

**“This I Believe”
Strategic Objectives Workshop
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PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTIANITY

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One question we were each asked to address was: “What is the most serious misunderstanding of you by outsiders?”

It would have to be that Christianity is yet another variant of religion.

The Rabbi [Hillel Goldberg, editor of the Intermountain Jewish News] has laid out for us something of the worldview of monotheism. I submit to you that Christianity is either the fulfillment, or the corruption, of Judaism. How is it distinct from Judaism? And how is it distinct from what we heard next [from Imam Karim Abuzaid of the Denver Muslim Society] as Islam?

The Christian revelation builds on the theological tradition of the Hebrew Bible, but modifies it in significant regards. Chiefly, rather than seeing the history of God’s dealings with his people Israel as being primarily about *how we can know God*, how we can be in relationship with him, Christianity sees this history as essentially a very long object lesson in *why we can’t* do either of those things.

Indeed, the Hebrew Bible is understood by Christian theologians as a dramatic representation of the human condition: Here is who God is, here is the creation we inhabit, and here is who we are—we, as human beings, are Adam, we are Israel, and we see in Israel’s wrestling with God our own wrestling with God—we see in ancient Israel’s shortcomings our own shortcomings. In essence, then, we don’t exegete—read—the Hebrew Bible, rather, it exegetes *us*!

Thus, the history of God’s dealings with Israel is not about how to know God, but rather, how to know ourselves—it is a powerful, dramatic statement of the human condition.

In the Hebrew expectations of a messiah, we believe we got more than we bargained for—a prophet, indeed. A powerful teacher, absolutely. But more still: in the person of Christ, we experienced God incarnate.

Why? That must be the next question. St. Anselm of Canterbury asked, in the 11th century, what I take to be the most basic and essential question of Christian theology: *Cur Deus Homo*—Why the God-Man? Or, why did God become man? The answer is the answer to the Old Testament: we are unable to reconcile ourselves to God. We'll return to Anselm in a moment.

The fundamental architecture of the world's religions may be described in a basically uniform way: Here we are, we know God exists, though our knowledge of him is partial, skewed, murky. Here is God, and here are the instructions for ascent to God, here is how we get from where we are to where he is. Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Plato and Plotinus, all can be described in terms of this basic dynamic—indeed, this model, *mutatis mutandis*, stripped of certain metaphysical assumptions, can describe Marxism. It is here we come upon what is truly unique about Christianity. If we were to attempt to sketch the basic characteristics of religion, it might look something like this:

**Eternity, Spirit, Necessity, The infinite,
The Absolute, Heaven, Utopia, Etc.**

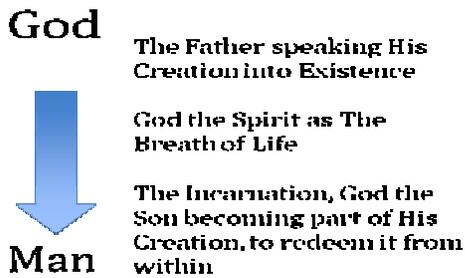
God



**Religion:
Ethics
Principles
Practices
Beliefs**

Man

Christianity moves in a fundamentally different direction—indeed, the dynamic itself is inverted. God comes to us. Christians believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. This is only possible on doctrine of God as Triune – for God is both propitiated, and propitiator. What must God be for this to occur? The Christian doctrine of God is intrinsic to the Christian gospel. God the Father sends, The Son accomplishes, the Spirit mediates the presence of God based on the finished work of the Son. Here we have something fundamentally unique from both Judaism and Islam, a unique conception of God, and a unique conception of redemption. The doctrine of the Trinity is inseparable from the Gospel.

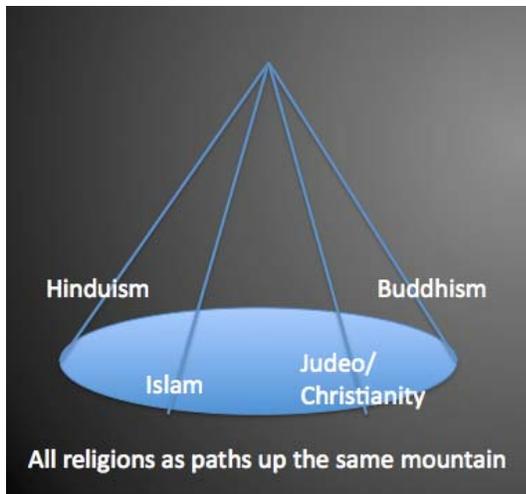


Why? Because in Christianity we have a fundamentally different assessment of the human condition. That's what sets Christianity apart. The assessment is not that vice is ignorance (as per the classical conception, Plato, etc.); it is not that we have corrupted our revelation, lost knowledge of God, and we required simply a better prophet, a more sound revelation, as per Islam, or Joseph Smith).

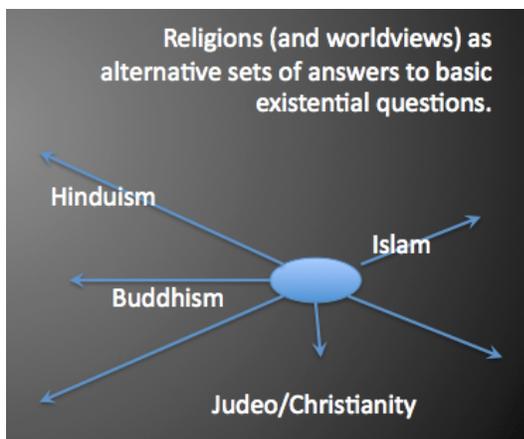
What's unique, is that Christianity posits that humankind is *unable* to bridge the gap between ourselves and God – not just ignorant of *how*, in which case further instruction would be necessary; Not just *unwilling*, in which case a helpful example would be called for. *Unable*. In which case, if this gap is to be bridged, it will be bridged by God himself. This is Anselm's conviction – Man owes a debt he cannot pay, God wishes to pay a debt he does not owe – the elegant divine solution? The God-Man. God incarnate in the person of Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

So I want to signal here quite clearly that what we are not confronted with in Christianity is simply another variant of Abrahamic religion – an idiosyncratic account of Abraham's God and the proper moral system for relating to him. We have instead a radically different account of the human condition, of who God is, and how it is that we are reconciled with God.

This leads us to an important point: we must reconsider the widespread conception of religions which holds that while they may differ in particulars, they all are essentially making the same claims.



Instead, we need to understand religions—and worldviews—as competing accounts of reality. (I happen to like Paul Tillich’s elegantly concise definition of religion as that which deals with “matters of ultimate concern”. On this understanding, religious or not, competing worldviews may be considered alongside each other.) Each provides a concomitant evaluation of the human condition, and an assessment of where hope (if such there be) lies.



Rightly understanding the competing claims of various worldviews, religious and otherwise, allows us both to emphasize what is unique and compelling about Christianity, as well as avoid many of the misguided critiques of ‘religion’, whether

these come from someone like Richard Dawkins, or our friend Dan Barker. Religions must be evaluated according to their unique claims, rather than dismissed *tout court* as though they are uniform in their essence.

One final point worth signaling: if the world's religions and worldviews are to be understood as rival accounts of reality, to which should we attend? These competing accounts may be *rationally* evaluated. One particularly helpful line of inquiry is presented by a tradition within Christian thought called 'Christian realism', which employs an essentially Augustinian account of human sin to provide a realistic analysis of human behavior. In short, the knowledge we gain about the human condition, based upon the manner in which God is redeeming us, allows us to make better sense of the self, and the dramas of history, than the alternatives. In other words, the ability of Christianity to produce better accounts of our moral experience is itself evidence for the truth of the Christian position, as grasped for instance by Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Augustine.

We close by returning to consider the Gospel itself, and its twin proclamation of our inability, and God's activity on our behalf. Hear Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes - and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent."

Background on Professor Murphy:

<http://www.ccu.edu/admissions/spotlight/spotlight.asp?iSpotID=976>