

Just One Way

In a collection of essays compiled into one volume under the title *“Truth and Tolerance,”* the former Pope, Benedict XIV examines the ways in which modern, Western society has placed absolute claims of truth in opposition to tolerance and social harmony. This is very problematic for a religion like Christianity which proclaims the in-breaking into human history of God’s definitive word who is *“the way, the truth and the life.”*

At the largest scale of the challenge is the idea of missions: You will recall the recent story in the news of a young Christian missionary, John Chau who traveled to North Sentinel Island, in the Bay of Bengal, in order to proclaim the Gospel to the natives. Chau was brutally murdered by the natives when he landed on the island. The subsequent ridicule of Chau is captured in one derisive comment made on Twitter: *“[Chau] is just a dumb American who thought the tribe needed Jesus when the tribe already lived in harmony with God and nature for years without outside interference.”*

We can all argue whether Chau’s missionary zeal was prudent or wise or sufficiently informed, but the essence of the critique against him is that Christianity is a western cultural reality which should not be imposed on those who have their own, unique culture and religious traditions. The former Pope identifies the underlying secular belief behind this attitude as follows: *“The notion that all religions are ultimately equivalent appears as a commandment of tolerance and respect for others...”* He then proceeds to give the proper Christian response to this tenant of secularist faith: *“But, if in Christ a new gift, the essential gift---truth---is being granted us, then it is our duty to offer this to others---freely, of course, for truth cannot operate otherwise, nor can love exist.”*

Perhaps what secular critics are missing is the distinction between “imposing” and “proposing.” Did John Chau go to “impose” Christianity on the tribe of North Sentinel Island or to “propose” the Gospel Faith? I would assert the latter.

At the smaller level of our own society we who are Christian believers have experienced no small level of shaming for daring to proclaim things as universal truths. This is regarded as arrogant and intolerant. It is disrespectful of others who have a

different set of beliefs. Thus, there can be no attempts to convert people to faith in Jesus but only “dialogue” understood as *“setting one’s own position or belief on the same level with what the other person believes, ascribing to it, on principle, no more of the truth than to the position of the other person.”*

The way in which society attempts to finesse this religious relativism is by a notion which renders God one who is *“beyond all words and beyond all comprehension in absolute transcendence.”* In this view, no one can proclaim any absolute, universal, religious truth because every human perception is only-ever personal perceptions. So this has given way in our culture to the phenomenon of the *“spiritual but not religious”* person. This disposition works well in the world of relativism since the appeal to a purely personal spirituality will never offend or perturb anyone.



Thus, there is a sort of “universality” suggested in this secular religion which is predicated on what you could call “a truce.” *“I will not make any claims to truth that will upset you if you do not make any such claims that will upset me.”* But, as Benedict writes, *“Christianity is essentially faith in an event, whereas the great non-Christian religions maintain the existence of an eternal world that stands in opposition to the world of time.”* In other words, Christianity is the fully “historical religion” in that the Creator God entered into our history as True God and True Man. *“God seeks out man in the midst of his worldly and earthly connections and relationships; God, whom no one, not even the purest of men, can discover for himself, comes to man of his own volition and enters into relationship with him.”*

Jesus Christ is historical, particular, concrete and personal: Accepted on his own terms, he is the *way* to the Father, the Creator. It is not arrogance or elitism to proclaim this. It is just simply the truth to be shared and the answer to the deepest longings of the human heart.