

Living as Christians in Religiously Diverse Singapore

Engaging Religious Diversity and Pluralism

Key Questions

- Living within environments of religious diversity, we need to ask a basic question: given the many choices, why should someone be a Christian?
- Sociologist Peter Berger states: “We do have a problem of belief, and it not only raises the question of why we should believe in God but why we should believe in *this* God”? (Berger 1992, 146-47)
- Is it true that social harmony can only be achieved and maintained if religious followers refrain from making exclusive truth claims?
- How are Christians to live and witness to Christ in religiously diverse Singapore?

Religious Diversity in Singapore

- Buddhist: 40% (1.95m)
- Non-religious: 18% (873k)
- Christians: 18% (780k)
- Muslims: 14% (673k)
- Chinese: 7% (339k)
- Hindu: 4.1% (198k)
- Sikh: 0.5% (24k)
- Bahai: 0.1% (4.8k)
- **Migrant workers: 37% (1.42m)**

Religious Pluralism in Singapore

- In “Seeing Religion with New Eyes at the Asian Civilisations Museum,” Karen Chin writes:
- “In Asia and even in cosmopolitan Singapore, religion still plays a major role in national affairs as well as in the everyday lives of many ordinary people. Singapore is a secular state with a multifaith and multi-ethnic showcase. The plurality of cultures, religions, races, and origins still has a significant impact on state matters such as the school curriculum, citizenship education, and preservation of traditional cultures...”
- “Studies raised many questions and offered numerous possibilities for our museum educators to help visitors see religion with new eyes, not as exclusive sets of beliefs but an ecosystem of diverse ideas bound by rich civilizations that are connected by centuries of trade and cultural exchange” (Chin 2015, 192)
- What is religious pluralism?

Introducing Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism is a discipline that claims all religions are equally valid paths to God or a reality. No single religion can claim to have the final word of truth

On rejecting religious exclusivism: John Hick writes, "If exclusivism were true, one would expect empirical evidence to confirm it. For example, the true religion would be more efficient at producing saints. But this obviously is not the case" (*An Interpretation of Religion* 1989, 307; *God Has Many Names* 1980)



Pluralists Reject Christ as the Only Way to God

- Fact of religious diversity around the globe
- Correlation between ethnicity and religion
- Lack of Christian missionary success
- All religions are similar in that they teach people to be good
- Religious exclusivity is harmful to global peace

John Hick's Model of Religious Pluralism

- There is a religious ultimate reality—what Hick calls “the Real”—to which the major religions are all legitimate responses
- Religions are historically and culturally conditioned interpretations of this divine reality
- Salvation/enlightenment/liberation is understood as the moral transformation of people from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness

Hick's Thesis

- “The great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological spaces within which, or ways along which, men and women find salvation or liberation or enlightenment” (*An Interpretation of Religion* 1989, 240)

Conflicting Religious Truth Claims

- Muslims believe there is only one creator God—Allah
- The universal problem is that people fail to submit to Allah, producing evil and suffering
- Muslims believe that people die, they face judgment
- Hindus believe in Brahma, an impersonal reality in everything and there are millions of deities
- Hindus claim that the universal problem is samsara—the endless cycle of birth and rebirth
- Hindus believe in reincarnation into different forms
- Christians believe salvation involves being released from the bondage of sin and death

Conflicting Religious Truth Claims

- World religions manifest doctrinal or competing truth claims
- Hick overstates religious resemblances and over-simplifies their differences
- Religious pluralism is actually a form of imperialism or exclusivism
- Disregards the historical factuality among religions

Do All Religions Lead to God?

- For Christians, God has revealed himself to all people at all time through general revelation
- Paul writes: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Rom 1:20)
- God’s grace is evident in every culture. He has not left himself without a witness
- But this does not mean religions are “ways of salvation,” though this is implied in the Roman Catholic statement, *Nostra Aetate*

Christian Witness amid Religious Diversity

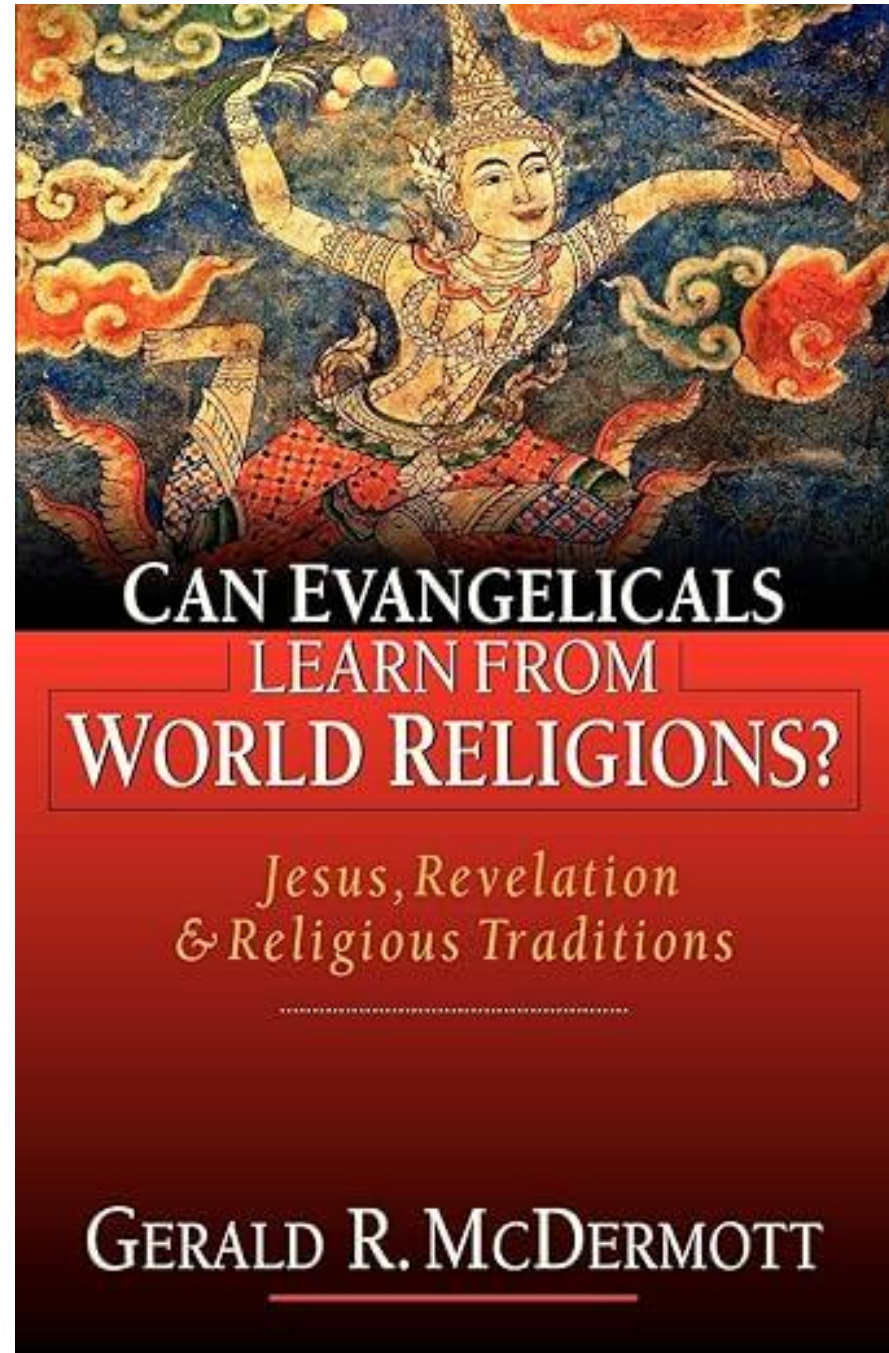
- Bearing witness to the gospel is not an option
- The Cape Town Commitment states, “We remain committed to the task of bearing worldwide witness to Jesus Christ and all his teachings” (www.lausanne.org)
- Christians are to bear witness in accordance with God’s love
- Christians believe that God is the source of all love and they are called to live lives of love and to love their neighbours as themselves
- Christian witness must be respectful of others and conducted with humility in a multi-religious environment (Gal 5:22)
- Christians should include appropriate forms of interreligious dialogue

Christian Interaction with Religious Others

- Where do Christians draw the line, if at all, when it comes to participating in the religious rituals of other religions?
- How should Christians respond to invitation to participate in community functions, where members of other religions are present, so as to foster community cohesion?
- How do Christians determine what is cultural and what is religious?
- In what ways can Christians cooperate with followers of other faiths to promote common good?
- How should evangelism be carried out in a multi-religious society like Singapore?

Further Reading

“This book addresses the problem of truth and revelation, and takes seriously the normative claims of other traditions. It explores the biblical teaching that Jesus is the light that enlightens every person (Jn 1:9) and that God has not left himself without a witness among non-Christian traditions”
(McDermott 2002, 39)



Discussion Questions

- In your opinion, what would convince you that a religion is true?
Why?
- How do you know that Christianity is the one true religion?