



## 26. Non-Christian Religions - A Postscript

It is time to call a halt to our rather superficial look at other faiths and how far they relate to Christianity. I have not touched at all on Confucianism, which I take to be a philosophy of life rather than a religion, or fascinating byways like the faiths of the Jains or the Parsees; nor is this the place to consider how far Marxism can be considered to be a religion. What I have not done is to ask why a Christian should be concerned about other faiths at all. The answer must be so that we can understand how someone of another religion views us.

The very earliest Christians did not condemn other faiths as evil. They considered them to be simply pointless and ineffective, because the Christian God was the one true god. Other deities did not exist, so could not save, and worshipping them was a waste of time. This did not make everything good pagans taught wicked nonsense.

Justin Martyr, one of the earliest Christian saints, wrote: 'What has been well said by good men in every age is said by us.' It was later Christians who decided the pagan gods still had evil powers and demoted them, along with the fauns, satyrs, dryads, etc. to the status of devils, and accused those who prayed to them of being demon-worshippers. To the pagans, Christians were 'atheists' - by failing to honour the ancestral gods, they would bring ruin on the state.

God, for the Hebrews, was to be worshipped because he was their god. He was supreme over the other gods. What other nations did was up to them - Yahweh was the only god to be worshipped by Jews. What is condemned in the Old Testament is idolatry - the worship of things we have made ourselves. Nowadays we don't often worship idols. But there are many forms of idolatry - the worship of a statue, yes, but also that of a football team, a flag, a car, an image on a computer, a printed book even, if we substitute it for God as an object of adoration.

So where does this leave other religions? We cannot condemn a high-caste Hindu sage, or a Buddhist, or a Sikh, or a Muslim, as a wicked idolater.

Insofar as their religion leads them towards the love of God and of the rest of creation, it is better for them than if they had no religion; insofar as it leads them to alienation and acts of cruelty, it must be

bad. But the same, surely, must go for Christians. We believe that Christianity is faith in the one true God. But if we see non-Christians, non-believers even, behaving in some respects better than some Christians, more in line with what we understand to be God's intentions, it is time to ask ourselves why this should be.

Jesus said, 'No-one comes to the Father except by me.' It follows that if those who follow other faiths come close to God, that, for a Christian, must be due to the grace of Christ, whether they know him by name or not.