



BIG QUESTIONS

Don't all religions lead to God?

Assumptions

Whenever we encounter a question - even if it's a question we have ourselves - we need to ask ourselves: what are the assumptions behind this? What does this question assume about the world, ourselves and about who God is?

Interestingly, whenever I have been asked this question, it has either been from a Christian (or someone from a Christian background) or someone who doesn't believe in God. It doesn't tend to be asked by someone of another faith.

I have found that there are three key assumptions behind this question "Don't all religions lead to God." One is 'All religions believe the same thing' and another is 'All religions lead to the same place.' Before we tackle those, however, let's consider one more assumption: 'It's intolerant to say otherwise.'

It's intolerant to say otherwise

This is a very popular position in our world today. You have to say "All religions lead to God" because it would be horribly intolerant of others to say otherwise. To claim that one religion is 'right;' and that others are 'wrong' is the height of arrogance

How would you answer this objection?

Tolerance is the watchword of our society today. Tolerance and acceptance of others is the measure of so many things. But what does it mean to be tolerant?

Tolerance means "to treat fairly and patiently put up with a person with different beliefs or opinions." That's literally what my Chambers dictionary says. But that means that saying "all religions lead to God" is not tolerant at all. I can only be tolerant with people who disagree with me. To say that we all need to agree removes tolerance entirely.

So saying that this religion is right, and that one is wrong is an opinion and a belief. How you react to that opinion shows whether you are tolerant or not.

So it's not intolerant to have this discussion or even to have an answer to this question!

All religions believe the same thing

At the heart of this question is one of two beliefs. Probably the most common is the belief that all religions basically believe the same things. They might worship differently but since they believe the same thing, it doesn't really matter what you call yourself. And you can't call one religion right and another wrong if they basically believe the same thing.

Okay, but is it true? Do all religions believe the same thing?

Do you know of any significant differences between major religions?

There are some connections you can find between major religions. There are deep connections between Judaism and Christianity for example. There are ethical teachings you can find in more than one world religion.

But even a brief look at the major world religions show that they differ in very significant, fundamental ways. They certainly don't all believe the same thing!

Consider what they think about the nature of God: Hinduism has many gods, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all believe in one God, and Buddhism doesn't believe in a god at all! Even within those religions that believe in one God,

there is much disagreement about what God is like and how we relate to him.

Or what about life after death? Both Hinduism and Buddhism believe in a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Buddhism, in particular, believes that all existence is suffering and the search for enlightenment is the search for an end to existence

Judaism believes in life after death, but has no clear teaching on what that means or how it works – some Jews even believe in reincarnation

Muslims and Christians both have a firm belief in life after death, but have completely opposing ideas on how that is worked out – Muslims believe that your eternal fate depends on your actions and deeds, whereas Christians believe that it is through faith.

You can understand, appreciate and respect the various religions of the world. But to say that they believe the same thing really shows a lack of understanding, appreciation and respect.

The poet Steve Turner, with his tongue firmly in his cheek, shows the confusion that arises:

“Jesus was a good man just like Buddha, Mohammed and ourselves. We believe he was a good teacher of morals but we believe that his good morals are really bad. We believe that all religions are basically the same, at least the one we read was, they all believe in love and goodness, they only differ on matters of creation, sin, heaven, hell, God and salvation.” Steve Turner

So do all religions lead to God? Not if you think that means they all believe the same thing, because they simply do not.

Different religions are different routes to the same goal

So this is a slightly different take on the question. We have to admit that various religions have wildly different views on a number of subjects. But perhaps in their own way they are heading in the same direction?

Consider mountain climbing. A mountaineer has a number of different routes up the mountain. One ascent might be easy, another very challenging. One might need one set of skills, a different one different skills. Each ascent gives different views on the way, but they all end up at the same point – the summit.

So each religion represents a different way up the mountain. They aren't all the same. But they do end up the same place.

A popular way of illustrating this is the parable of the blind men and the elephant. The story goes like this: A rich and powerful king comes back from his travels with an elephant. The people of his kingdom had never seen an elephant before and were astonished by its strange appearance. Interested to know what they make of it, the king brings in three blind men who have no knowledge of the elephant. Bringing them into the room where it was, the king invites the men to examine the creature and see what they make of it.

One man takes hold of the tail and runs his hands over it. He declares that what the king has is nothing more than a rope and doesn't know what all the fuss is about. Another of the men grasps hold of the elephant's leg. He argues with the first, claiming that what the king has is not a rope but a tree. The third man grabs hold of the elephant's ear and, surprised, exclaims that the king has brought a wonderful fan, and has no idea why the other would think it was a rope or a tree.

The story can go on with more blind men and more parts of the elephant, but I think you get the point. Religions are like the blind men, grasping part of the truth but not the whole. Instead of arguing over the differences in their views, if only they could see the elephant they would realise they were all examining the same thing.

Can you spot the flaw in this parable?

Compelling though that story is, it only makes sense because of one thing: there is someone who can see! The king is the one who can see everything perfectly and knows that the blind men have all got it wrong.

The big problem with that parable is that it places us in the part of the king. We are the ones in the privileged position of seeing perfectly. And we can look on the foolishness of religions grasping their various parts, safe in the knowledge that have it all understood.

The truth is that we are all in the position of the blind men. None of us can claim to see perfectly. The only way we can know what is true and what is not is if someone tells us. And that is what Christianity claims.

Each world religion has its own views on God, on humanity, on the world, on salvation. They cannot be all true since they contradict one another. They do not believe the same thing, and they do not agree on where they are heading.

The only way we can make sense of it all is if God himself were to come and show himself. If he were to enter our world in a form we could understand. If he said and did things that only God could do to convince us he was real. And then to tell us, okay, this is what God is like and this is how to know him.

Christianity claims, uniquely in world religions, that God has done just that. In Jesus, God has shown himself to us. We don't need to scabble around for truth, like blind men grasping at elephants. God has come to us and said to us:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."
(John 14:6)

Jesus makes that claim. The only question is whether we believe him.

Questions

Videos

Ro Mody

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6jRKpvhXT0>

Do all religions lead to God? Animation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKhSHEXRSa4>

Dr Andy Bannister

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MouMyBwxZOM>

Resources

<https://www.eden.co.uk/christian-books/understanding-the-faith/other-religions/but-dont-all-religions-lead-to-god/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-gEcq9mBOs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3s8lwLdqZvU>

https://www.christianityexplored.org/Articles/469283/Home/CE_ORG/Tough_Questions/Transcripts/09_Arent_all.aspx

<https://www.bethinking.org/is-christianity-the-only-way/the-blind-men-the-elephant-and-the-zoo>