

Book Review/Response: *The Bible and Other Faiths*

In our global milieu, we live in a “world of religions,” and increasingly, Christians are confronted with how to relate to these religions. Ida Glaser approaches these issues with clarity and authenticity in her book *The Bible and Other Faiths: Christian Responsibility in a World of Religions*. As a Jewish Christian who reaches out to Muslims, Glaser has personal experience in how crucial and delicate these matters can be. With an important contribution to Christian theology, Glaser helps Christians distinguish between primary and secondary questions, focusing believers on what we can genuinely know and cannot know from Scripture. In other words, *The Bible and Other Faiths* is an in-depth look at how the Bible speaks to our personal interaction with people from other faiths.

In the first chapter, Glaser separates interfaith questions into two categories. On one hand, there are externally-focused questions that focus on judging other people: Are people from other religions saved? Is Jesus the only way to know God? Do other religions consist of any truth? These questions often dominate our religious dialogue, but Glaser argues that these questions may not be the “right questions.” (13) While this is somewhat controversial, especially for conservative Christians, Glaser says that these questions should be secondary to more pressing concerns.

According to Glaser, there is a second set of questions that “focuses on other people’s welfare and our own responsibility,” and it is upon these questions that she primarily focuses. (13) What is God doing among people of other religions? What does God require of us in response? How should we respond to other religions? And how do we apply the great commission and the great commandments to our interfaith context? Certainly these kinds of questions are related to the first kind, but this second set is more “urgent” in the sense that they affect our actual relationships with people.

Developing this further, the author outlines three major approaches to interfaith relations – or more specifically, how Jesus applies to other religions. These can be generally understood as

exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. An *exclusivist* holds that salvation comes through explicit faith in Christ alone; that God only offers special revelation through Israel, Christ and the Bible; and that Christ is Jesus of Nazareth. In light of its exclusive claims, exclusivism strongly emphasizes our personal need to spread the message of Christ. Without this message – and an affirmation of a particular doctrinal truth – a person will necessarily go to Hell.

An *inclusivist* allows for “anonymous Christians” from other religions because salvation is through Christ, but not necessarily explicitly. It is possible for a spiritual seeker to find Christ, even if they meet him through another religion or know him by another name. Special revelation can be found apart from Christ and Scripture, including the possibility of finding some truth in the sacred texts of other religions. The Christ who saves is visible in the person of Jesus, but is not limited to him. This perspective emphasizes the sovereignty of God and an individual’s response to the Holy Spirit more so than evangelism efforts.

A *pluralist* believes that salvation is available through all faiths, whether by denying the inconsistency of these religions or by diminishing the significance of such contradictions. Christ is “cosmic” in that He is merely one option among several. All religion, including Christianity, is humankind’s response to the transcendent. There may be mistakes within a particular religious system, but these are to be expected. For a pluralist, what truly matters is not doctrinal correctness, but a genuine response of faith to the transcendent God, whoever that God may be.

While Glaser does not express a particular view, she persuasively illustrates how each camp interprets and omits Bible passages in order to support their respective presuppositions. John 14:6, for example, can be read through the lens of an exclusivist, inclusivist, or a pluralist. An exclusivist would read this verse loudly and emphasize the word “the” in the English translation. An inclusivist would agree that Jesus is the only way, but would recognize the possibility that Jesus could be the only way,

the only truth, and the only life in an indirect way. A pluralist, though uncomfortable with such a verse, would point out that this was true *at that time and for those people*, but does not necessarily apply to all cultures and contexts today.

While this may be troubling for some, Glaser shows the importance of interpreting biblical texts within their literary context. Her approach involves reading John 14:6 in light of John's prologue in chapter one. As she does so – at least in my reading – she disqualifies the pluralist, weakens the exclusivist, and validates the inclusivist. This passage does not solve all of the issues that we might have hoped. However, by reading a passage within its broader context, we are more likely to see how Scripture was intended to be read. Rather than taking a verse out of context for our religious, and often violent purposes, it is essential that we read Scripture with caution and humility.

The book addresses many other important issues, but at its core, focuses on the Bible itself and what *it* has to say about other religions. Personally, I found this fascinating. If nothing else, *The Bible and Other Faiths* is worth reading for its helpful summary of Genesis.

Regarding the Old Testament, Glaser discusses the Pentateuch, historical books, wisdom literature, and considers their broader cultural context. While all of this was very intriguing, most significant may be her comments about the Tower of Babel and Abraham. She argues that Abraham may have originally known Yahweh as "El" from Canaanite religion, and that the Israelites gradually came to the awareness that their God was unlike the other gods that surrounded them. This of course, seems to suggest that people from other religions could gradually come to know God through God's special intervention.

Concerning the New Testament, Glaser shows that other faiths were frequently present in the Gospels and Acts. The Parable of the Good Samaritan becomes much more poignant when you consider that the Samaritans were idolaters in the eyes of the Jews. Likewise, the fact that Cornelius' prayers are

heard by God should sober us as we consider seekers from other religions. While Glaser recognizes that specific religious systems are not addressed, she proves that the New Testament can provide more instruction than we might originally think – not so much in terms of philosophical argument, but in terms of loving others into the Kingdom of God.

In the final chapter, the author returns to her initial proposal that some questions are more important than others. In her view, in which she admits her own uncertainty, we cannot answer all of the questions with absolute certainty. The Bible was not intended to tell us everything that we *want* to know, but everything that we *need* to know – or what God wanted to make clear to us. Thus, as surprising as it may be, she does not state whether the Bible is exclusive, inclusive, or pluralist in its claims – for as she says, the Bible was not written with those categories in mind. For many, Glaser's epistemic humility will be refreshing, while others may become frustrated.

As summarized in the final chapter, one of the main messages of the book is that our responsibility to other religions is not always clear. However, we should continually search Scripture for guidance. Rather than making blanket statements about religions like Buddhism or Islam, the Bible provides us with insights of how to relate to individuals within different traditions. Scripture does not offer a systematic approach to non-Christians, but reorients our lives, so that we can minister more effectively to the diverse peoples that we meet amongst the many world religions today. That is to say, Scripture is more focused on people than systems.

It is important to recognize our ignorance when it comes to the Bible's silence, and likewise, we must recognize our own inability to convert others to Christianity. It is better to focus on our own response, so that we can be faithful to God's call and eventually lead others to the truth of the gospel. Because even though we do not know all of the answers to all of our questions, it is still necessary to reach out to all people in all parts of the world, regardless of who or where they may be.

For the most part, I agree with Glaser's position, and I share many of her concerns. However, I wonder how far we can separate the two kinds of questions that she discusses at the beginning and end of her book. Granting that there is a difference between extrospective and introspective questions, a reader should question how different these questions really are. And since most of the book is founded upon this dichotomy, this is an important issue to raise. Glaser herself admits that the two are "related," but they may be more related than her book seems to suggest. (13)

My primary concern is that she does not answer a fundamental question that many Christians currently struggle with – namely, is Jesus exclusive or inclusive? To illustrate this point, *The Bible and Other Faiths* teaches Christians how to interact with other faiths on a daily basis, but what happens when someone from another faith asks us an either-or question? Do we tell that person that we do not know, that Jesus is exclusive, or that Jesus is inclusive? Unfortunately, this book does help in that regard. While it helps *us* become more charitable, it does not help *others* by providing them with an objective answer.

Even with this omission, however, Glaser offers great wisdom, and many Christians can benefit from reading this book. I found the book encouraging, instructive, and inspiring. Even though not all of my questions were resolved, a book like this that inspires further thought and investigation is definitely worth reading and re-reading. Most importantly, *The Bible and Other Faiths* focused my eyes on Scripture and challenged me to further search the text. I was also motivated to search my own heart and to explore how God wants me to interact with people from other world religions.