
“Do we need God in the 21st century?”
A Christian perspective given at the interfaith symposium on
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

I'd like to start by thanking our hosts, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, for inviting me to speak today, for their organizing this event, and providing refreshments.

It's only slightly daunting to be asked to represent a Christian perspective. Particularly since there are over 38,000 Christian denominations around the world. Current estimates are that 33% of the world identify themselves as Christian. That is approximately 2.5 billion people. And is it possible for 2.5 billion people to agree on everything? Is it possible for 2.5 billion people to agree on anything? In any case, the “Christian perspective” is many different perspectives. Some of these perspectives are quite similar to each other, but some are glaringly different, and even opposed to each other. I will try to honour that diversity within the Christian community in my reflection. And I will fail.

The question we have been asked to address is, “Do we need God in the 21st century?” I have a simple answer to that question. But after I give my simple answer, I get another 12 minutes to explain it, right? And my simple answer is that we do need God today - but only if we pick the right God. Don't worry, I don't mean my God as opposed to your God or any other God(s). I mean something much deeper than that, that I hope all of us can relate to. And I need 12 minutes to explain it.

I want to begin by reminding ourselves that God is not physically apparent, and so everyone who thinks about God creates an image of God in their own mind. And we just hope that the image of God in our own mind adequately resembles God. We do not all hold the same image of God. Let me share a story. In my work as a Christian minister, I used to visit people in prison. Often, our conversations would not directly speak about God, but sometimes an inmate would say to me, “I don't believe in God”. And with an opening like that, I always responded saying, “tell me about this God you don't believe in.” What followed was usually a long description that was not very complimentary, describing a God who was mean, vindictive, controlling, a murderer, racist, and other

labels I don't really want to mention here. And when the inmate was finished, I would respond, "I don't believe in that God either". And then, the inmate and I would share other images of God. We would share images of God based not on tradition, not on knowing what the "right" answer is supposed to be, but images of God based on how we perceive divine presence in our own lives through love.

Christians do not all carry the same images of God, and the images of God that we carry with us can have a great impact on our lives and those around us. Christianity has been around for almost 2000 years, and sometimes Christians have held images of God that were very destructive. Images of God that I'm sorry to say still exist today in Christianity, but I do believe that Christianity is slowly evolving away from these images of God. Images of God that are completely human in origin and do not actually speak of God at all.

For example, one image of God saw Christianity as superior to other faith traditions and that led to the Christian Crusades, where Christian marauders attacked the "Holy Land" to - in their words - "bring it back to God". Looking back of course, the Holy Land was already in good hands at the time, being tended so well by our Muslim brothers and sisters. But in the year 1095, the Christian church used a tribal, hateful, and racist image of God to encourage Christians to invade and slaughter Muslims and others. Today of course we are doing much better at learning from people of other faiths, who have much to teach us about many things, including God.

A similar very human and racist image of God was used by European settlers when they came to North America, and slaughtered much of the indigenous population. This was largely done for financial reasons of course, but the excuse given involved the use of an image of God that declared - at that time - that aboriginal spiritual practices were meaningless, and that Europeans, as "God's chosen people" were destined to dominate North America, a concept known as "manifest destiny". Looking back of course, these actions were horrific and wrong. Our governments and churches are still in the process of apologizing for that disastrous phase in the history of Christianity. Moreover, we are now - slowly - learning to appreciate the gifts of aboriginal spirituality.

I could say a lot more about historical Christian images of God that are now seen

as destructive, and at their core, reflections not of any God, but rather reflections of some of the lowest aspects of human nature including hatred, fear, and a sense of being “God’s chosen people”. But I think I’ve made my point, which is that the image of God that we hold makes a big difference. But just before we leave behind those destructive images of God I realize that some of you must be wondering where those images even came from and why they persist today. They came from Christian Scripture. Christians - even though we all use the same book called “The Bible”, read that book in different ways, and therefore we extract different teachings from it. Some Christians - I’m sorry to say - read it with a lens of fear and bigotry and therefore read from the Bible images of a very human God of war and hatred. This idea has been captured in a bumper sticker that says, “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people that you do”¹. Other Christians - I’m delighted to say - read the Bible with a lens of compassion and therefore read from the same Bible images of a God of love, love for all people.

For Christians, the Bible is important, and God is important, but in many ways, our principle lens is the life of Jesus. Jesus - a Jewish person born in Palestine about 2000 years ago is well known beyond Christianity. But within Christianity Jesus is a model for living, a mentor to us, because Christians believe that Jesus was deeply inspired by God. There are different ways to express this truth. Some say that Jesus was the son of God. Some say that Jesus was God. Some say that Jesus was “The Christ”, meaning the saviour. Christians have actually killed each other because they disagreed on who Jesus was. But Christians all agree that we should try our best to live the life that Jesus lived. Stories about the life of Jesus are in the Bible, and are called “The Gospels”. Nothing is known about Jesus except during a period of about 3 years, probably when Jesus was in his early 30’s, when Jesus wandered around speaking with people, teaching, healing people, and being present with people. Jesus travelled around with a small group of friends that we call “the disciples”. I just want to share 2 stories today, and I hope you can relate to both of these stories from your own faith perspective.

From the Gospel called Mark, we have the story of how Jesus assembled his little

¹ A quote often attributed to Anne Lamott.

group of followers to begin his 3 year tour. “Passing along the beach of Lake Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and his brother Andrew net-fishing. Fishing was their regular work. Jesus said to them, ‘Come with me. I’ll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass.’ They didn’t ask questions. They dropped their nets and followed.”²

In the story, Jesus begins rounding up his group of followers. This story is important to Christians because when Jesus wants to round up his group, Jesus does not go to a religious school to find followers. He does not form a search committee and setup an elaborate application process. Jesus just calls people. Everyday people. 2000 years ago, fishermen would have been not special at all. They were uneducated, poor, simple people. We are not told that they will be good at helping Jesus. We don’t even know if they were any good at fishing. But Jesus calls them to join with him. To me, the beauty of Jesus calling fishermen is this: If Jesus can use people like fishermen, then Jesus can use ordinary people - even people like me. For Christians, the work that Jesus is doing is work for all of us, not just the elite, or the religious, or the educated, or the “special”.

And what is that work that Jesus calls Christians to do? Jesus calls Christians to look for - and build - what he calls “The kingdom of God” in our midst. This kingdom is something that is already present, and yet is still coming. It is not a place so much as it is a state of being, a state of relationship. But we know what it will look like thanks to another Jesus story.

From later on in the gospel of Mark, “A religious scholar asked Jesus, ‘Which is most important of all the commandments?’ Jesus said, ‘The first in importance is, ‘Listen: God is one; so love God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.’ And here is the second: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ There is no other commandment that ranks with these.’ The religion scholar said, ‘A wonderful answer! So lucid and accurate - that God is one and there is no other. And loving God with all passion and intelligence and energy, and loving others as well as you love yourself. Why, that’s better than all of the religious trappings combined!’ When Jesus

² Mark 1:16-18. *The Message*.

realized how insightful the scholar was, Jesus said, ‘You're almost there, right on the edge of God's kingdom’.³

Jesus invites Christians to imagine and work for a world dominated by love - love of God and love for each other. Sounds simple, right? How has it so often gone so wrong? The problem for Christians is that too often we have seen “love of neighbour” as meaning love of people who are just like us. And we have held back on loving people who are different from us, perhaps even people who hate us. Jesus was very clear about this too. Jesus commanded his followers to “love their enemies.” As you can tell from the history I shared earlier, Christians have not always done this very well. There is even a bumper sticker that says, “When Jesus said love your enemies, I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean kill them.”

So let’s bring this back to the question, “Do we need God in the 21 century?” Jesus said, “the truth will set you free” and I have tried to share truth today about Christianity, including the good, the bad, and the ugly. Sometimes interfaith events can feel a bit pointless because we just share platitudes about how of course we respect each other, but then we go home, open up the newspaper, and all we struggle to understand what’s happening. I hope that my sharing of dark aspect within Christianity is helpful.

I said earlier that we do need God in the 21st century - if you pick the right God. If your image of God is very human, small-minded, hateful, racist, bigoted, grasping, then no, we do not need that “god” in the 21 century. We have never needed that “god”. An unfortunately, some “Christians” today - including powerful people like Donald Trump still believe in that God. But I do not. Any “God of fear and hatred” is not a Christian God. Jesus spoke only of a God of love.

So if your image of God is loving, open, welcoming, nurturing, respectful of all people, including people who are not like you, a God of healing and hope, then yes, we need that God in the 21 century. The issue is not whether your God is called “God”, or “Allah”, or something else. The only issue is whether or not your God is a God of love. That is the God we need in the 21st century.

Peace be with you. *As-salaamu Alaykum. Amen.*

³ Mark 12:28-34, *The Message*, paraphrased.