

Significance of Jesus

- exploring the claims of the New Testament

THE PERSON OF JESUS

Encountering Jesus

In his day Jesus provoked many different views. This is powerfully illustrated in the sound bites from the 'crowd scenes' at *Sukkoth* (Festival of Booths) in John's gospel (Chapter 7):

"Where is he?" (v11)

"He is a good man" (v12)

"No, he is deceiving the crowd" (v12)

"How does he have such learning since he has never been taught?" (v15)

"You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?" (v20)

"Is not this the man they are trying to kill?" (v25)

"Can it be that the authorities know this man is the Messiah?" (v26)

"We know where this man is from, when the Messiah comes no one will know where he is from" (v27)

"When the Messiah comes will he do more signs than this man has done?" (v31)

"This really is the prophet." (v40)

"This is the Messiah." (v41)

"Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?" (v41)

"Never has anyone spoken like this!" (v46)

It is not surprising that this debate, questioning and difference of opinion continues up to this present day.

Jesus among the world faiths

All cultures, faiths and beliefs across the world have 'Holy Ones', or good and distinct people who inspire others. Whatever you make of Jesus he clearly stands among that number.

It is important to remember that it is Jesus 'the Christ' who is unique; not Christianity. This is a vital distinction to both make and understand. Christianity, as a religious phenomenon, can be placed alongside other faiths and compared, favourably or unfavourably, at many different levels; this is perfectly valid. It is quite obvious that Christian involvement in history and society has frequently left very much to be desired, and that the spirituality of its followers has often been less inspiring than that of other faiths. So it is not a comparison of Christianity with other religions that is distinctive, but the person of Jesus.

From the perspective of the religions of the world Jesus stands together with the other great company of teachers and founders:

- Zoroaster (Zoroastrianism / Parsi)



- Moses (Judaism)
- Lao Tzu (Taoism)
- Confucius (Confucianism)
- Gautama (Buddhism)
- Mahavira (Jains)
- Muhammad (Islam)
- Nanak (Sikhism)

There are also the 'gurus' of Hinduism, the 'priests' of Shinto and the 'shaman' of primal religion. As we mentioned above, in speaking to human experience and need, Jesus shares common themes, and on occasions similar conclusions, to these other teachers.

There is a very real sense in which the person of Jesus connects with the desires and hopes of the faiths of the world. His life and presence along with his teaching and claims are attractive (though also sometimes shocking as we will see) to the people of different faiths that encounter him. This truth is at the heart of understanding the significance of Jesus. This understanding is expressed in the words of Symeon:

'For my eyes have seen your salvation ...
a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'
(Lk 2:30-32)

The early Christians believed that Jesus fulfilled the hopes and desires of Judaism and the Gentile nations as well (cf Lk 24:27,44; Acts 17:22-31). In as much as the faiths of the world reflect the working of God's Spirit and the deep aspirations of the human heart, this continues to be true. This is more than simply 'points of contact' for dialogue and engagement; though they clearly are important starting points. These are spiritual longings and motivations. For example, every faith recognises and respects goodness and holiness; Jesus comes as just such a person (as we have noted). Spiritual power, courage and sacrificial love each aspire people; Jesus demonstrates them and much more.

This is a broad and complex topic that demands sensitive and informed discussion; which is beyond our scope here. But with an awareness of the dangers of being simplistic we suggest some initial observations to provoke our thinking in terms of some of the major faiths:

- Parsis: personal moral responsibility, defeat of darkness (evil);
- Judaism: the Messiah, fulfilment of Torah and prophecy;
- Taoism: harmony with nature, the quest for freedom;
- Confucianism: the noble / perfect moral individual;
- Buddhism: simplicity, tranquillity, 'the Way';
- Jains: gentleness and non-violence;
- Islam: submitting to God's will, Jesus the prophet;
- Sikhism: the Guru as God's messenger;
- Hinduism: the avatar, the yoke ('yoga') of gentleness;



- Indigenous faiths: spiritual power, complete sacrifice.

Let us comment on just a few interesting of the interesting areas of connection and reflection with the three faiths of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam:

Jesus and Hinduism

It is popular to speak of Jesus in terms of being a *guru*. The word *guru* is a fascinating one; it is much more than just a 'teacher'. It is formed out of two Sanskrit words, *gu* ('darkness') and *ru* ('to push away forcibly' or 'to scatter'). A *guru* is someone whose presence and teaching 'pushes away darkness' and by implication radiates light (*prakasha*). In those terms Jesus is unquestionably a *guru*, he says, 'I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' (Jn 8:12) He also says, 'You are the light of the world ... let your light so shine before others ...' (Mt 5:14,16).

A *guru* is also described as being like a mother who holds her child, pointing out to them who their father is. This is exactly what Jesus does!

Jesus, like other Jewish Rabbis around him, invited a community of disciples to follow him. It is in India that this practice is most deeply developed. The disciple (in Hinduism *shishya* – 'one who learns'; in Buddhism *savaka* – 'one who listens') relationship is the model of life-learning and spiritual development - believing that enlightenment is only possible by living in life-long obedience to a *guru*. Jesus says, 'A disciple ... will be like their teacher.' (Lk 6:4). Jesus invites people to follow him as a learner-disciple for the purpose of becoming like himself – Christlike.

Some spheres of Hinduism identify individuals who in a special way mediate wisdom, grace, truth and more. Some are seen as actual manifestations of the divine who come on missions to overthrow evil and to encourage spirituality. A major example of this idea is found in the 'avatars' ('one who descends')¹ of the Hindu god Vishnu. The single foundational principle of the Christian faith is that Jesus the Christ was the very incarnation of the invisible God. There are close parallels at many points between Jesus and the avatars of Hinduism, leading some to argue that he was in fact just that. This being so, it is important both to understand the similarities and to make clear the differences between Jesus and the Hindu god-humans.

A careful study of Hindu avatars reveals twelve characteristics which they all share and that identify them:²

- Avatars are real not mythological;
- Avatars that are human have a worldly birth;

¹ Traditionally there are believed to be ten avatars of Vishnu, one of which still remains to take place, but in popular thought a number of recent figures, like Gandhi, or Satya Sai Baba, are argued to be avatars.

² These have been noted by Geoffrey Parrinder in '***Avatars and Incarnation***' Barnes & Noble, New York 1970.



- Avatars mingle both the human and divine in their lives;
- Avatars finally die;
- Avatars may in some cases have been historical;
- Avatars are repeated;
- Avatars are important in their example and character;
- Avatars come with work to do;
- Avatars show some reality in the world;
- Avatars are a guarantee of divine revelation;
- Avatars reveal a personal god;
- Avatars reveal a god of grace.

It is interesting that most of these characteristics share much in common with other Christian teaching on the incarnation, with the clear exception that the coming of Jesus in humanity was a once and only event, *never to be repeated*; unlike avatars.

The births of avatars are usually proclaimed with special signs and events, but they are not virgin births; avatars are conceived in heaven and implanted in a human mother. During their earthly lives avatars demonstrate their divine nature by both miracles and super-consciousness; some also suffer. Their work is to destroy evil, hence the need for their repeated reappearances; hope in a final golden age, associated with a future avatar, is held by many. The close affinities and yet the significant contrasts with Jesus are striking.

For a Christian the significance of Jesus is seen in the distinct nature of his person; being uniquely the divine 'Son of God' and person of the Godhead. This is evidenced in the exclusive nature of the incarnation: a once and for all event, never needing to be repeated. In him true humanity and true divinity perfectly united and demonstrated within his person. It is verified in his mission that was not only to deal with evil, but also the problem of human sin, providing both forgiveness and atonement. All of this is ultimately validated in the resurrection; none of which finds any parallel in the avatars.

Jesus and Buddhism

Buddhism and Christianity, properly understood, are close at so many points. However they have completely opposing worldviews. Buddhism is world-denying, Christianity is world-affirming.

Buddhism is a path that seeks to help individuals to overcome suffering and reach a state of enlightenment. In many ways it is less a religion and more a philosophy. It requires no belief in God, but rather a commitment to following the Buddha and his teachings (the *Dharma*). Buddhists, or 'followers of the teachings of the Buddha', as many prefer to be called, form part of the *Sangha* (Buddhist community) but are encouraged to seek their own path towards enlightenment. Christians loom for the fulfilment of all things in the cosmic vision of shalom. Made possible through the work of Jesus (the *messiah*), following his teachings (the *euangelia*) and being part of the community of faith (the *ekklesia*).



The difference between Jesus being seen as the 'anointed one' (*Messiah*) and Siddhartha being understood as the 'awakened' one' (*Buddha*) is both interesting and significant in comparing the two teachers.

- *Birth and youth* – Jesus' background in birth and youth is in marked contrast to Siddhartha's princely palace upbringing. Matthew's account of the coming of the magi from the East and Luke's account of the heavenly choir to the shepherds mark the occasion dramatically;
- *Baptism/Enlightenment* – his baptism is clearly not the moment of Jesus' 'enlightenment', but his identification. Siddhartha is tempted before his enlightenment, for Jesus it is after his baptism and before beginning his public ministry;
- *Teaching* – like Siddhartha the Buddha, Jesus is seen by the majority as a teacher of great skill but in contrast to the Buddha he authenticated his teaching by miracles. The Gospels speak of Jesus' 'words and works'. Jesus speaks of 'bringing something (the Kingdom) in', while the Buddha points to 'leading others towards something (Nirvana)';
- *Death and Resurrection* – from very early on (cf Luke 9) Jesus focus was towards climatic events in Jerusalem. The Buddha dies either by accidental or deliberate food poisoning and passes into Nirvana, while Jesus' death is in consequence of hostility towards him and understood as an act of power to enable the salvation others. The resurrection of Jesus makes a very strong affirmation that the Kingdom of God is to do with this material cosmos;
- *Ascension, Pentecost, Parousia* – this leads into the next stage of the work of Jesus with the demonstration of continuing presence and power and the promise of consummation; in considerable contrast with a Buddhist worldview.

Reviewing the above there are fascinating similarities and yet significant contrasts between the lives and the work of both Siddhartha the Buddha and Jesus the Messiah (Christ).

The Buddha set out his ideas in a much more structured and systematic way than the records of Jesus' teaching suggests he did. Jesus' teaching suggests that he took a more intuitive and experiential approach, leaving both memorable sayings and striking events as seeds / keys to encountering his message. Both of them speak of following a 'way' or a 'path'. For Gautama it is the 'noble eightfold path' for Jesus it is the 'narrow way'.

Some *Mahayana* Buddhists (from the broader tradition) believe that Jesus was a *bodhisattva*; a 'becoming-Buddha' who turn their back on *nirvana* in favour of continuing the process of rebirths so that they can help other people attain enlightenment. This combines the key principles of compassion and wisdom by vowing not to enter *nirvana* until they have helped others reach it too.

Jesus is often particularly identified with the *bodhisattva* Maitreya ('the kindly one') or the *bodhisattva* of loving kindness. It is said of Maitreya, "He has not come as a religious leader, or to found a new religion, but as a teacher and guide for people of every religion and those of no religion. At this time of great political, economic and social crisis Maitreya will inspire humanity to see itself as one family, and create a



civilization based on sharing, economic and social justice, and global cooperation .He will launch a call to action to save the millions of people who starve to death every year in a world of plenty. Among Maitreya's recommendations will be a shift in social priorities so that adequate food, housing, clothing, education, and medical care become universal rights. Under Maitreya's inspiration, humanity itself will make the required changes and create a saner and more just world for all" ³

Jesus and Islam

The New Testament sees Jesus as a prophet, but also as redeemer. For Islam the role of a prophet (*rasul*) is crucial; not just the prophet Muhammad, but Adam, Abraham, David and others, including of course Jesus. His position within Islam is fascinating.

Although Muslims do not believe that Jesus died and rose again - the very idea of God allowing one of His prophets to be tortured, humiliated and killed is abhorrent to them - Jesus is spoken about in a very special way in the *Qur'an*, both through the names that he is given and in the way he is described as doing things. Jesus is uniquely marked out as being special.

The most central of these is that Jesus is called the 'word of God' in the *Qur'an*. This is a remarkably powerful image, one that Christians share about Jesus (Jn 1:1), as it is through someone's words that we see their character, heart and mind, and through which their nature is revealed. *Sura 3* relates the angels speaking to Mary (*Mariam*) who say:

"God giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus (*Isa*) The son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the hereafter and of the company of those nearest to God" It then goes on to say "He will be one of the righteous and will speak to the people."⁴

The *Qur'an* states that Jesus was born of a virgin and refers to him as 'the Christ' or the 'Messiah'; acknowledging the uniqueness of his birth. It compares his inception to that of Adam, into whom God directly breathed his life.⁵ Another interesting description of Jesus is found in *Sura 4* in the midst of a passage stating the oneness of God, speaking against any notion of 'trinity' or that Jesus is God. Here we also see him referred to as the word, but even more than that, as a spirit proceeding from God:

"Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, was (no more than) an apostle of God and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in God and his prophets."⁶

The word spirit (*rouh*) is a very powerful word, also used to mean 'breath of life' or 'soul', which is at the very essence of a person and their nature. The *Qur'an* records

³ <http://www.shareintl.org/maitreya>

⁴ See *Sura 3*, *Ali Imran* v 45-49

⁵ See *3 Ali-Imran* v59-60

⁶ See *Sura 4 Annisa* v171



many miracles of Jesus, including the fact that he spoke while he was still only a baby, that he healed the blind and the leper by God's leave, and that he raised the dead by God's leave. Jesus is also recorded to have done things through his word that only God can do. In *Sura 3* Jesus makes the figure of a bird from clay and breaths life into it (by God's leave),⁷ Muslims very firmly believe that no one can create life but God.

The *Qur'an* also asserts that Jesus was entirely without sin, this is an attribute that is not given to any of the other prophets in the *Qur'an*. When the angel appeared to Mary, the *Qur'an* says that he told her:

"I am only a messenger of thy Lord
that I may bestow on thee a faultless son"
(*Sura 19.19*)

The Arabic word for "faultless" (*zakiyya*), implies that he was totally without sin.

One Muslim scholar, M. Ali Merad, sums up the biblical picture of Jesus in the following passage:

'Prophet, Apostle of God, servant of God, these are titles which are applied in the *Qur'an* to many other prophetic figures. But Christ is more than that. Everything in the *Qur'an* inclines us to represent him as being above the common condition of men... An exceptional divine work, an exceptional messenger, favoured in all things by God, Christ witnesses to an exceptional divine concern. Through all that the *Qur'an* has to say about Jesus, we cannot fail to recognise an unquestionable convergence: everything it gives leads to the declaration of Christ's surpassing greatness.'⁸

THE TEACHING AND EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Jesus and others

Jesus, confining his movements to Judaea and Galilee, appears to meet very few people who are not Jews. However, the encounters that are recorded are instructive:

- **Syrophoenician woman** (Mk 7:24-30): the Gentile mother pleads for healing for her demonised daughter, unperturbed by Jesus' seeming rebuff she shows great faith which is honoured;
- **Centurion** (Mt 6:5-13; Lk 7:1-10): possibly a 'God fearer', but this is not certain, requests healing for his slave; his recognition of spiritual authority causes Jesus to claim it was a unique demonstration of faith unseen among the Jews and a sign that 'many from east and west' will share in God's kingdom;

⁷ See *Sura 3* Ali-Imran v 49

⁸ Cited in Colin Chapman *Cross and Crescent* 2007 p 240



- **Gadarene demoniac** (Mk 5:1-20): when this trans-Jordanian is exorcised he pleads to become a disciple of Jesus, but is refused and sent back instead to tell his story to his own people; what is happening here?
- **Samaritans** (Lk 10:29-37; 17:11-19; Jn 4:1-30): in the parable Jesus shows the despised journeyman displaying God's character to an alien fellow-traveller; it is only the foreigner out of ten healed lepers that returns to give thanks to God, while the woman at the well may 'worship what she does not know' she still has real faith.

Jesus reveals deep spirituality among people outside of Israel, and while he touches their lives he surprisingly appears to leave them where they are. All one can say is that while Jesus is central and essentially significant, God is also working more broadly than we can imagine.

Other sheep

'I am the good shepherd.
The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ...
I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.
I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.
So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'
(Jn 10:11, 16)

Here we see Jesus looking out, beyond the Jewish community, and speaking of 'other sheep' that will listen to his voice. They will be found among the peoples of the earth, and there is a very real sense that they are unknowingly waiting for him. It is quite clear that God is drawing the 'faithful' together from among the peoples and the faiths of the world. It is Jesus' voice that is the focus that endeavours to find a resonance in human hearts everywhere, hearts that are already responding to the 'logos' and 'light' of which he is the unique incarnation. Drawing together one community of faith that is led by the sacrificial shepherd. The parable of the 'lost sheep' and the 'searching shepherd' (Lk 15:3-7) are clearly significant in this context.

Claims of supremacy

It is important to remember that it is Jesus 'the Christ' who is the distinctive one and not Christianity. This is a vital distinction to both make and understand. Christianity - as a religious phenomenon - can be placed alongside other faiths and compared, favourably or unfavourably, at many different levels; this is perfectly valid. It is quite obvious that Christian involvement in history and society has frequently left very much to be desired, and that the spirituality of its followers has often been less inspiring than that of other faiths. So it is not a comparison of Christianity with other religions that is distinctive, it is the person of Jesus.

However, what sets Jesus distinctly apart from all other great religious teachers and leaders is the very nature of his personhood. His words and his works are crucial but because of the way they illustrate and emphasise who he is. One of his boldest recorded claims is:



‘I am the way, the truth and the life.
No one comes to the father except through me’ (John 14:6)

These words declare that Jesus is *the* road to God. Jesus is not claiming there is no truth or life without him, nor that God cannot be known apart from him. But he is saying that only a person who follows him can know God with the intimacy of ‘Father’ [*Abba*] and the quality of spiritual experience this enables. Similar themes are struck by Jesus elsewhere (cf Jn 1:12; 5:26, 39; 6:40-54; Mk 8:34-35).

That Jesus is supreme above all spiritual power is the unequivocal claim of scripture, as is the uniqueness of his revelation of truth and his work of salvation. While this is implied throughout the New Testament where there are other significant explicit texts; here are some important examples:

John 1:14

‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father’s only son,
full of grace and truth’

These words clearly state that there was only *one* occasion when the divine ‘Logos’ was manifest as a human being and that was in Jesus. While ‘the true light that enlightens everyone’ (v9) may display the ‘Logos’ to the world, this is quite distinct from its manifestation in Jesus. Therefore God’s revelation in Jesus is unique (cf Mt 11:27; 1Jn 2:23).

Acts 4:12

‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given
among mortals by which we must be saved’

These words are spoken against the background of Peter’s healing of the lame beggar at the gate ‘Beautiful’; but they are not just referring to healing but to the fullness of salvation. They make explicit the belief of the early Christians that the sole focus and means of salvation is Jesus. This is an uncompromising radical statement that is distinctively Christian, the implications of which will continue to unfold below.

Phil 2:9-11

‘Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father.’

These words are to do with destiny and are emphatic in affirming that the future lies with Jesus, that all things, spiritual and material, will acknowledge him completely. They were written in the light of the conflicting religions of the world and put the Christian position for the uniqueness of Jesus very firmly (cf Eph 2:9-11; Rev 5:4-5).



Many or few?

With the vast majority of the total world population having lived and died without ever hearing the good news about Jesus the crucial question is, "What is their eternal destiny? Will any, and if so how many, be saved?" Many Christians hold very strong opinions on this subject. They span the whole spectrum from those who deny salvation to any who have not confessed Jesus as Lord whether or not they have had the opportunity to those who believe that ultimately there will be universal salvation for all.

On this important subject we must take our lead from Jesus who was asked exactly this question and refused to answer it! He did, however, make some telling observations that challenge us about our own response to him while at the same time reminding us of the mystery of God's purposes and the extravagance of his grace:

'Someone asked (Jesus), "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many I tell you, will try to enter and not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us," then in reply he will say to you, "I do not know where you come from." Then you will begin to say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." But he will say, "I do not know where you come from; go away from me all you evildoers!" There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.' (Lk 13:23-30).

Very simply, those who have the privilege of a truth-encounter with Jesus have an awesome responsibility to respond or face exclusion, yet the final manifestation of the kingdom of God will be all-inclusive. Here is the paradox and mystery of salvation. Beware of simplistic and dogmatic answers!

Exploring this question is a thrilling encounter with the nature of God's grace which is wholly unpredictable and yet always overflowing. It is popular to say with some confidence that salvation will surely be given to those of other faiths who are 'moral', 'people of goodwill', 'sincere', 'observers of the law' and so on. This may or may not be so; but to speak like this is to miss the point, it fails to capture the whole spirit of wonderful unpredictability in scripture:

'Here emphasis is always on surprise. It is the sinners who will be welcomed and those who are confident that their place was secure will find themselves outside. God will shock the righteous by his limitless generosity and by his tremendous severity. The ragged beggars from the lanes and ditches will be in the festal hall, and the person who thought their own clothes were good enough will find themselves thrown out (Mt 22). The honest hardworking lad will be out in the dark while the young scoundrel is having a party in his father's house (Lk15). The branch that was part of the vine will be cut off and burned (Jn 15). There will be astonishment both among



the saved and the lost (Mt 25:31-46) ... To refuse to answer the question that our Lord refused to answer is not 'supercilious'; it is simply honest.⁹

As we explore this exciting question we need to do so in the light of the sovereign, serious and yet the joyfully all-embracing unrestrained grace of God in Jesus. As Paul reminds us:

'Do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each will receive commendation from God' (1Cor 4:5).

THE DEATH OF JESUS

Power and scandal

Jesus' rejection of formal religion with its powerful social and political implications led to his execution. However, he saw his crucifixion not only breaking the stranglehold of evil and death through his resurrection but also enabling total all-embracing salvation for every person who has ever lived:

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,
will draw all people to myself"
(Jn 12:32)

'...God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself'
(2Cor 5:19)

'... through him (Jesus) to reconcile to himself *all things* ...
making peace (*shalom*) by the blood of his cross'
(Col 1:20)

'He is the expiation of our sins, and not ours only
but also for the sins of the whole world'
(1Jn 2:2)

'The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that *all* should come to repentance'
(2Pt 3:9)

However, the fact that a spiritual leader should die such a violent and shameful death, has been seen as absurd to many and a stumbling block to faith in others:

'We proclaim Christ crucified,
a scandal to the Jews and an absurdity to the Gentiles'
(1Cor 12:3)

Not to mention the early Jesus-community's claim to his subsequent resurrection!

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin '*The Open Secret*' Grand Rapids 1978 p196



THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Spiritual teachers and leaders die. This comes as no surprise; it stresses their physical humanity. Their tombs often become centres of devotion and pilgrimage. Jesus' unique claim among world spiritual leaders is that he died and then rose again from the dead.

The resurrection of Jesus is pivotal for two essential reasons:

It authenticates his claims: Jesus made some disturbingly extravagant claims about himself and also by others about him; his resurrection proves them all to be true:

‘This Jesus God raised up,
and of that all of us are witnesses’
(Acts 2:32)

‘(God) has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged
in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed,
and of this he has given proof to all by raising him from the dead’
(Acts 17:31)

‘... and was declared to be Son of God with power
according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead,
Jesus Christ our Lord’
(Rm 1:4)

It demonstrates his work: the theme is victory; Jesus defeats, once and for all, the forces of sin, death and evil which all religions struggle with:

‘If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins ...
For since death came through a human being,
the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being;
for as all die in Adam , so all will be made alive in Christ ...
For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet’
(1Cor 15:17, 21-22, 25)

The resurrection releases the life of the Spirit into the life of the believer freeing them from guilt (cf Rm 8:1), bringing a relationship with God (cf Mt 28:20) and power to live (cf Eph 1:1-20). An adherent to any other faith has to fulfil its teachings simply in their own strength.

Resurrection not reincarnation

Among the peoples of the world Hindus, Buddhists and Jains believe in reincarnation, or ‘the transmigration of soul’. This is the conviction that individual souls survive death and are reborn to live again in a different body, in this way passing through a series of lives. Some see the process including animal as well as



human bodies and even involving heavenly and hellish spheres. The nature of these rebirths is governed by the principle of 'karma'; deeds which carry good or evil consequences, a moral law of cause and effect. Those who believe in reincarnation are caught in an inexorable 'wheel of becoming' from which their only hope is to seek 'release' (*moksha*) by practising various types of yoga (Hinduism), by following the 'noble eightfold path' (Buddhism) or acquiring the 'three jewels' (Jainism).

While the Bible states that 'whatever a person sows that they will also reap' (Gal 6:7),¹⁰ it also clearly declares that 'it is appointed for people to die once, and after that the judgment' (Heb 9:27). The historical and bodily resurrection of Jesus makes a declaration that the power of death has been broken forever, it leaves no place for notions of reincarnation. Furthermore, Jesus frequently associated his resurrection with the eternal life of his disciples, for example:

'I am the resurrection and the life.
The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;
and whoever lives and believes in me will never die'
(Jn 11:25)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS

Jesus is distinctive

So it is the person of Jesus that is unique (cf 1Tim 2:5; Acts 17:31). Leaders in other religions call people to follow their teachings; they are voices for spiritual ideas. In contrast Jesus calls people to follow *him*;¹¹ he is the demonstration of spiritual truth. He lived a spotless life through the power of the Spirit (cf Mt 3:17; Rm 5:17; 2Cor 5:21). Jesus identifies himself with God (cf Jn 8:54-59; 10:30-31) and he even allows people to worship him (cf Jn 20:28); something at which both the Buddha and Muhammad would have recoiled from in horror had their followers attempted to do that to them.

Jesus did not come to begin a new religion.

In the well-known story of his conversation with the Samaritan woman Jesus makes some striking statements:

"You will worship the Father
neither on this mountain"
nor in Jerusalem"
(Jn 4:21)

... true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,
for the Father seeks such to worship him.

¹⁰ These are words that some Hindus and Buddhists have used to try and argue that the Bible teaches 'karma' and thus by implication supports the idea of reincarnation.

¹¹ On more than 20 occasions in the Gospels Jesus calls people to follow him



God is spirit
and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth”
(Jn 4:23-24)

Jesus and confrontation

At the same time it is of the nature of things that Jesus will confront and scandalize the adherents to other faiths. He makes it clear that he has ‘not come to bring peace but a sword’ (Mt 10:34), and ‘blessed is the person who takes no offence’ at him (Mt 11:6). He came to the Jews and fulfilled their faith and yet he was executed as a threat to their religion. It is no different with other faiths. Jesus’ uniqueness disturbs deep spiritual issues; some are:

There is the call to follow Jesus as the only way; he is not a guru but *the* saviour, an absolute demand that is an offence to many; people want synthesis but it simply isn’t possible with Jesus’ claims;

- There is the essential historical nature of Jesus’ work; he is not just a teacher of ethical and theological concepts like others, his atoning work is rooted in time and space; Buddhism (*Bodhi* tree) and Islam (*Hijira*) have historical moments but they are of a different order;
- There is the world affirming attitude of Jesus’ teaching, existence is neither an illusion nor a dualism but life in a God-created world that is good; neither detachment nor asceticism are his way;
- There is the character of God in relation to the problem of evil; becoming mortal to take the consequences of human and satanic rebellion once and for all, bringing freedom and forgiveness;
- There is salvation that is both present and eternal, physical, spiritual and absolutely certain, a free gift of God’s grace towards us; Hindu devotion (*bhakti*) is human effort towards God, this is typical of other faiths also;
- There is the welcome and status of the poor and outcast in God’s kingdom;
- There is the scandal of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead!

Inclusive and exclusive

The paradox of the uniqueness of Jesus is that he is both inclusive and exclusive, a truth that is so well illustrated in the following words:

‘If God’s purposes are universal in scope, they are also at the same time exclusive in character ... The one to whom Christians will move and the one through whom they will view God’s inclusive and exclusive purpose, is Christ himself. In Christ there is both universal scope and unique means. It is Jesus who talks about those from east and west taking their places in the kingdom. It is Jesus who has other sheep who are not of his fold. It is Jesus whom God raised up. The gospel is the power of God and the wisdom of God to both Jews and Greeks. It is in Christ that all are made alive.



Yet - Jesus is also the way, the truth and the life. He is the name by which people must be saved: and he has offered for all time a sacrifice for sins'.¹²

The significance of the uniqueness of Jesus is drawn out in this important reflection:

'If God could have *adequately* revealed himself in any other way, how can one possibly believe he would have gone to the almost unbelievable length of the incarnation? This is no mere theophany, we must remind ourselves, no mere appearance of God among humanity, as the Hindu believes to have happened in an avatar. It was God actually becoming human, with all that this necessarily involved. And if God could have dealt with the problem of evil in any other way whatever, how can one possibly believe that he would, in Christ, himself have taken the sinners place and borne the sinners guilt - with all the agony [to say nothing of the mystery] expressed in that cry of dereliction from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"¹³

The responsibility of the uniqueness of Jesus being maintained in the life and ministry of the church is powerfully illustrated in these words:

'Christians say, "Yes", to Christianity as a vehicle of Jesus, but. "No", to it when it betrays that message, as it often has ... if Christianity is unique it is only because Christ is. If it ceases to witness to him, it ceases to have any value for the human race.'¹⁴

Dialogue

Communicating truth involves dialogue; conversing together and the sharing of selves. Too much thinking about 'sharing the gospel' is seen in one-way terms; preaching and teaching. They have their place of course; but sharing truth with people of other faiths must involve listening and hearing as well as talking and telling. There must be mutual respect and real vulnerability.

We see this with Jesus; he dialogues with Nicodemus at night (Jn 3:1-21), with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:7-30), with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners at the meal table (Mk 2:16; Mt 9:10; Lk 5:30).

We see this with Paul; there are some important examples in Acts 17:

- In Thessalonica he argues with the Jews in the synagogue over three sabbaths 'from the scriptures' that Jesus was the Messiah; some were 'persuaded' (v3-4)
- In Berea the Jews 'welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures everyday to see whether these things were so' (v11)

¹² Bill Persson Bishop of Doncaster quoted in '*Christ's Exclusive Claims and Inter-faith Dialogue*' by Christopher Sugden Grove Pastoral Series No 22 1985 p16

¹³ Norman Anderson '*Christianity and World Religions*' IVP 1984 p139-140

¹⁴ Christopher Lamb '*Lion Handbook of World Religions*' Lion 1982 p363



- In Athens he 'argued in the synagogue with Jews and devout persons and in the marketplace everyday with those who happened to be there ... philosophers debated with him (v17-18)

We see conversation, communication the exchange of ideas, the cut and thrust of argument in order to get to the truth. Christian dialogue must have essential characteristics:

'Partners agree to accept each other as persons ... the essential requirement is not that we agree beforehand or negotiate a compromise, but that I have a willingness to listen to them, to understand and to seek mutual enrichment. I do not impose my personality, but put myself at their disposal with all that I am. As a Christian I report what I have come to know about Jesus Christ, I share my faith not as an achievement but as a gift of grace. I shall be glad to listen to my partner and learn much as I hear about their spiritual journey. Dialogue will be richer if we both give ourselves as we are, for the Christian this must include witness. It is possible for convinced Christians to enter into true dialogue with convinced Hindus, Muslims or Jews without giving up their basic convictions. There must be 'reverence for reverence'. The fact that Christians believe they know the source of divine truth does not mean they have nothing to learn from people of other faiths. We will often be humbled and challenged by seeing true devotion, unflinching loyalty to the truth as they see it in other religions.'¹⁵

We sensitively recognise that both our commitments are but two of a number of possible commitments a person could make. Even if we are convinced that our position is the truth, it is most likely they will believe the same about theirs. Belief is a process and this must be reflected in our dialogue. Christians have a tradition of arrogance in the way they share their faith, but this was not the way of Jesus so it must not be ours either. It is the person who is most secure in what they believe that can be most vulnerable. True dialogue should leave everyone changed for the better; as in Acts 10 where both Peter and Cornelius were significantly impacted as a result of their dialogue.

A concluding thought, "Could a Christian get 'converted' as a result of dialogue?" If that means being changed and effected then, "Yes". There can be no dialogue without risk! There will be truth to be learned from the experience and reflection of other faiths that should be gladly embraced; if it is truth then it will quite naturally find its place under the Lordship of Jesus.

Discipleship

Communicating truth longs for decision; people making the choice that leads to discipleship. Dialogue does not have evangelism as its hidden agenda, but as a Christian sharing yourself will inevitably involve sharing your faith. There is the commission to, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news," [Mk 16:15], but there is also the passion to share what you have "seen and heard" [Acts 4:20]. Our

¹⁵ Adapted and slightly paraphrased from Visser 't Hooft '**No Other Name**' London 1963 p117-118 quoted in Anderson p184-185.



proclamation; whether in conversation or in declaration will be empowered by the power and person of the Holy Spirit.

When communicating to the Jews the early Christian appeal is to the Hebrew scriptures showing how they are fulfilled in Jesus:

- Psalm 16:8-11: as testimony that he had not suffered decay, as David had done;
- Joel 2:28-32: as evidence that the promise of the Spirit was fulfilled;
- Psalm 110:1: as a sign that the 'coming one' is more exalted than David;
- Psalm 2:7: as evidence for the resurrection; 'today have I begotten you'.

When communicating with Gentiles they appeal to their pagan worship as a wholly inadequate expression of the true God who reveals himself in creation and human experience:

- **Acts 14:15-17** (Lystra): 'We bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth and the sea and all that is in them ... he has not left himself without witness in doing good - giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling your hearts with joy.'
- **Acts 17:22-31** (Athens): 'I see how extremely religious you are in every way ... I found an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown God". What you therefore worship as unknown I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth but does not live in shrines made by human hands.'

To both Jew and Gentile the crisis was the person of Jesus; he is the one in whom God is acting and his resurrection from the dead is the supreme evidence of that fact. Passages from the Hebrew scriptures relating to Yahweh are applied to him, and as 'Lord' he is contrasted with the Imperial Roman Caesar and the mystery cults (cf 1Cor 8:5-6, 10:21).

In our dialogue with other world faiths we need to take our example from the New Testament, they start with the people's knowledge of God and spiritual experience but move across to the person of Jesus and his authenticity validated in the resurrection. In a faith like Hinduism both the word 'God' and argument from 'religious experience' can mean anything. Plurality and open-endedness are so much part of its character that you can start the dialogue anywhere but draw a conclusion nowhere, because the experience can only be authenticated by the person who experiences it. Hence, it is essential to always focus on the historicity, objectivity and uniqueness of Jesus.

Questions

1. What positive things can we learn from an encounter with world religions?
2. In what way can we say that Jesus is unique in the light of other spiritual teachers?



3. Will people who have never heard the gospel be saved? What should be our attitude to evangelism and mission to people of other faiths, and why?

Reflection

Paul makes an important observation, "From one ancestor (God) made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, having determined their appointed seasons and the boundaries of the places where they would live; so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him - though indeed he is not far from each one of us" [Acts 17:26-27]. What are the implications of these words for understanding the uniqueness of Jesus and the question of salvation? If God deliberately created the world to be place where human beings would scatter, develop different cultures, and by implication therefore different spiritualities, for the direct purpose of finding him; what does this actually imply? How does the searching, groping, finding and not being very far from each one of us relate to the person of Jesus?

Reading and Resources

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