religious essence, what he has called the Real.<sup>4</sup> Hick's approach may be criticized on several grounds. First, it uncritically assumes that in the wake of the Enlightenment, modern thought has successfully established reliable universal principles. The thinking individual can stand outside the historical context, setting aside the messiness of the particular and the contextual. But post-foundationalist philosophy has shown this view to be untenable. Second, this position is abstract and does not pay attention to genuine differences between religions as living systems of belief, worship, and life experience. Hick has built an elaborate analytical structure without the benefit of empirical data to support his argument.

In conversation, Stephen Neill once made the point that those best qualified to speak about Jesus Christ are individuals who have had a personal encounter with the Lord. Neill said: "We must listen to the converts." By this he meant that those who have come to faith in Jesus as adults, with full awareness of what life is like pre- and post-Jesus, carry an authority that those who have been nurtured into the Christian faith cannot have. For such individuals, turning to Christ has often been a costly decision arrived at only after great struggle. Such a decision can be neither cheap nor easy.

One may extend Neill's point to Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; for many the meaning of the gospel still has a freshness that Western Christians have largely lost. Max L. Stackhouse observed this contrast firsthand when he attended a meeting of Indian theologians in Bangalore. He also had opportu-

nity to meet ordinary Christians in their congregations and homes. Stackhouse was impressed that the Indian Christians he met in local congregations did not share the enthusiasm of the professional scholars for interreligious dialogue. Instead they were concerned with the lived reality and struggles of everyday life.

*The pietistic Christian Dalits [self-chosen name for what others have called untouchables] that I met, both the Catholics and the evangelicals, were interested more in conversion than conversation....*

*[One teacher at a South Indian theological school] expressed grave suspicion of those who are eager to engage in dialogue with Hindus and Muslims without studying the social implications of these faiths.... The more prophetic forms of Christianity that press toward human rights and social justice are precisely those most under attack by non-Christian militants at local levels....*

*At Madras Christian College, students and faculty spoke of the explosion of independent Bible study and prayer groups that coexist in tension with the traditional churches.... This contextualization of Christianity was completely unanticipated and frequently opposed by the older churches and ecumenical leaders....*

*[But] these groups are having a major social and economic impact in several respects. They seem to be caste-inclusive—a posture that all Christian churches officially aspire to but seldom attain....*

*Their chief focus is on helping people develop a personal and saving relationship to Jesus Christ and to live in peace with their neighbors.<sup>5</sup>*

This passage reminds us that ethical concerns have frequently played a significant role in evangelization. This dynamic became clear in a major 1929–30 study by J. Waskom Pickett for the Indian Christian Council, published as *Christian Mass Movements in India*.<sup>6</sup> The issue that gave rise to this study was the uneasiness many Protestant missionaries felt when entire groups—family clans, social groups—had become Christian and sought baptism.

Indeed, such a movement had occurred already in the sixteenth century, but it became a more common occurrence in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century. It was noted that these large-scale movements had uniformly taken place entirely among the marginalized classes of people—that is, aboriginals or unscheduled castes. The problem was that so-called group conversions did not jibe with Western evangelical expectations that had been shaped by modernity and put great weight on a rational *individual* decision.

Repeatedly, Pickett and his team of researchers heard the stories of these marginalized people who had been oppressed by landowners. The moral support of the missionaries had given them the courage to resist and protest. Here is a sample interview:

*“Why did you become a Christian?” we asked a young man in Vidyanagar who had been baptized less than a year before. “All of us in this village became Christians together,” came the quick response, and it was recorded that he had followed the crowd. “But you didn’t have to become a Christian because these others were doing so.” “No, I wanted to be a Christian.” “Why so?” “So I could be a man. None of us was a man. We were dogs. Only Jesus could make men out of us.”<sup>7</sup>*

Another theme revealed by the research was that the traditional religion seemed incapable of helping these peasants cope with the ever-present evil spirits. The traditional cosmology no longer commanded these peasants’ confidence.

Missionary practice has by no means been uniform or consistent. Ethical issues are invariably complex and contentious. The way missionaries have worked out their responses has reflected the formation they have received in their own experience of the church. Michael Barnes has pointed out the differing attitudes and approaches taken by Roman Catholic and evangelical missionaries in response to the exceedingly complicated case of caste in India.<sup>8</sup> The Catholic tradition treated caste as a social rather than religious issue. William Carey set the precedent among evangelicals who regarded caste as integral to Hinduism, on the one hand, and irreconcilable with the gospel, on the other. From this viewpoint, social practice was a manifestation of religion. The

Catholic tradition saw itself as being inclusive of the whole culture, whereas evangelicals such as Carey came to India from the experience of being Dissenters in Great Britain, from having refused to submit to the established church. Dissenters knew what it meant to suffer civil disabilities because they did not conform to the state church. It was relatively easy for them to sympathize with people of the lower castes and the aboriginal people who were at the bottom of society. Theology and ethics were joined.

### **A scripture-shaped response to the question**

Since the Enlightenment, thinkers such as Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), who laid the foundations of Deism and argued for a natural religion, have made many attempts to work out answers to questions not answered by religion. They have sought alternatives to the Christian faith. Herbert was convinced that because of geographical exploration, Christendom was rapidly shedding its provincialism, and Christianity could no longer lay claim to being the sole source of salvation. Many others have joined him in this search for alternatives to Christianity.

While there is a place for exploration and speculative inquiry, we should not treat speculation as sure knowledge. We ought to cultivate the humility to admit that we do not have answers to all questions. We may grow in insight but can never pretend to have gained full knowledge. The caution of the Apostle Paul—“Now I know only in part” (1 Cor. 13:12b)—should not be forgotten.

Speculation is different from a sustained effort to understand the mind of God on contemporary issues by wrestling with the scriptures in prayerful study. As Michael Barnes writes, “Christians may be called to anticipate the working of the Spirit through discerning ‘seeds of the Word,’ the patterning of God’s continuing self-revelation. But Christians speak always of what they know; they have to be careful about speaking of what they do *not* know, what always remains other and utterly mysterious.”<sup>9</sup> This observation suggests three aspects of a scripture-shaped response to the title question: (a) the mission of the people of God to the peoples of the earth, (b) what the scriptures say about the religions, and (c) Jesus as model for relating to people of other faiths.

***The mission of the people of God to the peoples of the earth.***  
Genesis 10 presents a “table of the nations” that affirms the unity

of all people. Genesis 11 reprises the scene in the garden of Eden. In a show of power, the people assert their autonomy by setting out to build a monument that will memorialize their achievements. God interrupts this plan by scattering the people and causing them to speak different languages, but God does not abandon humankind. Genesis 12 opens with the call to Abram to leave the land of Ur. God enters into a covenant with Abram, saying: "I will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:2-3).<sup>10</sup> The identity of the people of God is profoundly linked to the nations. The salvation of the Abrahamic people is inextricably linked with that of the nations. The people of God are elected for the salvation of the nations.

***What the scriptures say about the religions.*** The Bible offers neither a critique of religions nor a model of dialogue with religions as such. Yet religion and religions are found throughout the biblical canon. Religion is taken for granted; it is a constant of human existence. On occasion the Bible refers to the religion of a particular people, but the writers never offer a phenomenological description of religions, nor do they compare one with the other.

We can make two observations about the way scripture regards religion. First, the Bible recognizes the presence of many gods; each group has its own deities. The original relationship between God the creator and humankind has been replaced with worship of many gods. Second, when Moses comes down from Sinai, his first and second Words are: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God" (Exod. 20:3-5a). Yahweh calls the Israelites back to the original relationship with their creator by commanding them to abandon the worship of gods and idols. Yahweh's covenant with the Abrahamic people requires their undivided loyalty.

***Jesus as model for relating to people of other faiths.*** Jesus the Messiah is the essential model for us in relating to people of all religions. Jesus says a good deal about religion, but the religion in question is that of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He engages in a radical critique of hypocrisy and formalism. By contrast, Jesus

allows other people to set the agenda. In his encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-42), Jesus was vulnerable—he needed water to quench his thirst and risked breaking social conventions to get it. Jesus did not engage in religious talk. Rather he piqued the woman’s interest by pointing beyond the mundane and linking it to “the gift of God.” The woman brought up the religion question (“Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain”), but Jesus refused to take the bait. He returned the focus to the worship of God and away from a particular place or ritual system. As a partner in dialogue, the woman came to know herself in a new way, as a person of dignity for whom God has infinite compassion. She and her fellow villagers discerned that salvation had come to them. Always Jesus responded to the needs of people, but God was central to the answer.

## Conclusion

A scripture-shaped response to the title question will seek to draw on the spirit and teaching of the entire canon of scripture.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the Gospel of John and in Acts the writers wrestle sensitively with the particularity of salvation in Jesus Christ, on the one hand, and the universal scope of God’s plan of salvation, on the other. In contrast to the triumphalism of too many Christians, which leads them to reject the possibility that other religions or systems of thought include anything of value, the scriptures do not deny what is positive in other religions. At the same time, these scriptures confidently affirm that it is through the work of Jesus Christ that women and men are restored to fellowship with God. The scriptures affirm both the finality of the work of Jesus Christ and the finitude of the church. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians that “We have this treasure [that is, the gospel] in clay jars [that is, the church]” (2 Cor. 4:7).

We need to hold together three dimensions. First, as noted above, God elected Abraham and his descendants to be servants of the nations: “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). This blessing of the nations is the permanent *apostolic* purpose of the church. Second, the role or stance of the church is that of *ambassador*, *intermediary*, or *reconciling agent*. The church is not self-important but has the function of representing God’s mission before the watching world. Third, the church is



called to engage in this ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:15-20) in the spirit of *uncoerced concern*. The words of 1 John 1:2 ought to haunt modern and postmodern Christians: “This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.” If we have indeed experienced this life, we have no right to withhold our witness.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 10; Buber’s italics.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983). Race credits this typology to John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977). Gavin D’Costa has subjected the pluralist paradigm to scrutiny in *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); and *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). See also Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 46–54.

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Various scholars have criticized Hick’s approach. See, e.g., Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 162–63, *inter alia*.

<sup>5</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, “Pietists and Contextualists: The Indian Solution,” *The Christian Century* 110 (January 20, 1993), 56–58.

<sup>6</sup> J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India: A Study with Recommendations* (New York: Abingdon, 1933).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>8</sup> Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 169.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>10</sup> This covenant structure, which has been called the original Great Commission, is reiterated three more times in Genesis: 18:18, 22:18, 28:13-14.

<sup>11</sup> See George R. Brunk III, “The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ,” in *Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church: Contemporary Anabaptist Perspectives*, ed. Erland Waltner (North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1990), 1–23. Republished in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 39–54.

## About the author

Wilbert R. Shenk taught mission history, missiology, and mission to contemporary culture at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA), 1995–2005. He served with Mennonite Central Committee, 1955–1959 and 1963–1965; Mennonite Board of Missions, 1965–1990; and taught at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 1990–1995.