

The Empty Promise of Godism

Questions encountered in the multi-faith and inter-faith culture.

These are the key questions I have encountered in discussing multi-faith issues from a biblical Christian viewpoint, and with reference to my book, *The Empty Promise of Godism*.

Questions encountered – and a counter question to consider.

1: What do you mean by “Godism”?

There is an increasingly popular belief that all religions are approved by God, that all religions worship ‘one god’ (or at least the so-called “higher religions”). This idea goes on to assert that what God is interested in is not so much the finer points of our beliefs, but rather with the way we live our lives, which should display compassion for fellow human beings, and the environment.

Most people believe in God, or at least some form of ‘higher authority’ or ‘higher being’. Godism then seems to be tolerant of the idea of God (although this is highly debatable in fact!), but is suspicious of organized religion, or aspects of organized religion. It is then selectively ‘God-positive and religion-negative’.

Godism, in a nutshell, is the belief/philosophy that all religions lead to God, that all contain truth and all contain error. The trouble with Godism - at its root - is that it raises huge questions about the nature of God (questions which it conveniently ignores and so does not try to answer) and relies upon religious intuition rather than any idea of revelation from God.

Godism is a malleable thing, borrowing from various philosophies. It is post-modern in its willingness to shift philosophical ground easily. In my book I identify elements of the ancient philosophies of Gnosticism and Arianism (both recognized as heresies by the early church) within modern Godist philosophy – but Godism also borrows from and incorporates bits of the rather more modern philosophies of deism, theism and monism.

There are 2 types of Godist – the casual Godist (the proverbial man down the pub) who thinks (if he thinks at all!) that it would be unfair if only one religion was right as this implies the others are wrong, so they must all be right or God would be displaying favouritism – which of course He is not allowed to do. In the Western world I would guess that casual Godists make up 95% of the adherents of the idea.

Then there is the determined Godist. This is the person who has looked a little more deeply at *the religions*, recognizes their glaring inconsistencies and opposed beliefs and

practices, but sweeps these conveniently away in their determination to “find” that God somehow inhabits all the (so-called higher) religions and that belief is less important than the way you live your life. When found in a “Christian” context – and most determined Godists in my experience are either church-goers or ex-Christians – then these people seem to try to reopen the early Christian controversy around salvation by faith or salvation by works, and come down firmly on the side of salvation by works.

There is something insidious about Godism: that is that as we can mix and match different bits of different *religions* in the so-called ‘knowledge’ that they are all ultimately the same and approved by “god”. And as Godism tends to believe that all *the religions* contain “error”, then the moral demands of Christianity are conveniently relegated to “nice to have” requirements. Moral requirements are perhaps something that particularly religious people can abide by if they think it particularly important, but the more enlightened Godist sees religious commands more as suggestions. So the 10 commandments are relegated to the 10 suggestions. All this is doubly convenient if you have a particular area of your life that you are not prepared to surrender to Jesus – normally attitudes to money, sex or other social mores.

In my book I identify all the key currents that run through this philosophy – and find these are pretty consistent in most Godists that I have met. But Godism is malleable – that is one of its attractions – so the Godist’s final set of beliefs is pretty much down to the individual Godist. The pseudo formula I have devised to identify the key currents within Godist thought is:

$$\text{Godism} = G + R[n] + RI + AK - TS$$

No doubt individual Godists would argue with aspects of this pseudo formula, but this does seem the simplest descriptive to encompass the philosophy.

Counter-question to consider: if all the religions (or all the “higher religions”) are approved by God, then is God a split-personality? Is God portrayed in the Bible as a split-personality? And if this ‘power’ is a split personality, is it “God”?

(Check-out the freely downloadable bible studies from “The Bible Student” (www.glorytoglory.co.uk) and especially studies # 21, 22, 23. Does this sound like a God Who would masquerade in multiple guises?)

2: What is your attitude to *the Religions*?

I must be honest and say I do not much think about *the religions*. Apart from studying the religions under the old school RE curriculum (which I think was more appropriate than the modern curriculum) to the age of 14 and then going on to do an ‘O’ level (again under the old curriculum, which focused in the course that I undertook on the patriarchs of the Old Testament and very early church history (mainly in Acts) in the New Testament) I

have only looked at Islam in any depth, and that mainly to understand the attitude of Islam to non-Moslems living within Moslem societies, and the attitude of Islam to warfare.

I have two key attitudes to *the religions*: all of *the religions* except Judaism and biblical Christianity can be argued (and I would say strongly argued) to have grown out of the ancient Babylonian mystery religions. These *religions* have a single root. Some people would say “there, I told you so – they are all one, and are meant to be one” or perhaps that *God always meant the religions to emerge from a common root*. But I’d repeat that Judaism and biblical Christianity stand completely apart from the common root of *the religions*.

I believe quite simply what the Bible amply reveals – that God has announced Himself to His creation – first through His chosen people, the Hebrews – and latterly through His Son (Jesus, our Lord). He has expressed His promises to mankind through what the Bible calls ‘covenants’ and in particular (in the loosest sense) through what some people call the “Old Covenant” and then the “New Covenant”.

The religions, then, provide a set of beliefs (some firmly held, others not so firmly held) by which people choose to live out their lives. *The religions* hold one thing in common that is distinct from biblical Christianity – they all teach that you “earn” a “right” to a reward of some sort from “god” (or “gods”). Biblical Christianity by contrast, is emphatic that we do not “earn” merit in God’s eyes. As God looks at us as the rebels (or sinners) that we truly are, so He looks beyond us and fixes his gaze upon Jesus His Son. It is because of Jesus that we can be forgiven by God. Jesus stands in our place. We have to put our trust (faith) in Him and in what He has achieved for us on the Cross, and go on trusting in Him as our Saviour.

In my opinion *the religions* provide a sort of *spiritual-antibody* sufficient in strength to persuade their followers that they do not need Jesus and that by their own effort they can ‘get right’ with their ‘god’ - however they define that word. Men do not naturally want to acknowledge their need of God, nor their need of forgiveness, and especially not their utter inability to stand in the presence of a holy and righteous God. Mankind have incredibly stiff necks when it comes to the need to repent and the need to ask for God’s forgiveness. *The religions* reinforce that stiff neck of spiritual rebels determined not to acknowledge their need of mercy from God. Determined not to see that it was they, personally, who nailed Jesus to the Cross of execution. That’s why most *religions* argue against the historical veracity of the crucifixion – the Cross is an inconvenient reality that just won’t go away, so has to be explained away. It is interesting (and sad) to see how *the religions* explain away the Cross.

So my attitude to *the religions* is simply this: their ultimate purpose whether they are new religions or old religions, is to divert Mankind from looking candidly at the Cross – from looking candidly at the Lord Jesus. To deny the purpose of the Cross and to deny its complete, total efficacy, as the sole remedy for Mankind’s permanent state of rebellion against God. To deny people the opportunity to consider Jesus, killed for you and for me

– and for all Mankind – yet risen and having conquered death, beckoning us to place our trust in His risen life, so as to be given new life forever.

***Counter-question to consider: what is YOUR attitude to The Cross?
(Galatians 6: 14; 1 Corinthians 2: 2)***

3: How do you define a religion?

A *religion* is a mechanism to earn merit with a “god” or “gods”. Biblical Christianity (and Judaism in its truncated way) is not a mechanism – it is a relationship between the person who acknowledges his or her need for forgiveness and cleansing, and the Saviour who has paid in full the debt they owe to God. As they put their trust and faith in Him, so He saves them from the consequences, the penalty and the power of their sins – the very thing that prevents them from knowing God personally.

Jesus said that in order to see the kingdom of God, a man (or a woman or a child) must be born again. In other words their old life needs to be completely replaced by the new life that only Jesus can give.

Christianity, by contrast with *the religions*, is all about healing. John 3:14 – “just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up”. Moses lifting up the snake was to provide healing to all who saw the snake. So Jesus being lifted up on the Cross provides healing (or rebirth = new life) to all who “see” their need of forgiveness and Jesus’ blood as being *the* sufficient remedy for their sins.

A *religion* then is an invention of men where man ‘builds’ his own relationship and ‘merit’ with ‘god’ (howsoever defined). A *religion* is an attempted alternative to forgiveness. A *religion* is a ‘partnership’ between Man and ‘god’ where by his effort the man ‘earns’ some favour from ‘god’. I personally would place communism and fascism in the same bracket as *the religions*. They are religions where ‘Mankind’ or the State (or the volk or proletariat) take the place of God and demand the same total allegiance and willingness to sacrifice as demanded by *the religions*.

I would contrast biblical Christianity with *the religions* in this way: I would say that true biblical Christianity is not so much a religion as a relationship. A relationship of child to parent – of sinner to Saviour. Biblical Christianity is a world apart from *the religions*, all of which demand ‘performance’ of religious duties whereas Christianity is all about the penitent sinner receiving grace. Grace is God’s favour to those who don’t deserve it – but can still be given it as they acknowledge their need of forgiveness and acknowledge the saving power of the blood of Jesus.

***Counter-question to consider: How do YOU define being born again?
(John chapter 3)***

4: Do you consider that *the religions* contain no truth whatsoever?

In my book I look at this in-depth from a biblical standpoint. Here I would simply say this: the Lord Jesus described Himself as THE Truth. “I am the Way the Truth and the Life – no one comes to the Father except by me”. Determined Godists attempt to explain this away and their ‘explanations’ are reviewed in detail in my book. (Casual Godists don’t bother to explain this at all). Religions can only contain truth if they contain Jesus.

Now some *religions* do claim to contain Jesus – or to acknowledge Him and then go on to add to His revelation and to His achievement on the Cross of crucifixion. But this is plainly not what Jesus meant as He invited people to follow Him, to become His disciples.

Religions do contain human wisdom that may, in certain circumstances, be helpful to their adherents. This human wisdom may be mistaken for truth, but is not the same thing. But *religions* hold people in their grip and act (in some people) as an antidote to prevent them from seeing their need of Jesus.

Counter-question to consider: what do YOU think that Jesus meant when He called Himself “The Truth”?
(John 14: 6)

5: Is your view of God simply a narrow, exclusivist view that masks your own fears and prejudices about the people and religions of other cultures?

No! My view of God is based on His clear self-revelation (on His self-disclosure) given in the Torah, the Writings, the Prophets and the Gospel. In what we call loosely “the Old Covenant” and the “New Covenant” – although I’d suggest that these titles may be a little misleading.

Also misleading, in my view, are the titles “Old Testament” and “New Testament” as these titles may suggest replacement by one with another. I prefer to think of what Hebrews call the Tanakh (and what Christians tend to call the Old Testament) as being “The Promise” constantly pointing towards the promised Messiah. And I think of the New Testament as being “The Promise Fulfilled” in the person and ministry of Jesus. So God has kept His promise – has sent His Messiah – and indeed will return again at the end of human history. (I do, of course, recognize that these terms themselves raise other questions and are not therefore the ‘final word’ in how we look at the relationship of the pre-Jesus and post-Jesus scriptures).

Some people say that my God is a little God and that their 'god' is a bigger, more expansive and more inclusive 'god'. That at the end of the day must be their personal choice but they cannot make that choice without at the same time raising enormous questions about the nature of God and presenting 'him' or 'it' as being unconcerned with truth. Appendix 1 in my book looks at some of the implications of Godist belief in simple flow-chart form.

***Counter-question to consider: what is YOUR view of God?
(Matthew 5: 48)***

6: God is big and God is loving and He is far bigger than your narrow sect.

Yes God bigger than our ability to fully comprehend Him. But He has made Himself clear in terms that mere mortals can understand. He has revealed Himself through a *chosen people* and latterly (and for all time) through His Son. Yes God is loving but the word 'love' in English is an ambiguous one. Prince Charles in the UK once famously and correctly asked the question "What is love?". Where we have one ambiguous word in English the Bible uses four. *Hesed*, *Agape*, *Phileo* and *Storge*. Each has distinct meanings far removed from our romantic/emotional ideas around what we call love.

The subtext behind this question seems to be 'God is so loving that He loves each one of us into a relationship of salvation'. Some have a candid philosophy called Universalism – the idea that God 'saves' everyone irrespective. I can only say this idea is not supported or entertained anywhere is Scripture. Those who think that it is, are self-deluded.

Godism seeks to overcome the awkward challenge of the Cross at Calvary. Painting "god" simply as an all-loving, all-forgiving deity persuades Godism's believers that they can bypass (as they see it) the absolute demands of the Christian faith that they must lead sober, upright and righteous lives before a holy and righteous God. Perhaps some think of it as a way of avoiding the need for rebirth. God's righteous demands and restrictions are pesky to all too many and they seek ways "around" it. The promotion of a one dimensional all-loving, all-forgiving God is their response to the challenge (and the offense) of the Cross.

Christianity is not a narrow sect. Indeed some talk quite correctly of a broad church which entertains a range of different beliefs and understandings on details providing it agrees on certain fundamentals. The attempt to paint biblical Christianity as 'narrow' again seems ultimately to be a mechanism to avoid the Cross and its inevitable demands. Incidentally, Jesus reminds us that the path to life is a narrow one "and few find it" (Matthew 7: 14).

Counter-question to consider: If God is all loving then why was the Cross necessary at all? (Acts 2: 23)

7: All religions contain bellicosity – that’s where mankind interferes with and falsely interprets divine revelation. Christianity is no different.

Do all *religions* contain bellicosity? That challenge may well be right. I frankly do not know but I have already suggested that biblical Christianity is not so much *a religion* as a relationship, and in that sense the question is probably wrong, trying to equate a relationship with *a religion*.

The purpose of the question is no doubt two-fold: first to say that in fact Christianity is just the same as all the rest. Or even, that they are all as bad as each other! The second purpose is to attempt to show that it is not *the religions* that are to blame. Rather, it is the naughty people who misinterpret them, not realizing what is seen as the ‘worthiness’ and ‘peacefulness’ that is supposed to lie at the heart of all of them.

Biblical Christianity is not bellicose. Our Lord is called The Prince of Peace for a good reason – He is! In both Hebrew and Greek the name Jesus (correctly Yeshua in Hebrew) has a special meaning, being in a sense, a one word summary of the work that the Lord was sent to do. In Hebrew the name Yeshua means, variously, ‘Jehovah is my help’ or ‘Jehovah is rescue’ or ‘the help of Jehovah’. In Matt 1:21 we read “you are to give him the name Yeshua, because he will save his people from their sins.” The very name Yeshua, therefore, marks Him out as Saviour. “He is God’s divinely appointed and divinely sent Rescuer” wrote William Barclay “whose function it is to deliver men from their sins. He came to rescue men from the estrangement and the alienation from God which is the consequence of their past sins, and for the future to liberate them from the bondage to sin, from the moral frustration and the continuous and inevitable defeat which are the result of sin. He came to bring friendship for fear, and victory for defeat.”¹

To the Greek mind a connection was made between the name Yeshua (in Greek Iesous, and in English Jesus) and the verb *iasthai*, which means *to heal*. The connection between the two words is only in the sound, but the Greeks made much of the idea of Jesus as the healer of the bodies and souls of men - the One Who alone could bring health to the body in its physical pain and cleansing of the soul polluted by the spiritual disease of sin. It was no accident, therefore, that Yeshua was given His special name, for it summarises the things He came to do and which *only* He could do. He came to be the divine rescuer of men from the consequences and the grip of sin. And what He restored for His followers is peace.

¹*Jesus As They Saw Him* - William Barclay - SCM Press Ltd - 1962 - page12

I would say that all *religions* are not the same and that uniquely it is biblical Christianity that presents a righteous God Who is love, who promises to restore peace to those who place their trust (faith) in His Son. Where Christianity is presented in a seriously bellicose way (and I think this is far rarer than many people seem to imagine) then one is entitled to wonder whether the “Christian” is in fact that they claim to be.

Counter-question to consider: what would YOU say are the 4 key differences between biblical Christianity and the religions (or the so-called “higher religions”)?
(Acts 4: 12)

8: God is love and therefore He will find a way even where you cannot see one

Where are we told that God is love? Who said it? What was the context in which it was said? Many who are keen to bandy-about a “god of love” have not the faintest idea where that notion came from – and nor do many of them care. The God of love is widely presented as a user-friendly God, whom we should not fear because He loves us and will ‘see us alright in the end’.

Actually God IS a God of love, amongst His other attributes. We should also remember that He is a God of righteousness and a God of holiness. As mentioned earlier the English word ‘love’ is inadequate to reveal the full force of how God has revealed Himself to the world. It would actually be more accurate to say that God is the God of agape – of hesed.

Incidentally, did Jesus ever *preach* a “gospel of love”?

I can fully accept that God, as the sovereign deity, can indeed find ‘a way’ to save where we humans cannot. And by this the questioner presumably means ‘find a way to save people who have not heard the good news of Jesus’. In principle the question must be true but we would be extremely foolish to build a huge theology on this idea. “Unless a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom” said Jesus. The real reason why this idea of “other ways”, of escape-clauses, is promoted so vigorously is because it is thought (wrongly) that it relieves us of the need to live holy and righteous lives. God, it is thought, is so loving that he will ignore our ‘peccadilos’. My book deals at some length with this.

Yes God MAY find a way to save where we cannot see one. But He has graciously shown us THE WAY so why do so many Christians seem to promote an alternative way, or what they see (rather legalistically and mechanistically) as an exclusion clause to the need to repent and trust in Jesus? Why do some Christians promote the idea of “unknowing Christians” i.e. those who they say are “Christians” even though they do not realize it? Such an idea is nowhere taught by the Lord Jesus.

God is righteous so He WILL do the right thing. I would not be so presumptuous as to try to tell Him what the right thing is. But many people presumptuously assume that faith and right living is an optional extra. Matthew chapter 25 stands as a warning of a church unready, perhaps a church teaching people they can “relax” because God is so loving. What a tragedy! What a travesty!

***Counter-question to consider: Are you genuinely comfortable with or persuaded by the implications of your question? Do you REALLY think that Acts 4: 12 can be “explained away” by saying that in spite of all that the Bible says God will actually bypass Jesus and the Cross (which YOU nailed Jesus to) in order to find “another way”? Did you know, incidentally, that the first Christians were known as the people of the way?
(Acts 9: 2; 19: 9; 22: 4)***

9: If you are right then God’s “reward” is going to be reserved for an awfully small number!

I challenge the idea that God’s reward is reserved for few in my book. But I do not try to build a theology around the idea. What must be affirmed clearly is that those who reject Jesus (and in the West that must be stated plainly as being the clear majority) will face judgement. What will their defence be?

Would you want to go naked into a courtroom in order to hear the Judge pronounce? It is Jesus Who provides the robes of righteousness and only those washed in His blood can stand before the Judge.

The question may be thought to be ‘clever’ in the eyes of the person asking it, but really it is another attempt to broaden what Jesus called the *narrow path* that is “found” by relatively few.

We must affirm once again in the words of Jesus: unless a man be born again he cannot see or enter the Kingdom. And the eternal alternative to the Kingdom is dire!

***Counter-question to consider: will not a God of justice and righteousness do what is right? Why does God need a ‘helping hand’ from you – or indeed from the religions?
(Romans 4: 15)***

10: God is not really so bothered about the minutia of what we believe – he gave us religions to help us to live better lives – He is far more interested in the way we live our lives rather than the finer points of our beliefs

What we believe governs the way we live. God knows that! This question (or rather statement) cannot be defended anywhere in Scripture. Again it seems to be an attempt to “find” an escape clause from the absolute demand to repent and turn away from Sin, trusting only Jesus and leading our lives in His strength.

Counter-question to consider: If God is not concerned about how we live, then why did He give us the Ten Commandments?

11: So what do you think happens to the souls of those who are not Christians?

I will answer that when you answer for me a simple question: *why is the sky green?* You ask the wrong question and you are bound to get the wrong answer!

Right questions: * do you love Jesus? * do you trust God to do what is right? * why should a Holy God have you (or me) anywhere near Him?

This question is not really designed to illuminate, or even to find a truthful answer. The question is motivated by a desire to paint Jesus into a corner from which the questioner thinks that Jesus cannot escape. In that sense it is a dishonest question.

If you insist on asking that question, then fine! Alongside it however you also need to explain *why the sky is green*. Having persisted in asking the wrong question, whatever answer you reach will be wrong and therefore misleading.

My book looks at some length at what God may or may not do in this regard. But once again the question of rejection of Jesus will lie at the heart of God’s response.

Counter-question to consider: Why do you think that God invested 2000 years of human time in teaching the Hebrew people, and then sending His Own Son, if He was intending to use religions as alternative paths? What were the Mosaic and Messianic Covenants all about? What does a God of Covenants actually mean?