

September 11, 2016

World Religions

Responding to World Religions

Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11

Opening words: Several years ago, I began studying my family tree. I hoped to discover some person of note. I hoped to discover some great inventor or author. Perhaps, I would discover some great soldier or politician. I found no such person. Instead, I found hard working farmers from northeast Ohio. My grandfather, Roger Adams, was the first in the family to leave the farm and graduate from high school. My father, Ronald Adams, was the first one in the family to study beyond high school. I was the first one in the family to get a Master's Degree. My daughter, Anna, is the first in the family to specialize beyond a Master's Degree.

As I thought about my family tree, I was reminded of how much our world has changed. I am sure my great-grandfather, Eli Adams, never met a single person who wasn't of the Christian faith. I am equally confident my granddaughter, Pippa, will know many who aren't Christian. Our society has changed. The issue is no longer if we can tolerate other branches of the Christian faith. The issue now is, how we will tolerate other world religions. In the past, parents worried about their Protestant children marrying a Roman Catholic. How would you feel if your child married a Muslim or a Hindu? Our world has become extremely complex.

Today, I begin a new six-part sermon series called *World Religions*. It is the same theme I covered ten years ago. That time I called it *Christianity and World Religions*. I have returned to this topic because it has not grown stale. Christianity does not live in isolation. It stands next to the other four major world religions. Over the next five weeks, I am going to look at each one. However, my goal is not just to educate you. My goal is more ambitious. I want you to appreciate the uniqueness of our faith. Today is an overview of what is to come. Let me call this message *Responding to World Religions*.

Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

How many of you remember the name Abu Hamza? He is an Egyptian born cleric, who at one time was the Iman of London's Finsbury Park Mosque. His words were not filled with love and forgiveness. His words fed terrorism. He taught his followers that Adolph Hitler came into the world to punish the Jews. He taught his followers to fight for Allah and kill non-Muslims. Because of his words, he was arrested in 2004 by the British government. In 2006, he was found guilty of inciting violence, and sentenced to seven years in prison. In 2012, he was extradited to the United States to face terrorism charges. Once again, he was found guilty and is now serving a life sentence. Abu Hamza responded to other world religions with violence. This is my question for you. How do you respond to other world religions? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

We begin this sermon series in the second chapter of Matthew. We are comfortable with these words because we visit them annually. It is the story of the Magi. To the Christian world, the Magi symbolize the season of Epiphany. It is the season we celebrate the divine truth: Christ came to save everyone. Today, however, they symbolize something different. Today, as we begin this sermon series, they remind us that our world is filled with many religions. Who exactly were the Magi? In Jesus's time, the term 'Magi' was used in a variety of ways. In some ancient writings the term Magi can mean a magician or an astrologer. Many believe the Magi in the scripture lesson for today were Zoroastrian priests. The Zoroastrian religion still exists. It is monotheistic and understands the world as a great struggle between good and evil. Do me a favor: look at the story one more time with me. In our reading, there are three religions represented. There is the two-year-old Jesus. You have heard of him. He was the greatest life who ever lived. He is our Lord and Savior. He represents Christianity. There is Mary and Joseph. They took the baby Jesus to the temple and fulfilled the law. That was when they met Simeon and Anna. They represent Judaism. There are the Magi, the Zoroastrian priests. Today's story is a collision of three religions; Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. It was true from the very beginning - Christianity has never been, and it never will be, isolated. From the very beginning, Christianity existed in the middle of a crowd. From the very beginning, Christianity has been forced to answer our question for today; how do you respond to other world religions?

The question, how do you respond to other world religions, isn't going to go away. Today, the question, how do you respond to other world religions, demands an answer. Let me state the obvious. Our world is forcing us to answer the question. Our world has changed. We used to live in a very large world, but no longer. Due to modern transportation, communication and electronics, our world has grown very small. The answer to the question, how do you respond to other world religions, depends on who you ask. There may be as many answers as there are people.

Wake Up!

Ask some people the question, how do you respond to other world religions, and they will tell you to wake up. The numbers don't lie. According to the world population clock, there are approximately 7.4 billion people in the world. Of that 7.4 billion people,

2.2 billion are Christian, or 31.5%. Of the 7.4 billion people, 1.6 billion are Muslim, or 22.32%. There are approximately 1.1 billion people who are agnostic and atheists. The basic numbers tell us to wake up! If Christians make up 31.5% of the world's population, then 68.5% of the world's population is non-Christian. That means by definition, we are a minority in the world. Have you ever considered yourself a minority? If things continue at the present pace, we may be a minority in America someday.

What do the numbers say about America? When I looked at this topic ten years ago, 77% of Americans were Christians. According to the most recent Pew Research, that 77% has dropped to 70.6% of Americans who say they are Christian. That means 29.4% of Americans aren't Christian. For now, we have the majority, but the times are changing. Over the past twenty years, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism have grown 110%, 170% and 230% respectively. I find those numbers disturbing. Some will tell you the best way to respond to world religions is to wake up. Not only is the face of America changing, but the beliefs of Americans are changing. World religions are not just in the world. World religions are in America. If all those numbers bother you, then say, "**Amen!**"

Show Up!

Ask some people the question, how do you respond to other world religions, and they will tell you to look at the scriptures. In the text for today, the Magi made a false assumption. They assumed the newborn king would be born in the palace. They were wrong! You remember! The newborn king was born in a barn. When they finally found him, the text says they bowed down and worshipped him. Then, as the text says, they opened their treasure. Ask any Sunday school student and they will tell you what they brought to the newborn king. They brought gold, incense and myrrh. Those were odd gifts for a baby. Gold was a great gift for a king. Incense was a great gift for a priest. Myrrh was a great gift for one who was preparing to die. Remember two things about the gifts. They summarized Jesus's purpose, and they were very expensive. The Magi didn't just show up. The Magi were generous and their generosity revealed their sincerity.

Ask some people the question, how do you respond to other world religions, and they will tell you to show up. Showing up and responding to human needs is vital when responding to other world religions because it shows the world that we are sincere. It shows them Jesus has made a difference in our lives. The church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of her non-members. The Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, said it best. He said, "*Go into the world and preach the gospel and use words only when absolutely necessary.*" I am proud of the history of our denomination because time and time again we have shown up generously.

Several years ago, I was in Russia on a Volunteer in Missions trip. We were staying in an orphanage near St. Petersburg. When I got up the very first morning, the first thing

I wanted to do was take a shower. I slipped on a pair of pants and grabbed my items for the shower, soap, shampoo and a towel. I didn't really know where to go, so I wandered down the hall past groups of excited children. I was the first American they had ever seen. (They were impressed with my bed head 😊.) An aide at the orphanage saw me with my soap, towel and shampoo. She smiled at me and revealed her gold tooth, and motioned for me to follow her. We pressed through all the children and walked down a dark, foul-smelling hall. I didn't know where we were going. I thought, this is where it all ends. When we came to a certain door, she opened it and motioned for me to go in. It was the shower room. I was shocked. It stood in direct contrast to the rest of the orphanage. The rest of the building was cold, damp and lifeless. The shower room was bright and cheery. When I was done showering, I looked for something to eat. I walked into kitchen and met our translator. My hair was still wet, so I said to her, "The shower is great! Who renovated it for the children?" Not knowing who I was or what I did, she responded, "The United Methodist Church." From that moment on, I have never felt like our apportionment dollars were wasted. At that moment, I was proud to be a United Methodist. We respond to basic human needs. We showed up. How do you respond to other world religions? There is no single correct answer. Some will tell you to wake up. Others will tell you to show up. Our world is filled with human needs. Where is God calling you to show up? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Speak Up!

If you ask me the question, how do you respond to other world religions, I will tell you to speak up. In other words, are you able to tell people who Jesus was? Are you able to tell people what Jesus did? Are you able to tell people what Jesus means to you? Long-time professor at Dallas Theological Seminary Howard Hendricks once said, *"In the middle of a generation screaming for answers, Christians are stuttering."* Is anyone here stuttering? You can't tell people who Jesus was, but you can tell people about the latest fundraiser. You can't tell people what Jesus did, but you can recite church rules. You can't tell people what Jesus means to you, but you are able to express your opinions about any church topic. In dealing with other world religions, this is the bottom line: If we don't know Jesus, then we don't know anything.

When Kathryn was at the university, she organized annual trips to Washington DC. I went on most. I would go for three reasons. First, I would act as a chaperone. Second, I would drive one of the vans. Third, I love Washington DC. If you haven't been to Washington DC since the fifth grade, you need to go back. It is filled with energy and history. Those groups were generally made up of international students. Some were Asian. Some were from Africa. Some were from the Middle East. Some were from India and Eastern Europe. They were great. Each student was extremely bright and knew a surprising amount of American history. We visited the same sites annually. We would visit Union Station and the Capitol Building the first night. The next day we traveled to all the memorials and museums. We would go to Arlington National Cemetery and go to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. We would go to the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam

War Memorial and the Korean War Memorial. After visiting the World War II Memorial, we would go the White House. They were great trips and each one ended the same way.

On the morning of the last day, we went to the National Cathedral. It is one of Washington DC's best kept secrets. Built with private funds, it is an Episcopal Church. It is extremely high church and is decorated for the various liturgical seasons. We usually went during the spring, so it was decorated for Lent. The international students were impressed with the structure and curious about the symbolism. One year, I walked around with a student from the Middle East. He admitted, he had heard about Jesus many times in his Muslim home but knew very little about him. I said, Jesus was God incarnate. I said, Jesus healed many people's afflictions. I said, Jesus expects us to love and forgive others. I said, Jesus never committed a single sin, making him the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. I said, Jesus was executed on a Friday but was resurrected on a Sunday. I said, all we have to do to go to heaven is believe in Jesus. I said, we are saved by grace. The young man listened as I talked and responded with these words, "This Jesus was a good man." I answered, "No! Jesus was a great man!" If you believe Jesus was a great man, then say, "**Amen!**" How do you respond to the other world religions? Why don't you just tell someone what Jesus has done for you? All others are secondary to him.

Will you pray with me?