

CHOOSIN' MY RELIGION

by J.P. Moreland

J.P. Moreland shows how to make a non-arbitrary choice about one's religion.

True for You but Not for Me

"Hey, I gotta question!" yelled a student from the back of the room. I was sharing the claims of Christ at a University of Massachusetts fraternity house when he interrupted me. "Yes, what is it?" I queried. "I think Jesus is great for you, but I know Buddhists and Muslims, and they're just as sincere as you are. And they think their views are true just like you do. There's no way a person can know his religion is the 'right' one, so the best thing to do is to just believe everyone's religion is true for them and not judge anyone."

Ever heard something like this? It's hard to believe you haven't. What should we make of these ideas? How should we respond? I think there is a good response to this viewpoint and I hope to provide it in what follows. But before I do, we should carefully note what seems to underlie such a claim. The student was assuming that there are no objective principles that, if applied to one's religious quest, would help one make the best, most rational choice of religious options. In the absence of such principles, any choice is either purely arbitrary or totally based on emotion or upbringing. In either case, such a choice would in no way put a person in a position to judge someone else's choice as being wrong.

Are there objective principles to guide one in choosing a religion? Indeed there are. I believe the following four principles should be used to guide one in choosing which religion he or she will follow and, if properly applied, I believe they will point to Christianity as the most rational choice.

Facts About Creation

Principle 1: A religion's concept of God should harmonize with what we can know about God from creation.¹

I will not develop the argument here - I want you to look into the matter yourself - but a powerful intellectual case can be made from facts about the creation that a single personal God exists.² This case claims that the existence of one personal God is the best explanation for (1) the existence and beginning of a finite universe, (2) the beauty and order of the universe, including the existence of biological information, (3) the existence of finite minds such as our own, and (4) the existence of objective moral law and the equality of human rights.

Please note that Principle 1 points to monotheism, not because the Bible requires it, but because monotheism is the best explanation of these facts about creation. Principle 1 leaves Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the running.

Miracles

Principle 2: An adequate explanation of a religion's origin and success should have to appeal to divine activity.

One should not be able to explain a religion's origin and success simply as a result of brilliant human insight or philosophical wisdom. As important as these factors are, by themselves they do not indicate whether the religion is a human invention or a divinely sanctioned revelation. For example, Mohammed claimed that he received most of the Koran in a cave. Clearly, there is nothing about this aspect of the origins of Islam that escapes naturalistic explanation.

By contrast, at least two factors indicate that Christianity has supernatural origins. First, there is fulfilled prophecy. Jesus fulfilled numerous centuries-old prophecies and this fact cannot simply be the result of human wisdom. Such a fact defies naturalistic explanation. Again, I will not develop the argument here, but one should familiarize oneself with some of the Old Testament prophecies Jesus fulfilled, along with the evidence that he really did fulfill them.³ Second, based on the historical evidence that the New Testament documents are reliable, one can argue that Christianity is based on real miracles done by Jesus and his disciples, including his resurrection from the dead.⁴

If Jesus really fulfilled numerous prophecies, and if he really performed miracles and rose from the dead like the New Testament claims, then we need supernatural explanations for the origins and continued success of the Christian faith in a way that we do not need them to explain the origins of Islam and other world religions.

I believe Principle 2 leaves only Christianity and Judaism in the running.

The Human Condition

Principle 3: A religion's diagnosis of and solution for the human condition should be more profound than its rivals.

A student of mine came from India to study at Talbot School of Theology. Having been raised a Hindu, he began an intense search for religious truth as a teenager. His search led him to study the religious texts of the world's leading religions. His search also led him to Jesus Christ. Why? He said that, by comparison, the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament towered over the others for their depth, profundity and power. While all religions have some truth in them, one should choose a religion that does the best job of diagnosing what is wrong with human beings and how their condition can be solved.

When one does a cross-cultural study of the human condition, one finds the following universal human experiences and desires: All humans (1) experience threefold alienation- they feel alienated from God, from other people (including those they love), and from themselves; (2) experience deep and abiding shame and guilt; (3) desire personal life after death in which their loves and ideals may continue to be a part of their experience; (4) desire that their individual lives have meaning and purpose; (5) desire a life of beauty and drama, to be a part of something big and important, to be part of the struggle between good and evil, and (6) experience the need for help and empowerment to live a life of virtue and character.

I believe that if one carefully compares the New Testament with other religious approaches (including atheism), like my student, one will discover that the religion of Jesus of Nazareth provides the deepest, most penetrating analysis of these six factors, along with the richest solution to these longings of the human heart.

Principle 3 points straight to Christianity.

Jesus

Principle 4: pick a religion in which one gets all of Jesus and not just a watered-down, distorted part of him.

This principle may seem to stack the deck in favor of Christianity, so let me explain. Have you noticed that all religions, including some sects of Judaism, want to claim Jesus as one of their own? For New Agers, he is a channeler, for Muslims he is the greatest prophet, and so on. Now why is this so? I believe this is because Jesus is easily recognized as the greatest figure in human history. Given that most people do not want to line up against Jesus, why not pick a religion that has the best chance of presenting an accurate account of who he really was, what he actually did, and what he really taught?

Find Out for Yourself

To review, I believe Principle 1 limits the choices to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Principle 2 limits the choices to Judaism and Christianity, and Principles 3 and 4 point directly to Christianity itself. But don't take my word for it. I have refrained from including the arguments here so that you can find out where these principles lead.

If you agree that they are good principles for selecting a religion - and what makes them good is an interesting question in its own right - then start reading and studying so you can fill in the gaps I've left here. If you do this, not only will you gain a greater understanding of your own faith, you will be able to help people see that choosing one's religion need not be an arbitrary step in the dark.

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¹ Some readers will object that all we can know about God is what he has revealed to us through the Bible. The Bible, however, makes it clear that, from creation alone, even those who have never read the Bible should know certain things about God (Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:18-23). This means that when one begins to search for God by reading the various "Holy Books" of different religious traditions, one does not begin with a blank slate. One has the opportunity to "read a book" - the book of creation - every day of one's life before one picks up the Bible, the Koran or anything else.

² For a good place to start learning how to make this case, see Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, eds., *To Everyone an Answer* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

³ See Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), chapter 10.

⁴ Strobel, *The Case for Christ*.

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