

Communicating Christ in a Multicultural World



18. THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound That
saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

(John Newton, 1779)

Introduction

What is so different about the Christian message in a crowded world of religions? Why will Christians sacrifice years, comfort, and even their lives to share this message from a carpenter who lived in an obscure Palestinian town thousands of years ago? Does the preparedness of followers to be martyrs prove anything at all, when people are also prepared to die for nationalistic ideologies, cults and charismatic leaders, or to assure themselves of a place in Paradise?

The comparative study of religion leaves us with a sense of bewilderment. Should all religions be regarded equally, as vain attempts to solve a very real but human needs?

Is Christianity Unique or Just Another Religion?

Christianity has features that are common to most religious systems, recognizable by anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and other social scientists, eg

Feature	Also found in:
charismatic founder	Buddhism, Islam, Mormonism
recognition of the supernatural	tribal religions, Spiritualism, witchcraft, Hinduism
belief in One God	Judaism, Islam, Freemasonry
moral system	Confucianism, Judaism
social and cultural forms	most religions
defined way of salvation	many religions
long and complex history	Hinduism, Buddhism
massive sacred literature	Hinduism
future promises	Communism
Heaven	Islam

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hierarchy of leaders/specialists	African traditional religion, New Age
rituals	Mormonism, Freemasonry
imposing temples, churches, shrines	Sikhism
life-changing dynamics	Hare Krishna, Communism
devoted followers	Shi' ite Islam
promotion of self-discipline	Buddhists
faithfulness in prayer and fasting	Islam
detachment from materialism	Hinduism (sadhus)
defined dogma with practical application	Jehovah's Witnesses
missionary faith	Islam
educated apologists	theological liberalism, Humanism, Existentialism
large numbers of adherents	Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism

For this reason, "comparative religion", as a discipline, is often reduced to relativism, ie reduction to the common level of human experience. It trivializes the nature of Christianity, ignores its unique claims, and misses the point of divine revelation. It engenders discussion about a "post-Christian" era, however it is dishonest because it ignores rapid growth in the church in Africa, Latin America and East Asia, as well as the unique features of the Christian faith.

Christianity is not just about religious identity or tradition, patience in suffering, a life of prayer, or perfect attendance at church. It is not a better idea, or a deeper philosophy, than other religions. It does not centre on priests, popes, pastors, parishes or praxis. It's not what we do (eg ritual or sacralised tradition). Christianity hinges on the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not come with a new religion, code or philosophy but to meet human sinfulness, overcome spiritual bankruptcy and bring men and women back to God; not to restore or "mend" the human race, but to create a new race.

What are the Unique Features of Christianity?

Jesus Christ – The Image of the Invisible God

Christianity is unique because God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ- John 1: 1; Colossians 1:15-20. Jesus is the incarnation of Deity, the "only begotten Son":

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Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold Him come,
Offspring of a virgin 's womb!
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the Incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.

Abraham, Moses and David enjoyed special fellowship with God, yet they did not yet know Jesus and the salvation He was to bring, except as a vague hope of the future they proclaimed but only dimly understood (cf Hebrews 11:39-40). It was only in the coming of Jesus that the revelation was completed: "I and the Father are One. Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 10:30, 14:9).

A Living Christ

Christianity is a relationship with Jesus, the Saviour of the world who, according to historical records and the testimonies of hundreds of eyewitnesses (1 Corinthians 15:3-8), was charged with treason, executed on a Roman cross, rose from the dead, and is alive today. The founders of all the other major world religions remain in their graves, or the whereabouts of their graves are unknown.

Unlike the Hindu who tries to escape the eternal cycle of pain, the Christian says, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10-11). And again, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). This is our faith declaration, because Christ is alive.

The Agape Love of God

The heart of Christianity is the love of God - not fear (animism, tribalism, cultural alienation), "pillars" of religious duty (Islam), guilt (Hinduism), ethnicity (Parseeism, Jainism, Sikhism), or right paths (Buddhism). The Christian is not only loved by God; he or she is also the recipient and channel of that love (Romans 5:5).

The Grace of God

Going to heaven is not a special "reward" earned for believing the teachings of Christianity and obeying Jesus' rules (Romans 4: 4-8). Eternal life is God's gift to all who belong to Him (Romans 6:23).

Unlike the animist, Muslim or Hindu, the Christian can do nothing (and need do nothing) to win favour with God. What the Christian has, who they are, and where they will spend eternity depend entirely on the grace - the unearned favour - of God. The Christian knows they cannot pay for their sins. God is too holy, and even the least sin is too great to be atoned for by penance, meditation or religious ritual. The free gifts of forgiveness, cleansing, assurance of eternal life and reconciliation with God, come from the God-Man who paid the debt as our substitute.

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Jesus Christ the Truth

What attests to the Truth in a world of counterfeits? Unlike other leaders, Jesus Christ did not claim to *have* the truth. Instead, He claimed to be the truth, ie its incarnation (John 14:6). Jesus did not build on what others taught (cf Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7), but the revelation of God among men and women. The Apostles claimed His was the only name under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). The uniqueness of Christ was not negotiable (Matthew 16: 13-17).

Relationship with God

Christianity is a personal "relationship" with God's only Son who became a man so we, in turn, could enjoy relationship with the Creator, in the position of His adopted sons. No other religion (even monism) does this. Only Christ restores fallen man to fellowship with his Maker.

The Miracle-Working Power of God

While some religions (eg African witchdoctors) demonstrate authentic power miracles (from evil sources) no other faith is characterised by widespread evidences of the power of God in action in the human sphere, such as the power of God manifest in response to prayer in Jesus' name, cf Mark 16:15-18; John 14:12. Moreover, He has given his followers authority to act in His name to do likewise.

Cross-Cultural, Global

God has not left himself without a witness (Acts 14:16-17).

Christianity is not a Western religion (although it hugely impacted Western nations; some of whose leaders and writers have assumed their relative wealth and technological advancement were proof of their special relationship with God). The majority of Christians today do not live in the West. The resilience of Christianity is not explained by any one culture or stage of economic development. The Gospel is trans-cultural. However genuine Christianity is not fully ecumenical, in the sense of adopting or recognising other faiths as "equal". Christians need to understand other religions, but primarily for the purpose of incarnating Christ in those cultures through being His witnesses.

The Christian faith is being planted more widely than it (or any other religion) has ever been. This means that today there is in most of the world more serious commitment to Christ on the part of Christians than at any other time in history. Christianity will continue to be the most dynamic spiritual force in the world.

Why Missions?

There is but one answer in Christianity – Jesus Christ. That is the wonderful news we are privileged - commissioned - to share with the world. Christianity is a missionary faith.

The attitude of the Christian should be to point to Jesus Christ as the Saviour and Lord of all. The church does not apologise for the fact it wants all men and women to know Jesus Christ and to follow Him. Its calling is to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth. It cannot make restrictions in this respect. Whether people have a high, low or primitive religion,

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whether they have sublime ideals or a defective morality makes no difference. All must hear the Gospel, because it is the "power of God" to save them (Romans 1:16).

What about those who have never heard the Gospel because:

- ‡ they are located far from Christians (eg members of unreached people groups);
- ‡ their governments forbid the entry of Christian missionaries and they do not have opportunities to hear it by other means (eg satellite/radio broadcasts);
- ‡ few Christians take seriously Jesus' command to take the Gospel into all the world?

There is salvation only in the sacrificial work of Christ. Abraham (and many other Old Testament men and women) were saved because they had faith in God. Consider:

- those who keep God's laws apart from the Law are "justified" – Romans 2:12-16;
- God accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right -the Holy Spirit engineered Peter's meeting with Cornelius – Acts 10:34, 35;
- the "judge of all the earth" will "do right" (Genesis 18:25- in context);
- closed doors or ideologies do not release the Church from its mandate for world evangelism – we need to do the work till Christ returns.

Summary

Christians cannot be loyal to Jesus Christ and at the same time:

- ‡ be syncretic;
- ‡ have other fundamental loyalties;
- ‡ have an open mind about the person and work of Christ;
- ‡ reject the inspiration and authority of the Word of God;
- ‡ reduce Christianity to a philosophy on par with other "faiths" (Colossians 2:6-9).

Biblical Christianity is linked to reaching the world with the Gospel!

Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hail, the heaven-born prince of peace!
Hail the Sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings.

If Christianity is unique, it is because Jesus Christ is unique.

We live in a multicultural world.

We are world Christians (but not worldly Christians).

Our goal is to communicate Jesus Christ to our world.