

It's Up to You 2026 (Week 5) - How should Christians view other religions?

Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. We'll be taking two weeks to respond to this crucial question, one related to the public witness of Christianity and how we relate to other religions. While we can't talk about every relevant biblical text nor explore any other religions with any depth, we can construct a compass (which is different from a detailed map): a compass points to true north, and as such can tell you what direction to go and also which directions not to go, which makes a compass a trustworthy guide in any situation.
2. As we get into this question, it's important to realize that the earliest Christians, like so many global Christians today, have experience interacting with and living among other religions, often as a minority. We as Americans do not: 2/3s of Americans still identify as some kind of Christian, with the largest portion of the 1/3 who don't being "religiously unaffiliated." It is likely that most Americans have no meaningful firsthand experience with another religion, like Islam or Hinduism. For us, this question can be a theoretical exercise, often based on what we've heard from others or harmful stereotypes.
3. We will be tapping into resources from our own denomination, the PCUSA, to help us build this compass. Namely, small sections from two of our creeds (The Confession of 1967 and The Declaration of Faith from 1977) and a larger document from 2014 entitled the "Interreligious Stance of the PCUSA." (We'll send links to these documents in next week's Monday Memo.)
4. That PCUSA document from 2014 contains six "building blocks" that we can use to build a healthy view of other religions, as well as relationships with those who aren't Christians. We looked at building blocks #5 and #6 yesterday, which could be summarized as follows - "We should have humble modesty and unfinished conclusions about the work of God's Spirit, God's limitless grace, our own knowledge, human sin, and how God works in human lives."
5. We can offer three conclusions drawn from those two building blocks. The first is this - Western Christianity (European and North American) has not always interacted with other religions this way. In fact, we've often blurred the lines between our faith, our culture, and our desire to conquer and control. Ken Gnanakan, who is an Indian Christian educator, describes the hubris and negative effect of Western Christianity on his country as follows, a description that parallels the experience of many other African, Latin, and Asian countries: "Western Christian claims to ultimate religious superiority were taken for granted...Western Christians were known for presenting the Gospel condescendingly, with no respect or reference to our cultural context. It condemned and made judgmental pronouncements of the beliefs of those they intended to reach in the name of Christ. Jacques Dupuis, a Belgian priest who is an expert in the effect of Western Christianity on Majority World countries, writes more succinctly, 'Evangelism was confused with aggressive conquest or forcibly converting entire populations to Christianity.'"



6. A second conclusion follows from the first - a good number of us were formed and steeped in a version of Christianity that viewed other religions in a way that is precisely opposite to those building blocks: we were taught to assume God's absence in nonbelievers, not God's presence; we were told to emphasize God's judgment and anger toward them as sinners, not God's limitless grace; we assumed that everyone needed what we knew and that we didn't need any of what they did; we ended up being arrogant, not humble, and close-minded, not open.

7. Jim Baton is a longtime Christian missionary to the world's largest Muslim nation, Indonesia. He's written about what we can observe in the Gospels about Jesus' own interaction with those who didn't share His Jewish faith (such as a Canaanite woman with a sick daughter in [Matthew 15](#), a Samaritan leper in [Luke 17](#), and a Roman centurion in the beginning of [Luke 7](#)). Jesus didn't operate from the biases and prejudices of His own culture, He didn't give a theology lesson on how Jews were right and they were wrong, and He didn't warn them about the dangers of Hell. Instead, to quote Baton, "He simply loved them and praised both the good and the faith He saw in them." As He says to the Roman centurion, "Truly I tell you, in no one Israelite have I found such faith."

8. Scripture tells us that there are many universal truths that are common to our experience as human beings, whether we're Christian or not. In one masterful example, the apostle Paul while preaching in Athens touches on all these ([The Acts of the Apostles 17.23-31](#)): we are all God's children and we are all part of God's one human family; we all live, move, and have our being in God; we all search for God and fumble about hoping to find God; and God is not far from any of us.

9. A third conclusion we can draw tells us one of the specific ways we can come at other religions with humility and modesty, and this conclusion ties directly with something we find in The Confession of 1967. That creed tells us that when we encounter other religions, we will discover that Christianity is also a manmade religion and not to be confused with God's truths revealed in Christ. So often, as the creed says it, other religions are how God will call us as Christians to repentance and renewal. So, ironically enough, it's not us telling another religion how they're wrong, it's the other religion pointing the way for us to be better (and be better Christians).

10. In the 1980s, Sweden was in an uproar about the Mormons wanting to build a temple in Stockholm. Into that fray stepped the bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl. In his advocacy for the temple and religious freedom more generally, he came up with three rules that can guide how different faiths interact with one another, the third of which ties to what we find in The Confession of 1967 mentioned above: in his words, "We should leave room for holy envy, which is our willingness to reflect on the beauty and goodness in another religious tradition and to let that beauty shine a light on our own path." (His other two rules are 1) When you're trying to understand another religion, you should ask its adherents, not its enemies, and 2) Don't compare your best to their worst.)

A Prayer for the Week

We'll leave the usual resources for next week, that is, for after the second sermon on this question.

For this week, we'll just include this resolution/prayer that comes at the end of the PCUSA Interreligious Stance (2014), which also ended the sermon yesterday:

"We believe the Bible proclaims God's love for all people, that Christ's two great commandments sets the standard for all of our relationships: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'

We confess that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has sought to live up to its commitment to love people of other religious traditions, but many times we have not; with God's help we resolve to do better. Self-serving theologies and attitudes of superiority pull us apart; with God's help we resolve to do better; Some of our own confessions and previous perspectives have resulted in patterns of unhealthy relationships with people of other religions; with God's help we resolve to do better. We resolve to do better and not perpetuate divisive relationships among our neighbors and ourselves.

God calls us to have loving relationships with people of other religions. God calls us to approach others in a spirit of openness and trust as we follow Jesus Christ.

God calls us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to work with people of other religions for peace, justice, and the sustainability of creation.

We follow Christ's call to work for God's kingdom, knowing God will complete what we leave incomplete. To God be the glory, amen!