

From a Christian perspective, discuss the fate of those who never hear the gospel message about Jesus Christ.

One of the most often criticized / questioned Christian beliefs is – why do we as Christians lay exclusive claim on religion? While Christians can recite John 14.6 as our explanation all day long, many of those asking the questions do not hold our Bible to be foundationally true so any arguments stemming from it are moot to them. Another alternative is to explain that all religions may express some truths about God (or a higher being) and salvation, but they are so different that they cannot possibly all coexist as true. Thus, only one set of beliefs is true and it alone is the path to salvation. For various reasons (our upbringing, Jesus being the only religious leader to die and be resurrected, etc.) we have chosen to put our faith in Christianity as that sole path to salvation.

Exclusivism is the approach to the diversity of religion that holds that “salvation, liberation, human fulfillment, or whatever else one considers the ultimate goal of the religion to be, is found solely in or through one particular religion” (RRB 262). Further, for people in an exclusivistic religion “to be saved, they must be told about and acknowledge the unique way” (RRB 262). In light of this, many people “find it difficult to believe that persons in other religions are doomed

because they have not heard the gospel of a given religion and sought salvation in the prescribed manner" (RRB 263). The question always resurfaces: "can they be thought to have failed on the ground that they do not acknowledge a particular religious mediator, follow someone's teachings, or conceive of God or Reality in a particular manner? It is unjust for God to condemn a person who has never heard or is unable to understand what is necessary for salvation" (RRB 263). In response to all these questions and unsettling feelings, the orthodox Christian rebuts that we should not forget the premise that all have sinned and all are thus deserving of death (Rom 3.23, 6.23). Further, God stated that all that is necessary to accept and have faith in Him is evident in the world he has created around us (Rom 1.20). It is not our "right" to be granted salvation; it is our gift and blessing.

In any discussion of exclusivism, one of the major issues that continually resurfaces is if one religion truly has exclusive reign over the path of salvation, what will happen to those who do not follow this path? Many people shy away from this discussion in order to avoid telling everyone who does not put their faith into Christ that they have an unsettling future awaiting them. If we, as Christians, believe that there are only two ultimate afterlife destinations (heaven and hell), and we believe that only those who faithfully believe in the same

foundational truths regarding Jesus Christ will reach heaven with us, then our logical conclusion is that all others will be sent to hell. However, not many Christians enjoy sharing these basic truths with those who spiritually disagree with us (however, there are some that love to say it, discuss it, yell it and even make a living out of it). One reason this is a tough subject to discuss is that many people find it to contradict the foundational Christian truth that God is all-loving (how or why would he send anyone to hell if he loves them?). However, the traditional Christian position is that "God can justly consign certain individuals to hell as an eternal punishment for sin committed on earth" (RRB 313).

Many non-Christians question how God could punish all non-believers in the same manner even though some obviously commit "worse" crimes than others. However, this assertion misses the point that all have fallen short of the righteousness of God. Whether you miss the mark by an inch or by a mile, we have all missed the mark and thus we deserve the punishment for this unless we can find someone else to "stand in" for us on our behalf. Jesus "stood in" for all of humanity when he suffered on the cross, but he calls on us to accept the grace (by faithfully believing in who he was) he freely offers in order to receive the pardon from our deserved punishment for our sin.

Still, any discussion involving non-believers going to hell usually comes back to the question of what happens to those who have never heard about Jesus – those who have never heard that he even existed, let alone his miraculous deeds and his sacrifice for humanity. What happens to them? Using the logic from above, they go to hell hand in hand with those who have heard, but refused to faithfully believe in Jesus. But how can this be justified? How will we ever know how these people would have responded had they only had the opportunity to even respond in the first place? Many orthodox Christians point to Rom. 1.20 and show that God has made himself evident to all through the creation of the world. But even still, how can nature point to the person, the work, or the cross of Jesus Christ? Is his name and story written in the clouds or in the trees or in the leaves? If we believe that Jesus Christ is the way, and the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father God but through him then we also hold that attempting to know the Father alone (i.e. realization through the beauty of nature) is not enough. Otherwise, all the Israelites who refuted Jesus as being the Christ, but still truly believed in God our heavenly father as the creator of all would technically be on the same spiritual “path” as us as believers.

So what are we to say? It is at this point in the discussion that we must realize that God is sovereign and He has a plan. The easiest answer to this whole debate is to take a fully deterministic approach and hold that God has chosen and elected all those who will respond to the gospel of Christ. Thus, if anyone is never even told of the gospel of Christ, they were never chosen to receive salvation in the first place. However, while this is an easy explanation, it is obviously not warmly received by non-believers as it takes an approach even more uncomfortable and unwelcoming than the explanations already given.

One theory of God's sovereign plan that is more apt to placate non-believers' unjust God argument is that the revelation of himself via nature as discussed above is God's general revelation (as opposed to God revealed in Christ being God's Special Revelation) and "that those who have never had meaningful access to the gospel will be judged on the basis of how they respond to that natural light that is available to them" (RRB 315). However, many who believe this still believe that "God's Special Revelation – the Gospel – is more effective. That is, they believe that those who hear the gospel are much more likely to respond positively" (RRB 316) and thus there is still a great need for evangelism. In further discussion of this theory, Kvanvig adds that "God sustains all persons for as long as necessary for them to come to

the point where they can make a rational, settled choice between God and nonexistence... [because] God is strongly committed to our rational freedom" (RRB 314). And in response to this, it can be said that while God assigns the blanket punishment for not putting your faith into Him and his Son, it is ultimately the nonbeliever who chooses to receive this punishment.

In conclusion, we as orthodox Christians strongly affirm Christianity as an exclusive religion. Therefore, those not faithfully believing Christ for who he was, is, and always will be (the Son of God who lived on earth, was crucified, and resurrected) are destined for the less desirable afterlife path (to hell) as opposed to those who put their faith in Christ being destined for the desirable afterlife path (to heaven). While it has been held in Christianity that whether or not a person has ever even heard the message of Christ one must accept the message of Christ in order to go to heaven, the rising theory is that God deals with people on an individual basis and ascertains their belief based on the facts they had before them.