

What Makes Christianity Different?

By: Joel Lindsey

All religions are basically the same, right? How could Christianity be any different?

No matter how each religion gets there, the end result is usually the same: there is a higher power or force of some kind; human life is valuable; peace is better than violence; something happens after we die; and so on. There may be some contradictions in the details, but most religions hold these same general truths.

Many world religions have a creation story, a flood story, a rescued-people story, and so forth. There's also usually some kind of key person in each religion. Imperfect as people are, each religion presents the case for at least one person who "did it right." This person is the model; everyone else is supposed to strive to become like them. In fact, each major world religion is even similar in the fact that it declares itself unique in some way.

So how could Christianity *really* be much different from other religions?

Well, the radical claims of Christianity truly do set it apart. Because of these bizarre claims, Christianity can be viewed as either ridiculously unbelievable or something to be seriously considered.

As the famous atheist-turned-Christian C. S. Lewis once stated: "Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, is of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."¹

The Claims of the Leader

The primary difference between Christianity and all other religions is rooted in the differences between Jesus and other religious leaders.

Almost no one denies that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person who lived two thousand years ago, so the issue is not about Jesus' existence. We must look at what Jesus claimed, for it is his claims that ignite debates about him.

Unlike other spiritual leaders, Jesus openly declared that he was one with God, according to the earliest Christian writers.² To see him, Jesus said, is to see God the Father.³ Jesus went about forgiving sins⁴—something only God could do—performing miracles,⁵ and healing the sick.⁶

For these and other reasons, the earliest followers of Jesus began to think of him as more than a human being. They began to believe his claim of divinity, and these Jesus-followers began to maintain that he was indeed God in the flesh.⁷

Those of other (or no) faiths may accept that Jesus was a good man, a wise prophet, and even that he died at the hands of his enemies. Only Christians, however, believe that Jesus was not only good and wise but also fully human and fully divine. These beliefs were reinforced by the

reports of his resurrection. Thus, Christians today are convinced that Jesus' life and claims have cosmic implications.

Implications for Now and Later

Christians say that the most profound of these implications lies in the issue of salvation. Salvation, as taught by many of the world's religions, is a type of deliverance from the physical and spiritual adversity of the world, as well as a rescuing from suffering or punishment in the afterlife.

Buddhists believe that to reach Nirvana, a transcendental state of bliss, a person must follow the Noble Eightfold Path. This process of personal effort and discipline will end suffering for the individual. Hindus believe that one reaches Moksha—freedom from this world and the cycle of death and reincarnation—by practicing self-sacrifice, meditation, and certain levels of self-realization. Muslims believe that Allah grants Paradise to those who live a life of moral uprightness, using the Five Pillars as basic guidelines.⁸

This is another area in which Christians depart from the norm. In essence, other religions state, “You need to do these things and live this way in order to earn your way to salvation.” But Christianity says, “What needs to happen in order for you to know God and receive salvation has already been done for you by Jesus Christ.”

At its core, Christianity is the joyful news that Jesus lived and died to open the way to God for each of us. In this act, Jesus saved us from the consequence of our sins—eternal isolation from God—and began to offer us instead forgiveness and eternal life in relationship with God.

Christianity says that Jesus has done everything necessary for people to have the kind of relationship with God that leads to peace in the present and hope for the future.⁹ For many, this seems too good to be true.

Doing Good

Many atheists, agnostics, deists, and devout followers of other religions are very good people. They live good lives and do good things. They are honorable people, and their contributions to humanity across religions and borders are much needed.

But if we are honest with ourselves, we all sometimes do things we regret; we all make mistakes; we all suffer from egocentric selfishness; we all fail. And what if this “good outweighs the bad” mentality isn't enough?

According to Christianity, God took the pressure off us by sending Jesus to live a perfect life for us. In Christian understanding, salvation is a gift: “for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”¹⁰

For Christians, Jesus is more than a teacher or a role model. He is the means by which people can find freedom from their burdens and baggage and make real changes that improve their lives and the lives of those they love. Christians believe that because salvation is already available to

those who believe, sheer joy in that realization and thankfulness for a personal relationship with God prompt right actions and righteous living as described in the Bible.

The Christian does this from a position of gratitude, faith, and humility—not burden or obligation. In one sense, it is the purest form of motivation, because the actions are not being done for personal gain. The reward has already been given.

The Gospel

The personal claims of Jesus and the espoused implications of his life, death, and resurrection stand in distinct contrast to other religions. This is what Christians through the years have called the gospel—which literally means “good news.” The gospel of Jesus is the good news that everything has already been done for you. No other religion makes that kind of upfront gospel promise.

Incredible? Yes. Outrageous? Yes. Hard to believe? It certainly can be. But, if true, it is also profoundly important. It’s worth exploring further.

NOTE: You can also find this article with links to other resources at <http://www.explorethegod.com/what-makes-christianity-different-from-other-religions>

• Footnotes

1. C. S. Lewis “Christian Apologetics,” *God in the Dock* (London: Collins: 1979).
 2. *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, John 10:25-30.
 3. Ibid., John 14:5-9.
 4. Ibid., Mark 2:1–12, for example.
 5. Ibid., Mark 4:35–41, for example.
 6. Ibid., Matthew 15:21–28, Mark 8:22–26, Luke 4:40–41, and John 4:43–54. These are just a handful of examples.
 7. Ibid., John 1:1-14.
 8. *The Qur’an*, Surah 23:102 John 1:1-14–103, 5:9.
 9. *The Holy Bible*, John 14:6, 16:33; Romans 5:8, 6:23, 8:1, 8:6, 10:9–10, 10:13; Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:8–9, 2:14–16, Galatians 5:22–23, Philippians 4:7.
 10. Ibid., Ephesians 2:8–9.
-