

Jesus – the only way?

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In a recent opinion column, Christine Snitchens opined that Christians are narrow minded for claiming that Jesus is the only way to God. I will respond to her objection by arguing that simply making a truth claim is not an act of narrow mindedness, and that the claim that Jesus is the only way to God is a reasonable one to make.

Given modern notions of tolerance and pluralism it is understandable that this particular angst would arise against any group or person advancing exclusivity in any form. To suggest that there is only one way to do or understand anything is to shut down one's mind to other possibilities. The assumption of course is that all ideas are equally valid. But that assumption is false, and rejected even in Ms. Snitchen's own thinking, for she insists that pluralism is *the only way* to process and discuss religion. By definition, that excludes ways that do not endorse pluralism, including the Christian claim about which she is presently perturbed. Shall we infer that she is narrow minded for claiming that pluralism is true? No! We may test her view to determine whether or not it is coherent and rational; likewise with the claim that Jesus is the only way to God. Good thinking Christians do not simply refuse to discuss any other possible way to God. Rather, they disagree that those other ways provide access to God; Christians also see the issue as one of reference, not preference.

Perhaps too many folks think that choosing one's religion is like choosing one's favorite television program. Some prefer comedy and some prefer action, etc. As in many areas of our daily life, we make decisions based on personal taste, things about which no external reference really applies, things purely subjective. In such a case to say that chicken is a better tasting food than hot dogs and that eating hot dogs is the only way to taste good food, would indeed be

narrow minded if not narrow taste budded! Religion, on the other hand, is more or less an attempt to understand a reality not subject to our personal preferences. We can avoid foods we do not like (infants and toddlers typically excepted, by power not preference), but we cannot avoid things like death, and musings over why we exist, and feelings of guilt, and the need for oxygen. We are seeking to understand something that is external to us. We cannot change the status of the thing because it does not align with what we might prefer. Religion then is a means of referring to a reality that is undeterred by personal preference. Reference and preference are at home in different categories. One might prefer pork hot dogs for taste, but one cannot prefer to have pork hot dogs more nutritious than boiled skinless chicken. Nutrition refers to a reality external to the taste buds. It may be that Ms. Snitchens has confused these categories, and is disturbed that one group narrow mindedly insists upon a superiority of preference. She would have a more legitimate complaint if that were the case—alas it is not.

As to the specific Christian claim that Jesus is the only way to God, we have much to say. Jesus claimed to be the promised Messiah of ancient Hebrew prophecy, the one through whom salvation or human rescue would come. He claimed that he “came to seek and to save what was lost”; and that he “would give his life a ransom for many”. He also declared “none could come to Father God except through him” (Jesus), a promise and warning repeated by his immediate disciples who insisted that “there was no other name under heaven by which men could be saved” Ultimately his claim to being messiah would cost him his life, he was crucified for blasphemy, for daring to call himself the “son of God”. Eyewitnesses testified to his miraculous works and deeds of mercy and recorded much of the same in the Christian gospels.

What then are our options with respect to these claims? Jesus either thought these things were actually true about himself or he was knowingly making them up, in which case he would be a liar. Yet throughout history, even non-Christian sects have praised at least the wisdom, peace, and love of Jesus. It runs quite contrary to what history records of Jesus to call him a liar, for that would surely compromise his renowned goodness. Not only so, but we would have to conclude that he willingly died for a known lie. Perhaps Jesus was out of his mind, a “lunatic” of sorts. Neither though does this comport with what we know of Jesus and his excellent historic reputation. Even today, various groups appeal to Jesus to buttress their political opinions. Some have tried to convince that Jesus is actually only a legend, but the overwhelming majority of historical scholarship rejects that notion. It would seem that the only remaining option is that Jesus is Messiah; that he is Lord, and the only way to God, just as followers of Jesus claim, in obedience to Jesus.

Much more could be said and volumes have been written both supporting and denying the specifics that I have addressed. Those on both sides of the debate over these specifics would admit that the issues are far more meaningful than just expressing preference. Each side purports to be interested in truth, or ultimate reality. Therefore, when Christians claim that Jesus is the only way to God, they are not being narrow-minded—they are being mindful of the narrow way Jesus spoke of, and following Him in that way.