

4 February 2018

The Problem(s) with God: Is Gandhi Really in Hell?

John 14:6-7, 10:11-16

When dealing with today's "problem with God" there is one verse from John that is often quoted. Jesus, speaking to his disciples at his last supper says this. We read John 14, verses 6-7:

⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Another passage in John, though, offers a balance to that familiar verse. We read about Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John 10, verses 11-16. Jesus says:

¹¹'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I 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.

Last week, in our series on problems that people have with God, we dealt with the question of why God permits evil, and I said that it was the most common problem that people have. Well, that's true, but in the past ten years I've actually been asked today's question more often than that one, especially by young adults. The question, at heart, is about how exclusive God is, but the way it most often comes out is, "Do only Christians go to heaven?" Or, even more starkly, "Do all non-Christians automatically go to hell? Even Gandhi?"

And you have to admit up front that in the Bible, God does seem to play favorites and to work by some exclusive means. Even though God created all people, he chose Abraham and Abraham's descendants to be the bearer of his special blessing. Later on, after leading some of Abraham's descendants out of Egypt, God made a covenant with them on Mt. Sinai, declaring, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." In this way, the Jews became God's Chosen People. Christianity has followed in this tradition, including Gentiles as well as Jews, but now making the Church the new Israel, the new Chosen People. After all, Jesus was, by Church teaching, the only-begotten Son of God, appearing on earth in the flesh – a unique and unprecedented event in history. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation. We and we alone teach that ultimate truth, which is why Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." So, yeah. It sounds pretty exclusive, and this exclusive claim has been the primary motivation for Christian evangelism and mission work for over a thousand years. 1 Peter says, "It is not God's will that any should perish," so we must recruit people to Christianity before they die and go to hell. Rescue the perishing.

But you don't have to think long before you see that there are some problems with this line of thought. First off, what about people who live and die in some remote region and never even hear the name of Jesus? Do they go to hell? That doesn't sound especially fair of God. That's basing a person's eternal salvation on the accident of birth. Now a typical answer to that objection is, "That's why we need to get busy sending missionaries!" But that doesn't really help. God wants everyone to come to salvation, but the best plan God can come up with for that is to send a few missionaries out? Is God not very bright? I gather we're supposed to picture God as a dithering old man up in heaven, wringing his hands helplessly and watching people die and drop into the flames of hell, saying, "Darn! Lost another one! Sure wish those missionaries would hurry up!"

By the way, an aside here. If one of your problems with the scenarios I just described is the whole concept of a hell, that's next week's sermon. You'll have to wait on that.

A second problem with Christian exclusivity has to do with other religions. You don't have to look very far to find adherents of other religious traditions who live lives transformed by their faith – lives of integrity, mercy, devotion. You think of figures like Gandhi, or the Dalai Lama, or Thich Nhat Han, or any of tens of thousands of worshipers in other faiths. Are we consigning all these devout and faithful people to hell just because they were devout in the wrong camp, while every Christian – devout or not – gets a free pass to heaven? So, God cares more about our affiliation than our life? To put it another way, I am a Christian by choice. But I'm well aware that I made that choice from within the context of a devout, committed Christian family. If my parents had been equally devout, but Muslim, I would doubtless be an Imam today, preaching on Friday nights at the mosque. So, if only Christians are "saved" that would mean I would be damned, and that sounds again like salvation by the accident of birth. And none of this sounds like "God so loved the world," does it?

Fortunately, there is another theme in the Bible, running parallel to the one about Chosen People, like the secondary theme in a fugue. This one is a theme about God's continuing love for all people. Yes, God chose to bless Abraham, but the reason for that choice – given repeatedly in Genesis – was so that his family could be a blessing to all nations. Yes, God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but in the Exodus story we also see God speaking to Jethro, the priest of Midian, and Balaam the Moabite prophet. Yes, God brought the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, but God also rescued the Canaanite prostitute Rahab and the Moabite widow Ruth. Yes, God worked in power through the Hebrew prophets, but God also used that power to care for a Phoenician widow and heal a Syrian general. The prophet Amos makes a startling statement in Amos 9:7: *Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?* In other words, "Why are you making such a big deal about God bringing you to the Promised Land? God has been working with the Philistines and Arameans at the same time, you know. You're not so special." And then we get to the New Testament. Yes, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but by me," but just four chapters earlier, in the second reading we had today, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own. And I have other sheep that are from a different fold." To summarize, while the Bible is indeed primarily a story of

the great salvation that God brought through a special covenant with a chosen people, which culminated in the incarnation of Christ, it is also clear to anyone paying attention that this is not the only story that God is telling.

So here's how I deal with this problem. First of all, I am a fairly orthodox Christian. I really believe this stuff, that Jesus was Incarnate God on earth, that he died and rose again, and that he really is the truest and fullest revelation of the One God. Sure, I was born into this faith, but for what it's worth, I *have* looked elsewhere. I have read the Koran, twice. I've read the great works of Buddhist and Taoist and Confucian faith. I have read the Hindu *Upanishads*, and I reread the *Bhagavad Gita* at least every couple of years, but as powerful and meaningful as those books have been in my own journey, I have found nothing to compare with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Reading the scriptures of other traditions has made my faith stronger, but that faith has remained Christian. *But* finding my deepest meaning in the Christian gospel is not the same thing as saying that we Christians have a sole proprietary interest in Eternal God. How arrogant is that? No, our story as followers of Christ is deep and true, but that doesn't mean that our story is God's only story. God has always thought outside our little boxes and has always worked the other side of the street, and I'm not worried about Gandhi. I just wish most Christians knew Christ Jesus half as well as Gandhi did, whatever name he may have used. I don't get to decide who God extends grace to, but every indication is that God cares more about one's life than one's memberships.

Now to some Christians, including many of the missionaries I grew up among, what I've just said would constitute the ultimate heresy, worse than dancing. This one is, for many, a non-negotiable because to say that God is at work among people who don't claim the name of Christ appears to undercut the whole reason for evangelism and mission work. Well, it *does* undercut that reason. And all I can say in reply is to suggest that maybe we could come up with a new motivation for evangelism – one that is more about what a good and generous God has done for us and less about what a Boogeyman God will do to them if they don't follow instructions. Maybe if we *could* do that, evangelism would deserve the name “good news” again.

I wasn't raised this way, of course, as a missionary kid in Singapore. I assumed through my childhood that all non-Christians were doomed, and it was incumbent on us Christians to convert them for their own sake. And there, of course, I was surrounded by non-Christians: Muslims, Hindus, Taoists, Confucians, Buddhists. In fact, when I was in eighth grade my school took a field trip to visit various places of worship in the city. And I remember that day, as I walked up the steps of the Sultan Mosque, on Arab Street, a man sitting on the steps smiled at me and called out a greeting, “Hello, John.” All white-skinned people were “John” there. The old man wore a white skull cap, which even at fourteen I knew meant that this was a devout Muslim who had made the long and costly pilgrimage to Mecca. I stepped closer and returned his greeting. The thought made me quake with nervousness, but you know, here might be a witnessing opportunity. He asked about the group, and I explained it was a school trip. Then he asked, “Are you a Christian?” Well, there it was. I nodded. He smiled broadly at me and said, “Then you are my brother. You worship God. I worship God.”

Well, what was I supposed to do with that? Tell him he was wrong? Respond to his acceptance and offer of brotherhood with a gospel-tract scolding? I just nodded, helplessly. At that age I hadn't thought any of the thoughts I've given today, and it had never occurred to me to question any of my childhood beliefs, but I knew instinctively that I could not represent Christ by rejecting the hand of this faithful follower of Allah.

I still know that. God is bigger than that.