

You may have heard people say things like, “All religions are one,” or, “Every path leads to the same place.” This is a very popular view today. It’s a great way to try to avoid any risk of conflict with those whose beliefs differ from our own. After all, if all religions are essentially the same, and it doesn’t really matter what we believe, then there is no reason to risk talking about religion in such a way that it could possibly lead to any conflict. I often hear this sentiment expressed by people as though they’ve made the discovery that will finally lead to world peace.

Although this idea has been almost universally adopted by the post-modern generations, and those who hold it feel as though they’ve thrown off some terrible tyranny of the past generations, it is not really a new idea at all. In 1788, William Blake published a defense of the statement that all religions are one. You can even find elements of this line of thought in Greek philosophy.

The argument for this point of view is that religion is the human attempt to approach God. It is our attempt at knowing and understanding God and the basic principles by which the universe operates. Since no one can prove that their god is the true God with mathematical certainty, every religion may have a part of the truth about God, but no one can say that they truly know God.

This point of view treats religion as a field of philosophy. Religion provides an ethical system, and we can draw on the elements that are common to all religions. Most of the people who hold to this point of view would say that all religions teach mutual respect, and love, and charity. Others will point to religion and its quest for truth and meaning. It deals with questions like, “Where did we come from?” and, “Why are we here?” and, “Where are we going?” In such a view of religion, God is an ideal that we seek to discover and put into practice.

All of this may sound very nice. Among those who adhere to this point of view, there is probably little conflict over religious beliefs. It sounds very humble. If I say that my statements about God are no more certain than any other statements about God, I sound much more humble than if I say that I know something about God that is true, and statements that contradict these are not true.

The statement that all religions are really one, that they all lead to the same place, sounds nice. It has the appearance of humility. But is it true? What if the Christian religion is something different? What if it is something more than human attempts to know something about God and the principles by which the universe operates?

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name. It is the commemoration of the day that Jesus was presented in the Temple, and named by his parents, Joseph and Mary. We know the back story, and so know that the name was not chosen by Jesus’ step father, Joseph. Rather, the name Jesus was chosen by his Father in heaven.

There are a couple of points that need to be brought out about the Feast of the Holy Name. The first is the Hebrew concept of a name. The name of a person is much deeper than a designation by which a person is known. A person’s name says something about their nature. It

says something about their character. It describes them as a person.

When God the Father gave a name to His incarnate Son, He was describing who the Son was in personal terms. One of the dangers of religion is that it can quickly turn into a quest for ideas, a quest for principles, or a quest for ethics. When we remember that God the Son came as a person with a name, we are invited to turn to something much deeper than a set of propositions. We are invited to enter into a relationship with a person.

If religion is just about finding right principles, then how we get there is less important. If, however, religion is about a relationship with a person, then the only way to get there is with that person. Imagine going home this afternoon and telling your spouse that, what really matters about marriage is getting to your 50th wedding anniversary. It does not matter with whom you get there, just so long as you get there. What do you think the chances of getting there would be?

The important thing about marriage is not the anniversaries. The important thing about marriage is the relationship. The important thing about the Christian faith is not arriving at a certain set of propositions. The propositions tell us about the God to whom we relate. The ethics and principles grow out of that relationship, but without the relationship our religion is dead.

So, celebrating the Feast of the Holy Name reminds us that our God is a personal God who invites us to have a relationship with Himself through His incarnate Son whom He named Jesus. To know Jesus is to know God. To accept Jesus is to accept God. To reject Jesus is to reject God.

The second thing that we should note is the name that the Father gave to His incarnate Son. His name is Jesus. In Hebrew it would be Yeshua. Remember, in Hebrew culture, the name of a person reveals their character. The name, Yeshua, means YHWH is salvation. When the angel appeared to Joseph to tell him that the child Mary was carrying was from the Holy Spirit, the angel of the Lord said, “You shall name him Jesus (Yeshua), for he will save his people from their sins.”

The problem is not that we do not know the correct principles of the universe. The problem is not that we need an ethical system. The problem is that we have been alienated from God by our sins. When the Lord appeared to Moses, he said that he would not leave the guilty unpunished, but would visit the sins of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation. I won't ask if you have sinned, but did your parents ever sin? How about your grandparents?

If the problem were just ethics, any religion that taught right ethics could get us to the right place. Because the problem is alienation brought about by sin, what we need is not so much a teacher as a reconciler. The name given to Jesus by his Father tells us that he is the one to reconcile us to God.

Through Jesus, we can know the one true God. He revealed Himself personally through His Son. Through Jesus, we can be reconciled to the one true God. He reconciled us to Himself

through the person of His Son.

So, where does this leave us? First, we need to accept the relationship that is offered to us in the person of Jesus Christ. We do this as we pray to Him, as we read the words he spoke, as we ask him what he has to say to us in our daily activities. Second, we must approach this with humility. It is a humility that says we could not have found God on our own. We needed His self-revelation. It is a humility that shares the truth of the gospel in love, not in arrogance, not with an elitist pride, but in genuine love. If we do not love, then it is better to be silent. Finally, we need to remember that true religion is about God's work in us, not about our works. It is about God reaching to us, not us grasping God. It is about God revealing Himself in His word, but most of all in His Word made flesh, Jesus our savior.