

July 2008

Are All Religions Equal?

In the political correctness embraced by many in my Baby Boomer generation, one of the greatest social crimes one can commit is to suggest that one religion or belief system is superior to another. Doing so is a sure sign of either absolute ignorance or total arrogance.

Put another way, such narrow thinking could not be open-minded, for truth is too vast for any one claim. A truly enlightened or liberated person is someone who embraces all religions as equal.

A few years ago, I found myself sitting on the floor of a Gypsy home in the outskirts of Debrecen, Hungary. In the center of the room was a Gypsy woman singing a song which in essence said. "I no longer believe that God damned me; I now believe that God loves me". With passion in her voice and eyes, she was telling me and my friends that she had become a follower of Jesus, and that she no longer believed the lie that God had rejected her.

You see, the Gypsy people migrated from northern India to various parts of Europe and the Middle East around 1000 A.D., when the Persian Empire needed more laborers familiar with iron work, basket weaving, and musical production. Many in Europe called these new immigrants "Gypsies" because they mistakenly thought they came from Egypt. Today, they are known as Roma because so many settled in what is now called Romania, plus, the name Gypsy had become derogatory for many people.



A Gypsy Woman

Today, while Roma people live throughout Europe, they are especially concentrated in Eastern Europe. In Hungary, alone, the Roma comprise 10 percent of the population. Many Europeans despise the Roma and treat them as "dirty dogs." They are often forced to live on the outskirts of towns, if they settle at all.

The Roma originally were the lowest of the Hindu caste system in India, they were considered "untouchables" by the Hindu priests. In fact, still today throughout India, these untouchables, or Dalit people, are not allowed any formal education and cannot enter a Hindu temple, even though the central government has outlawed such practices. The Dalit are forced to sweep streets and clean latrines of the upper caste. In other words, the Hindu priests still have enormous power to influence people's thinking and practices throughout India. Hindus do not believe that God created all people equal.



A Hindu Priest

As a result, unfortunately, these Dalit and Roma people carry with them the devastating lie that God views them as "mistakes" in the economy of the world he has created. This lie has driven many Roma into despair, often causing them to pursue a life of crime through stealing, lying, and prostitution. During World War II, Hitler put hundreds of thousands of Roma to death rather than deal with their emotionally complicated and different lives.

My mission organization, Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, supports a Gospel witness in northern India among the Dalit people and also in Hungary and Ukraine with the Roma. In India, these frontier mission efforts have resulted in a half-million Dalits coming to know the love of God in Jesus; these new believers have joined the Rural Presbyterian Church of

Northern India. In Hungary and Ukraine, many Roma are coming to faith through our partnership with the mission initiatives of the Reformed Church of Hungary and Ukraine. No longer castoffs, they now live lives of hope.

This particular Roma woman to whom I was listening in Debrecen, Hungary, sang song after song, exalting how the Roma could identify with Jesus, as someone who was despised by the majority, had no particular place to call his home, and was eventually killed by the religious and political leaders of his day.

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What I have found is that as long as someone debates these kinds of lofty, philosophical questions from the vantage point of his or her own particular comfort, ivory tower, or independent academic exercise, without actually getting out into the world and hearing personal testimonies, there is a real danger that the conclusions drawn will be flawed and overwhelmed by a particular cultural bias.

For instance, if you make friends with a Muslim, you will discover that Islam does not teach that all human beings are created equal. According to the Islamic holy books, men are allowed four wives, but a woman can have only one husband. In a Muslim court of law, two women are needed to give testimony or witness to equal the same from a man. Women are incapable of becoming holy, as opposed to men, and for this reason can never assume a leadership role within their faith.

When I finally came to that point in my own life when I felt God calling me to enter through the narrow gate of faith in Jesus, I could feel every fiber in my being resisting; I felt as if I were committing intellectual suicide by believing in one thing, against the prevailing tide of my generation. When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), the audacity of the claim made me pause. But, once I committed my life to Christ, I experienced the most profound freedom my soul had ever known. It was counter intuitive; by believing in one thing, my horizons were broadened; by committing to one covenant, I felt more free; by believing that all the world's beauty and truth are contained in one person, I became more loving and merciful.

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Jesus came to earth to set us free, not weight us down with more burdens. He came to give us the Good News that God loves all people and created us equal. Jesus helps us embrace truth and light, no matter how ugly our lives have become.

When will my generation wake up and realize that all religions are not equal, and that there are severe consequences to believing otherwise?

We followers of Jesus cannot keep the blessings of our faith to ourselves.

Millions of people around the world are suffering from deep, spiritual poverty often because of bankrupt religious practices they are taught.

Who will set these people free? How will they hear the Good News unless someone tells them?

May we say from our own hearts, "Here I am, Lord, send me."