

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Answers to Religious Questions People Ask

I recently came across a noteworthy article that summarizes Google searches among Americans seeking answers to religious questions. The results are curious and reveal much about American culture in the early 21st century. Here is a brief summary of some of the salient findings:

- The number one Google question in America is “who created God?” Second is why does God allow suffering? If God is all powerful and all good, how can He allow suffering? The third most-asked question is, “why does God hate me?” The fourth is, “why does God need so much praise?”
- Google searches also reveal that, among Americans, there is more interest in heaven than in hell. There are 1.5 times more searches for “heaven” than for “hell,” 2.8 times as many searches asking what heaven looks like than what hell looks like, and 2.75 times as many searches asking whether heaven is real than whether hell is real.
- There are 4.7 million Google searches each year for Jesus Christ. The pope gets 2.95 million. But there are 49 million for Kim Kardashian! On Facebook, Kardashian has 26.3 million likes; Jesus has 5.6 million; and the pope, 1.7 million.

Obviously this summary is anecdotal and I am not certain we can draw significant conclusions from this material. But one thing is certain, humans have religious questions. Humans struggle with fitting their experiences and their hurts and tragedies into a coherent understanding of life and the human condition. So, I have decided to devote occasional *Issues in Perspective* to answering some of the more pressing theological/religious questions that people ask. My answers to these questions will come from my deep-seated convictions about the veracity of genuine, biblical Christianity. In other words, I believe that the Bible, as God’s Word, does have answers to the perplexing questions of life.

Question #1: How can there be only one true religion?

Claim #1: All major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing. In other words, the doctrinal beliefs among all the major religions are insignificant and superficial. Yet, this is inconsistent, for it argues that doctrine is unimportant, but assumes certain doctrinal beliefs about the nature of God. To affirm this claim means that one holds a specific view of

God, which is supposed to be superior or more enlightened than the specific beliefs of all major religions.

Claim #2: Each religion sees part of spiritual truth, but none can see the whole truth. The religions of the world each have a grasp of part of spiritual reality, but none can have a comprehensive vision of the truth. But, how can you possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless you yourself have the superior, comprehensive knowledge of spiritual reality you claim no major religion has?

Claim #3: Religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be “truth.” Because each religion has a specific historical and cultural context in terms of its origin, none can claim to know the entire truth. No one can judge whether one assertion about spiritual and moral reality is truer than the other. Yet, to claim that all religions are historically conditioned is inconsistent, because are you not now making a claim that is historically conditioned (i.e., in a Postmodern, Postchristian context)? Why should we believe what you are saying?

Claim #4: It is arrogant to insist your religion is right and then seek to convert others to it. Any exclusive set of claims to a superior knowledge of spiritual reality cannot be true. Further, the world would be a better place if everyone dropped rational beliefs about God and simply adopted (i.e., converted to) the above claim. But this objection is itself a religious claim, for it assumes God is unknowable or that He is an impersonal force that is unknowable. Further, such a claim is an “exclusive” claim about spiritual reality, which is itself inconsistent.

Several common propositions regarded as “true” by the world’s “religions”:

1. If there is a “God,” it is possible to relate to him and after death go to “heaven” by leading a “good” life.
2. Human attainment through good works, obeying rules/standards, etc., is the necessary basis for “salvation.”
3. The basic understanding of all religions is that humans must seek, through human effort, to reach “God.”

But, Christianity does not claim to be a religion; it is a relationship with the living God based on the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus does not tell us how to live so we can merit salvation. It is His life, death and resurrection that provide forgiveness and salvation. God’s grace does not come to people who outperform others but to those who admit failure to perform and acknowledge that they need a Savior. Humans are not accepted by God because of their performance, virtue, or wisdom, but because of Christ’s work on their behalf. Most religions and worldviews argue that your spiritual status depends on your religious attainment, but not Christianity.

Question #2: Why does a good God allow so much suffering/evil?

Claim #1: There is so much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world that the belief in a powerful and good God is pointless. Some other kind of “god” might exist but not this

traditional one. But, just because we cannot see or imagine a good reason why God might permit suffering and evil does not mean that none exists. Further, by observing life and people, we see that suffering and hardship often deepen/develop insight, character and strength.

Claim #2: Because of our sense of fair play and justice, we often conclude that people ought not to suffer, be excluded, or die of hunger or oppression. But both the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection (the reigning model for biology) and the Fall in biblical Christianity (see Genesis 3) view death, destruction and the violence of the strong against the weak as perfectly natural aspects of life. So, on what basis does a human judge the world to be wrong, unfair and unjust? POINT: The problem of tragedy, suffering and injustice is a problem for everyone—for the atheist, the Buddhist, the Hindu and the Christian. To abandon a belief in God does not make the problem of evil easier to handle.

But, genuine, biblical Christianity teaches that God in Jesus Christ suffered immeasurably and that it was qualitatively different than any other death, for it also involved the cosmic abandonment of the Son by the Father. Christianity alone teaches that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture, and imprisonment. God is truly *Immanuel*—even in our worst sufferings. Further, the resurrection means that every horrible thing that ever happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual glory and joy even greater. The incarnation and the cross bring profound consolation in the face of suffering, for God became a victim of evil and suffering to eradicate evil and suffering from this world.

See Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, “Googling for God” in the *New York Times* (20 September 2015) and Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, pp. 3-34.