
Christianity & Religious Practices

BOB HEERSPINK

We live in a world with many religions, and toleration is often celebrated as the key to getting along; but is it really okay to adopt practices from other religions? Can some of these practices be adapted, or do they need to be totally left alone?

DAVE BAST

Digging deeper into the scripture, from ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink; and these are some of the questions we are going to engage today.

DAVE BAST

It seems as though often Christians address only a few of the real hot-button issues, but there are other things we should be talking about. Things that are equally important with these well-known, rehashed kinds of subjects. So, what are some of those other things?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, they are the kinds of things that we want to explore on this program and in this series; things that really get into our discipleship. Today, we want to talk about a subject that really is taboo for a lot of people, and that is whether you can really bring practices from one religion into Christianity – syncretism, it is sometimes called.

DAVE BAST

Syncretism is combining beliefs or practices from two or more religions at the same time and holding them all; and really, the problem of syncretism also raises with it the question of whether we can call one another on this, or whether it is totally impossible to challenge anyone else's belief.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, syncretism is really becoming a major issue in the Christian Church today. There was an article in the *USA Today* not long ago, which talked about just this fact. It said one in five people find spiritual energy in mountains and trees; one in six believe in the evil eye – that certain people can cast curses with a look. Now, these are statistics coming from people in church on Sunday – people who identify themselves as Christians.

DAVE BAST

Yes; sometimes it is obvious. I read a report about a minister in Seattle who claimed to be both Christian and Islamic at the same time. I don't think that works real well...

BOB HEERSPINK

A foot in both camps.

DAVE BAST

Yes; not many are going that far; but this same *USA Today* article quoted a research by the Pew Foundation that found that 26% of people find spiritual energy in crystals or trees or rocks. Twenty-five percent believe in astrology. Twenty-four percent believe in reincarnation, including thousands and thousands of people who would describe themselves as Christians, and in fact are going to church regularly.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, you ask the question, where are these ideas really coming from? And they are really bubbling up because we live in a society that has put the idea of authority at arm's length. Americans don't like to be told what to believe. They want to think that there is no external source of truth by which to test the rightness or wrongness of various religious practices.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, that leads to kind of a cafeteria approach to religion. If we say: Don't tell me what to believe. I will decide for myself; which is what many Americans are saying today, then we are also going to result in kind of a personal preference thing that goes and says: Well, I will take this from this tradition, and I will take that from the Bible, and I will take this idea over here and put them all together and it is my religion. Sheilaism, you might say...

BOB HEERSPINK

From the book, *Habits of the Heart*.

DAVE BAST

Yeah, yeah; that famous story of a woman who said...she was asked what her religion was – her name was Sheila – she said: Well, my religion is Sheilaism. It is what I want to believe.

BOB HEERSPINK

But, the question could be asked by people: So, what is the problem with Sheilaism? Why can't you put together the practices and the beliefs of various religions? Isn't this something that allows us to celebrate the unity of religions and the oneness of spirituality?

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, I think we do tend to be a little too judgmental sometimes of other people, and I don't want to come across as criticizing a different religion, but I am interested in those Christians who claim to believe in Jesus, but are importing all these other things as well; and I think we can address that issue. In fact, Jesus himself did in a great passage in John 4. Now, this is quite a famous story in the New Testament, where Jesus is talking to a Samaritan woman by the side of the well.

BOB HEERSPINK

Jesus has entered into this Samaritan village. He is sitting at the well. He is thirsty. He wants something to drink; and up comes this Samaritan woman, and of all things, Jesus asks her for a drink; a shocking thing because Jews and Samaritans did not communicate with each other in Jesus' day.

DAVE BAST

And so then they have this interesting conversation, and he suggests to her that he might be a kind of water, in a metaphorical sense, that she really needs; and so she is intrigued, and they get deeper in conversation; and then Jesus says: Well, why don't you go call your husband?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Well, that was a bit of a problem because she had kind of a checkered past. So she tries to change the subject and wants to talk about religion, and she says to him: Well, we Samaritans worship on this mountain here, and you Jews say you have to worship in the Temple; now who is right?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and at that point, Jesus says to her: you worship what you do not know...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Which is actually an in-your-face confrontation with regard to her set of religious beliefs.

DAVE BAST

Yes; can you believe that? I mean, isn't that intolerant?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it would certainly be unacceptable in polite society today.

DAVE BAST

Yes; isn't that offensive to say to a person: you know what? Your religion is really ignorant. You are worshipping in ignorance, and just the fact that you are sincere in what you believe doesn't make it right.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is something our society believes. If you are sincere, sincerity trumps truth.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, the fact is, I think we can challenge what people believe because we don't naturally know the truth about God. This is what the Bible teaches very clearly, that our minds are darkened because of sin; and therefore, we need God's revelation to help us to the truth.

You know, Jesus goes on in this same conversation...the next thing he says to her is: we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. And in saying that, what he is pointing to is the whole narrative of biblical history – the whole story of the Bible – of God's calling of Israel and his preparation to give a Messiah – a savior to the world; and how he himself has come now to be that person. So, ultimately he is saying: you know, you have to listen to me. That is what you have to do.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, he isn't saying simply the Jewish people have the truth compared to all other people; he is really saying: We have the truth because we have a revelation from God.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and that gives us, I think, legitimate grounds to talk to people about what they believe, even to challenge what they believe, because all views are not equally valid, and they are not all equally true.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think this is a good place for us to take a break and to think about what we have talked about thus far, and when we come back we will pick up the conversation by looking at how we can use the scripture to give us guidance in religious practice.

DAVE BAST

Since *Groundwork* is all about digging into scripture and applying it to our lives, we want to tell you about some of the resources we offer to guide you on your personal spiritual journey. We recommend two daily

devotionals: *Today* and *Words of Hope*. Each devotion contains a bible reading and a short meditation. They are short and concise, but dig beneath the surface of the scriptures; ideal for everyone with a busy life. Both devotionals are designed with you in mind. Whether you would like to receive the devotion in a booklet, have it delivered to your e-mail each day, or listen to it on your commute to work, you will always find the spiritual nourishment you are looking for. You can find more information about *Today* and *Words of Hope* devotionals on the resource page of our website at groundworkonline.com.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

So Dave, we have been talking about how it is becoming more and more common for people to take religious views and simply bring them together into their own personal spirituality; and yet, when we go to scripture and we find Jesus talking to the woman at the well, Jesus is very willing to confront spiritual ignorance, and to say there are certain religious practices that simply are out of bounds.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, that is true, but that does raise the question of how we can follow him in that. I mean, it is one thing for Jesus to tell somebody, you know, you are really going off the rails here; or even someone else in the Bible, like Paul, to do the same. I think of that story in Acts 17, where Paul has come to Athens and he has gone to the Areopagus, you know that place where the Parthenon was, and all the idols and the statues of ancient Athens, and he finds an altar to the Unknown God, and then he announces to the assembled philosophers and teachers of Athens: What you worship as unknown, I am going to tell you...let me tell you about this God that you are worshipping in ignorance.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and he had something to say because he had a revelation from God; and I think that is the key. If we are only sharing our own personal opinions about religion with someone else...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Then we certainly don't have the right to critique.

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is only when we ourselves are into the revelation of God's word and understand what God is saying to us about faith – about religion – that we have the...well, we have, really, the responsibility to talk to other people about what it means to truly be on track with God.

DAVE BAST

So that suggests that we had better the story of the Bible down pretty well in our own lives, because we can only speak knowledgeably and with some borrowed kind of authority, I guess...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

If it comes from the Bible itself. So, first of all, there is kind of a big picture involved in understanding the Bible.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and I think a lot of people when they go to the Bible tend to pick and choose...I mean, they have their favorite stories, they have their favorite texts, and they use that to build their own brand of spirituality; but if you go to the Bible, you will find that all of those small stories really come together in one *big* story.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, outline it.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is a story that begins in a garden; it begins with creation. It leads to the fall into sin. It then is a long history of God working in history, first with Israel, and then as his saving purposes come to focus in Jesus Christ, eventually bursting out to all the world and offering redemption to all people – even redemption to the cosmos – to the creation – as we look forward to Christ’s return and a new heaven and a new earth.

DAVE BAST

So, just to kind of take this and apply it in a specific area, let’s talk about reincarnation; one of those popular, kind of syncretistic beliefs. How does that stack up against the big story of the Bible from creation through the fall and redemption, and finally the recreation of the new heaven and earth.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, it is an interesting thing, I heard one Eastern speaker say that in the West reincarnation is a fad, in the East it is really a curse; and a lot of people in the West grab hold on reincarnation as a kind of eternal life; and yet, actually if you go and look at what reincarnation is in Eastern religion, it is an embrace of a circular view of history; it is not linear; it is circular. You are caught on this wheel. You are involved in thousands and thousands of reincarnations; and your only hope is to break free of all that.

DAVE BAST

You know, it is no accident...you just reminded me of something...the Indian flag has a wheel in the center of it. Many of the Western countries, especially in Europe, their flags have a cross on them somewhere, and just the difference there in world views between the East and the Christian faith. In our faith, the world is going somewhere. There was a decisive point – a crossroads – literally a cross – at the center point of history, and it is headed toward a conclusion. It is not just an endless cycle that reincarnation supposes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; if you embrace reincarnation as part of some kind of Christian faith, then you have to understand that you are going against the word of God, which says each of us dies once, and then comes the judgment.

DAVE BAST

Yes; actually, that is from Hebrews. So, here is maybe a good illustration. How are you going to respond to this kind of thing? On the one hand, you can proof text. You could throw out Hebrews 9 that says everyone dies once and then the judgment. That is true, but on the other hand, it is more fruitful, it seems to me, to talk about the big story of the Bible, and how the shape of this goes against that.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, that is true. For example, take the issue of astrology...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

Do the stars, the sun, the moon influence your life? Well, go to the big story. What does scripture say about the nature of the sun, moon, and stars according to creation?

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, just look at Genesis 1. It says that on the fourth day God made the greater lights to rule the day and the night; and then it adds: Oh, he also made the stars, by the way. It is like the writer of Genesis is just tossing that out: Oh, by the way, he made the stars, too. So, do these things rule us? No. God made them to serve us. They are to tell time. It is like a giant cosmic clock that he gave for the benefit of his creatures here on earth. We don't find our lives under the destiny of the stars. We live under God, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, you can come along and you can embrace astrology, but you have to know you are kind of throwing out – you are throwing out – the doctrine of creation; one of the big pieces of God's story.

DAVE BAST

Right; well, okay; this knowledge from scripture can guide us when we want to help someone else, perhaps, who is confused; but how do we do that? Let's return to that in just a minute; but first, let's pause to talk about how you can help inform our upcoming program topics through our website.

BOB HEERSPINK

Listeners like you make *Groundwork* what it is. Our website, groundworkonline.com, is another way that we work to join you as you dig deeper into the scriptures. There, we continue to reflect on today's discussion about our world and the Bible, as well as many other conversations listeners begin about scripture and how it interacts with their lives. We would also like you to help us think through upcoming programs. One of the topics we are going to talk about in the future is prayer. Is prayer really effective? Are there some kinds of prayer more effective than others? Share your thoughts on these upcoming questions. Finding us is easy. Just visit our website, groundworkonline.com.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into the scripture as the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So far we have established the fact that syncretism does exist, that a number of people who claim to be Christians are mixing that with beliefs from other religions or traditions. We have talked about the importance of Jesus and looking to him, and especially his word – the word of God – for our understanding of what is true; and that it is even possible to confront people and to point out to them that the things they claim to believe don't really match scripture; but let's talk real world. How could we do that? I am not Jesus; I am not Paul; neither are you. How would we go about in a positive way, maybe interacting with someone that we know, or perhaps even a relative who is doing this sort of thing?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well certainly it involves being sensitive to where people are at in their own faith.

DAVE BAST

Well, let me give you a real-world example. We were talking about this in staff, and one of our staff members said: you know, I've got a relative who says she is a Christian. She claims that Christ is the center of her life, that she believes in God, and at the same time she runs a kind of business making money off the energy of crystals – the healing power of crystals. So, what would you say to that? How would you respond to that person?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you certainly would want to begin by affirming her faith in Christ. You know, the Bible encourages us to encourage all who come to faith, and there are a lot of people whose faith is...well, Isaiah talks about

flickering wicks. It isn't necessary for us to go out and run over people and simply dismiss them as whackos because of the ideas that they have in the world of religion, and so crush their pursuit of spiritual values and spirituality.

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; I mean, Christians have got kind of a bad reputation, don't we, for being too judgmental...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

There is a book called *UnChristian* that details some of the opinions non-Christians have of us, and they are not very flattering, frankly; but at the same time, don't we have a kind of responsibility to challenge ideas that really are contrary to the Bible?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I would want to explore with this person what they find in this experience with crystals. What are they looking for? And do crystals really deliver what they are craving spiritually, or are they perhaps missing out on something that only Jesus Christ can deliver?

DAVE BAST

Well, or astrology. That is another good case in point, to go beyond the mere assertion: I believe in this or I follow this; but ask why. Is it fear, maybe? Are you afraid that some power is controlling you, or...

BOB HEERSPINK

Wanting to know the future; wondering what is really going to happen in my life, and who is in charge.

DAVE BAST

Maybe we need to distinguish between kinds of belief or kinds of practice. There might be a kind of a continuum here of things that are clearly unscriptural...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Or even anti-Christian. They come out of a different world view, and things that are just sort of, who knows, maybe...I mean, there is a whole range of things. People wear magnets because they think that helps, or...

BOB HEERSPINK

I know people who have had acupuncture, and they say: hey, it made a difference. I think, though, that there do become practices where we really are starting to put our confidence in something other than Christ; where we are engaging in manipulation that leads to almost, really, a form of magic in the world; and that is where we begin to cross over a line.

DAVE BAST

I also think, you know, people take offence really easily, but I look at the example of Jesus, and for that matter, Paul as well, in Athens. They weren't afraid to say to people, you know, that is a whacky idea. In effect, I mean they did it politely, but to call out people for their ignorance – their spiritual ignorance.

BOB HEERSPINK

But to do that with a spirit of love. Paul says speak the truth in love.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is what Jesus Christ was doing with that Samaritan woman.

DAVE BAST

Those are two really hard things, aren't they, to keep together. If we love somebody we tend not to speak the truth because it is going to hurt them maybe...

BOB HEERSPINK

That is right.

DAVE BAST

If we speak the truth, we are often trampling on people's feelings, so...

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, we think that loving means accepting anything and everything a person says or does, when actually there are times when being loving means really speaking the truth into their own spiritual life.

DAVE BAST

You know, I love how that story ends in John 4, that we referred to earlier – Jesus and the woman at the well. He does say to her...He challenges her and says: you are worshipping what you don't know. You are really ignorant in your beliefs, even though you may be sincere; and then he says: Salvation is from the Jews. In other words, the Bible is the real story – the true story – and that is where revelation is found; but then he adds: God is seeking those who will worship him in spirit and in truth.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I have always thought that those should be capitalized.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well...

DAVE BAST

Spirit and truth, you know.

BOB HEERSPINK

You think about who Jesus claims to be: I am the way, the truth, and the life; and suddenly you begin to recognize that really the lens through which we have to evaluate our spiritual practice is Christ. Does it honor Christ? Does it celebrate his grace? And does it connect us closer to Jesus? Those are key issues as we decide how we are going to nurture our spirituality in the world today.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he is truth with a capital T; and God wants to be worshipped through him now. From now on, it is through Jesus; so I think bottom line for me is, anyone that I would be talking to I would want to just point them to Christ and say look at Jesus; learn from him; breathe him in; listen to what he says; look at his teachings and that is going to guide you and get you on the right path.

BOB HEERSPINK

We would like to thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and we would like to invite you to respond to what you have heard. What do you think about spiritual practices? Which practices do you pursue and how do you evaluate spiritual practice in your own life? We would like you to visit our website at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation. Tell us what you are thinking and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs.

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