
Incarnation: The Need and Necessity - (Is Jesus Just Another Avatar?) - Sudhakar Mondithoka

Incarnation is of critical importance to the Christian faith, because what we believe about Christ relates to and affects many other crucial Christian doctrines like the Trinity, Sin, and Salvation. Belief in incarnation has been at the core of Christianity, because this doctrine captures for us Christ's self-understanding and in an important sense Christ is Christianity. Biblical teaching on this is both abundant and unmistakably clear (John 1: 1-3, 14-18; Galatians 4: 4; Philippians 2: 7-8; 1 Timothy 3: 16; 1 John 4: 2; 2 John 7; Rev. 5; 6-9, etc.). Incarnation is unique to Christ and Christianity and it sets them both apart from other so-called gods and faiths. But there are many who think and teach that there is nothing unique about Christ and Christianity, because of their belief that the Hindu Avatar and Christian Incarnation are the same – there might be superficial dissimilarities, but the similarities are fundamental. And there are others who raise different questions about incarnation. Therefore, in this articles I will give the meaning of incarnation, discuss its need and necessity, answer two questions – Is it possible for God to become a Human? How can we believe in the miracle of virginal conception in this Scientific Age? and will finally zero in on 'Is Jesus Just Another Avatar?'

What is Incarnation? – The Meaning of Incarnation:

Incarnation (Latin *in carne* and Greek *en sarki*) literally means "in the flesh". *Incarnation* refers to the historic act whereby the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word (Gk. *Logos*) without ceasing to be God, took upon or added to himself a human nature and became fully human. This is a permanent union and Christ will remain fully God and fully man, yet one person, forever. The orthodox belief comes from the Chalcedonian definition: In the one person (*hypostasis*) of Jesus Christ there concur two natures (complete humanity and complete divinity), and they are united in his person 'without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation'.¹ In other words, Christ is both God and Man, 'Perfect in divinity, perfect in humanity; truly God and truly Man'. This is the theological meaning of the simple expression 'the Word became flesh and made hid dwelling among us' (John 1: 14). But why should the Word, God the Son become flesh (human)?

Why should God Incarnate? – The Need and Necessity of Incarnation:

It is obvious that we are all finite. Finite man cannot know the infinite and invisible God. Man can only know about God, but cannot know God, because the gap between the Infinite and the finite is always infinite and the finite cannot cross the infinite gap and reach the Infinite (God). Therefore, if man has to know or reach God, God only should take initiative and show the way. This perhaps is why there is the idea of God appearing in human history as a man in some major religions like Hinduism (concept of the 'avatars') and Christianity (concept of the 'incarnation').

¹ See John Macquarrie, "Incarnation" in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, Ed. Alister McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1993), 271.

The second reason why God should incarnate is the problem of sin. Man is an incurably religious being and has always been seeking to find the truth about God and to know God. In fact, religion is about man trying to reach God. The word *religion* (Latin *re*, and *legion*) means reconnecting. So the universal religious quest is a quest to reconnect with God. This implies that something went wrong somewhere and humans lost their connection with their Creator. The Bible says that human sin, which is the tendency to be self-centered, separated man from God and brought all the evil consequences like envy, fear, loneliness, suspicion, guilt, restlessness, and death. Sin is a congenital disease among humans. We are born with its infection in our nature. This perhaps is why our ancestors prayed (expressing a desperate cry of their hearts) and many religious Hindus, after reciting the Gayatri Mantra, still pray saying, “*Papo ham papa-karmaham papatma papa-sambhavah, Trahi mam, pundarikaksha sarva-papa-hara Hare,*” which means, “I am sinful, I commit sin or sinful deeds, my nature is sinful, I am conceived in sin, Save me, O thou lotus-eyed Hari, the remover of sin.”² A Jewish man (Paul) said like this: I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out and the evil I do not want to do, I keep on doing. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:14-25). The Bible says that all humans have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and that the result of sin is death (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). If we just look into our own hearts and look around we can recognize that sin is a real problem.

Some say that we should not call humans sinners because of their belief that humans are essentially good or divine and one man went to the extent of saying that calling humans sinners is the greatest of all sins. But what does the reality show? Reality seems to indicate that we are indeed sinful, although it is undeniable that there is some (or may be a lot of) good also in us. We are all capable of doing some (rather a great deal of) good and are actually doing also (helping the poor and needy, forgiving, sacrificing for the sake of others in love, etc.). Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi, and the many who are right now helping the earthquake victims in India and Pakistan are examples. We are also painfully aware of our or human tendency to steal, lie, murder, cheat, and so on and we know both perpetrators and victims of all this. The inhuman and barbarous killing of thousand or millions by Hitler’s Nazi rulers, by religiously motivated mobs in Gujarat, by militants and insurgents in different parts of our country and the world bear witness to this truth that we were created to be good (with freedom of choice) but have gone bad and have a perennial problem of moral corruption in us. On an average, we will find 8-12 reports of appalling evil committed by humans in a newspaper.³ We also know that what is reported in the press or media as far as the moral evil committed by humans is concerned is negligible when compared to what happens in actuality. The fact that we lock our doors, do not trust each other, have police stations, courts of law, bureaus to check corruption, etc, further confirm the truth that there is a real problem. Reality confirms the fact that we are sinful and we need a Saviour. This is the second reason why God needed to come into the history of mankind - to pay the penalty for human sin and grant us forgiveness for sin and salvation from all the consequences of sin including the eternal separation from God. In brief, God needed to incarnate for our redemption.

² Quoted in Monier Williams, *Indian Wisdom* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co., 2001), 158.

³ Refer to The Hindu, Chennai (Saturday, October 8, 2005) – page numbers 1, 3, 4, 8, 15, 19, and 20 for over 12 such reports.

The third reason why God needed to incarnate is to give us a much fuller revelation of Himself. God reveals Himself in different ways – through Nature, our conscience, His acts in history, and the Scriptures. We can know about God to some extent through all these. But for us to know more about God and to know Him personally, God has to come to us. So in Christ God came personally and has given us an incomparably more advanced revelation concerning His nature and the plan of salvation through His own person and work. This is true because only God can reveal God to us adequately.⁴ “The great God who made this world actually came down to the world that He had made, and walked and talked with the people whom He had created. . . . That is the marvel of the incarnation.”⁵ So according to the Bible, Christ is the final and perfect revelation of God to men (Heb. 1:1-4; John 1:14, 18). Incarnation has not only made it possible for God to provide redemption for mankind, but it also made possible a much fuller revelation of God to mankind. “This is what the Bible says and Christians believe, but “How can we believe the God became a Human and is it possible at all for God to become human” ask some and it is to this that we turn now.

Is it Possible for God to become a Human? – The Rationality of Incarnation:

Many wonder how God could become a man or take humanity upon Himself either because of their Greek conception of God’s ‘impassibility’⁶ or because of their understanding about the nature of man as basically an animal that evolved from the lower forms of life (this might entail that God and Man are incompatible). But the divine and the human, though distinct from each other are not foreign to each other or mutually exclusive. Since man (in the generic sense) is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27) and humans (men and women) are the most God-like creatures in the entire creation, a union between the Divine and the human was definitely within the realm of possibility, and given God’s desire to rescue humanity from sin and its consequences, is seen to be the most natural and effective method. Divinity and humanity are not contradictory categories. They are more like a set and a sub-set (Ps. 82:6; John 10:34). We are not talking about the existential (sinful, post-fall), but about the essential or original (sinless, pre-fall) humanity here. So Jesus’ humanity was not the humanity of sinful human beings (that we are familiar with), but the humanity possessed by Adam and Eve before their fall. So Divinity and humanity are not incompatible categories and God could assume the human form, because man was made in the likeness of God. God could not take upon Himself a nature wholly foreign to His own, nor become that which is altogether unlike Him. This is why “God chose to become incarnate in a creature very much like himself. It is quite possible that part of God’s purpose in making humanity in his own image was to facilitate the incarnation that would someday take place.”⁷ This is perfectly logical, because God is all knowing and he must have known (in his omniscience) that humans would someday misuse their freedom, disobey Him and bring decay, destruction, and death upon themselves. Incarnation is certainly not an after thought nor an emergency plan, but something that God knew even before creating humans. This is why the Bible says that the Lamb, Christ the Saviour was (of course from God’s perspective and in the Divine plan) slain even before the creation of the world

⁴ Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Washington: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1983), 205-206.

⁵ Ibid.

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⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 753.

(Revelation 13: 8; Ephesians 1: 4). Some would still say, “Well, incarnation might logically make sense, but is it scientifically conceivable” and we will briefly address this issue now.

Is Virginal Conception Scientifically Acceptable? – The Scientific Evaluation of Incarnation:

At the outset it has to be underlined that science is not the only avenue of knowledge and everything is not scientifically verifiable, because operational science limits itself to the natural, observable, repeatable, and uniformly occurring events, and not the singular and particularly the supernatural or miraculous events. What I propose to do in this section is to show how it is not unscientific and perfectly logical (in the scientific sense) to believe in the incarnation, particularly the virginal conception aspect of it. The belief that God supernaturally brought about the conception of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary makes sense now (in this age of cloning and genetic engineering) than ever before. In nature also there are phenomena like parthenocarpy and parthenogenesis⁸ that we are already familiar with. And now we, humans, with our limited knowledge, power, and know-how are able to by pass the normal and natural reproductive process (union between a female/mother and a male/father) and in a sense artificially produce animals (Dolly the sheep is a famous example and there have been cows, pigs, rats, etc., that have been produced) through cloning techniques, of course using materials already available in nature. Now it won't be very surprising if a group of scientists somewhere in the world announce in the near future that they have succeeded in cloning a human being. If we with our finite knowledge and power are able to do this, can't God with His infinite knowledge and power do what the Bible says He did in bringing about virginal conception and thus the birth of Jesus? No doubt, what happened was a miracle (Luke 1: 26-37), a supernatural event. We can't explain it fully, unless God gives all the details to us, because we are limited by the natural and God has not chosen to do so. But we are only saying and trying to show that this miracle that God almighty performed makes both rational and scientific sense, it is indeed conceivable and acceptable in a world that God himself created. I want to now consider the issue of whether Jesus is just another avatar.

Is Jesus Just Another Avatar? – The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ and His Incarnation:

Often our Hindu friends claim that there is no difference between Christianity and Hinduism and try to justify this claim by saying that the concepts of 'Trinity' and 'Thrimurthis' and 'Incarnation' and 'Avatar' are the same or fundamentally similar and superficially dissimilar. But is this true? Many would even be willing to accept that Jesus is one of the avatars and some even worship Jesus along with the other gods and goddesses. But is Jesus just another avatar?

Avatar (Skt., to descend into or descent) refers to the manifestation of Vishnu (the preserver god who along with Brahma, the creator god and Shiva, the destroyer god constitutes the Hindu Thrimurthis) either in animal or humans or hybrid (animal-human) forms to manifest and to establish dharma – to destroy the evil and to bless the righteous (Skt. *Dusta sikshna* and *sishta rekshna*) or to destroy *adharma* and establish *dharma*. This concept is found in the Bhagavad-Gita (4:6-8) and in the Puranas. Some texts suggest 22 avatars, but generally only 10 are recognized of which 9 are in the past and one will be in

⁸ Production of fruits without cross pollination and fertilization and the production of animals without fertilization (the union of the male and female gametes, the reproductive elements) and just from one respectively.

the future. The Fish (Skt., Matsya) avatar was for saving the ancient man Manu from a devastating flood by towing away his boat to safety, the Tortoise (Kurma) descent was for being instrumental in providing nectar for the gods to make them immortal, the Boar (Varaha) was for kill a demon, Hiranyaksha and rescuing the earth when it was inundated, the Man-Lion (Narasimha) was for saving a devotee from persecution in the hands of Hiranyakasipu, the demon king and brother of Hiranyaksha by killing him (he got the boon from Brahma that neither man nor animal would be able to kill him and hence the hybrid form), the Dwarf (Vamana) was for getting rid of the demon king Mahabali, Rama-with-the axe (Parasurama, the angry man) was for saving the Brahmin caste from the tyranny of the Kshatriyas, Rama (the perfect man) was for annihilating the demon king, Ravana, and Krishna (the divine statesman) was for the purpose of ensuring that Arjuna would uphold his sacred caste dharma. The next is Buddha (the compassionate man) or alternatively Balarama, the brother of Krishna according to some. Kalki (man on white horse) will be in future at the end of the Kali Yuga, the end of the Age and after this a whole new cycle of cosmic history will begin.

When we contrast the concept of avatar with Christ's incarnation it will become crystal clear that there are fundamental differences and only superficial similarities between these two. For example, incarnation is real, historical, permanent and a once for all time act of God, where as avatars are multiple, not historical, and not permanent. The incarnation was and is for the purpose of seeking and saving the sinful humanity (by making the sacrifice or atonement once and for all for the sins of all mankind, because all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God) and the different avatars are for different purposes as described above and in the ultimate analysis the purpose is exactly the opposite. Lastly, but most importantly none of the avatars made any unique and exclusive claims like the ones made by Jesus Christ for himself and those, if true show that Jesus is not just one of the many avatars, but the only true God-Man and the Saviour of the world. But making claims in itself does not prove anything. So, we have to see if there are any objective criteria to evaluate the claims and to verify their truth or otherwise

There have been some that claimed to be and some that are claiming to be the God-incarnate or God in human form. But how can we know who the real God-incarnate or God-Man is? It is important for us to have some criteria⁹ that will help us to know who the real God-Man is, among the claimants. Seekers after truth and philosophers have struggled with this issue and have come up with some criteria that I have listed and explained below. If God became a man, then we would expect Him to:

1. *Have a supernatural entry into human history.* Why? Because, a child born naturally will be a natural human child and cannot be looked upon as God in the human form. Jesus alone had a unique entrance into human history through virginal conception. It was foretold by the prophets (Gen. 3:15; Is. 7:14) and confirmed by the gospel accounts (Matt. 1:18-25; Lk. 1:26-38; 2:1-7). Virgin birth made possible the uniting of the full deity and full humanity in one person and the person born was God-Man (not just God nor just a man). This must be the case, because only a true human can suffer and die and only a true divine person could give that suffering an infinite value. Moreover, only an infinite God could bear the full penalty for all the sins of all the people. Any finite creature would be incapable of bearing that penalty. So when Jesus suffered, it was God the Son who suffered on the cross in his humanity. Also

⁹ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 285-328. I have got most of the criteria from this chapter and over the years I have done my own study and am convinced about their validity.

only some one who was truly and fully God and truly and fully human could be the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5).

2. *Be sinless. Why?* Because, the one who comes to save sinners should be free from sin. Just as a blind man cannot show the way to another blind man, a sinner cannot save another sinner (Ps. 49:7-9; Heb. 9:11-28; 10:1-18). Virgin birth made it possible for Christ's true humanity without inheriting the corrupt moral nature. The sin nature that could have possibly been transmitted to Jesus from Mary was prevented by the work of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1:35).¹⁰ Jesus demonstrated sinlessness in his Character. His sinlessness is established by the testimonies of Jesus Himself (John 8:29), His friends (John 6:69; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5; Heb. 7:26; 2 Cor. 5:21; Lk. 1:35), and even his enemies (Matt. 27:19, 24, 54; Lk. 23:41).
3. *Have an acute sense of difference from other men who are mere men. Why?* Because, it would be odd for God in the human form to forget that He is God and not just a man and then to realize suddenly that He is God. And Jesus demonstrated that sense of difference throughout His life in the world in His words and deeds (Lk. 2:49; John 2:13-17).
4. *Speak the greatest words ever spoken or taught the greatest things ever taught by any man. Why?* Because, the infinite wisdom of God should be reflected in His teachings and His words should have unparalleled impact. History bears testimony to the fact that Christ's words have impacted mankind more profoundly than the words of any other person in history.
5. *Have universal and lasting influence. Why?* Because, it would be odd for the God of the Universe to be the god of a tribe or small group of people when He comes into human history to reveal Himself and for His influence to be limited and temporary. Christ's influence on human history and life is universal, lasting, and unparalleled. He is the focal point of our history and without Him we cannot make sense of our history.
6. *Satisfy the spiritual hunger of mankind universally. Why?* Because if the God of the Universe comes into human history to save all mankind, it would be odd for Him not to satisfy the spiritual hunger of mankind universally. Jesus has satisfied and is satisfying the spiritual hunger of people from every tongue and nation.
7. *Demonstrate supernatural powers. Why?* Because, when the God of the Universe or the Creator God enters into the Space-time universe, He should demonstrate His power over His own creation. Otherwise, we cannot be sure that He is the God-incarnate. Jesus uniquely demonstrated power over nature, disease, and death.
8. *Exercise power over death. Why?* Because, death is the ultimate destroyer of meaning in human life and it is a consequence of sin. So if God comes to deliver us from sin and death and to give us hope of eternal life, He should demonstrate power over death. Jesus demonstrated His power over death when he called dead people back to life but more importantly when He came back to life (resurrected) on the third day.

If God has come into the world in the form of a man and if we have to accept the claims of a person to be the 'God-Man' and the Saviour of the world, the above eight criteria should be fulfilled in His birth, life and death. If these eight things are not true of any person who

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 531.

has claimed to be or who is believed to be, God in the human form, he can be looked upon as a man only, but not as God-man. This is like saying that if a triangle exists it must have three sides and the sum of the three angles should be 180°. Jesus Christ is the only one who fulfils the above criteria and hence qualifies to be the God-incarnate. Incarnation (the infinite, omnipotent, and eternal God, the Son becoming man and joining himself to a human nature forever will remain for eternity the most profound miracle and the most profound mystery in all the universe.¹¹ But God has done this for us so that we might know Him and enjoy Him forever and the question of our final, eternal destiny is directly linked to what we do with this truth about Jesus.

WAS JESUS TYPICAL OR EXCEPTIONAL? – L.T.JEYACHANDRAN

All the three major theistic religions viz., Islam, Judaism and Christianity would agree with our conclusion that the Ultimate Reality, God, will have to be an Infinite Person Who is both transcendent and immanent. Islam would however emphasise His transcendence at some cost to His immanence. Islam and Judaism would clearly part company with Christianity when it comes to the plurality of Personality within the Unity of the Godhead. The tragedy of Judaism is that the Old Testament indicated that God was in some mysterious way a plurality. The Jew as hard put to explain passages like Psalm 45:6,7 by holding to an absolute Unity of the godhead. In the same way, his Scriptures implied that the Messiah was in some sense both divine and human. Jesus pointed up this difficulty to His fellow-Jews in the paradox of Psalm 110:1. The Jews were unable to answer Jesus on this point. We must be grateful to the Jews for carefully preserving the manuscripts including passages which went against their idea of monotheism. The full revelation of the doctrine of Trinity, however, had to await the completion of the New Testament.

As was sought to be established in the previous article, the God of the Bible is both transcendent and immanent, One Who is Personal and Who has a plurality of personality within the Unity of His being. The full and final communication of this God with the crown of His creation, humankind, had to be more than verbal - it had to be incarnational. The Originator of this communication was God Himself and the receptor was the human race. In order that the communication was perfect and distortionless, the Medium had to fully partake of the characteristics of both. In other words, He had to be fully god and fully man. Thus, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews could say that the earlier prepositional communications from God had been consummated in the personal incarnational life of His Son Jesus Christ (1:1,2).

Some years ago, Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (who became our second President) made this statement as Spalding Professor of Eastern Ethics at Oxford University, 'Jesus is not exceptional but typical.' This article is devoted to an analysis of the truth content of this statement.

Firstly, the claim of Christ to uniqueness is repugnant to some solely because it is unique. They have no problems with god-men and gurus who claim to be reincarnations of others who have gone before but have serious reservations regarding Christ. They would prefer

¹¹ Ibid, 563.

to reduce Him to manageable proportions by calling Him a great teacher. Let us first examine this aspect.

It must be said that from a philosophical perspective, it is not difficult to conceive of a unique approach to truth. All great questions of life have only one answer. Conflicting and contradictory answers cannot be valid. Jesus' unique claim for Himself while answering Thomas (John 14:6) is a statement which is philosophically and logically reasonable. (Whether He had any basis at all for making such a claim is a separate matter and is discussed in the following paragraphs). Even those who deny unique and exclusive approaches to truth would insist that their own approach is unique and exclusive! Otherwise, they would have nothing to say! Truth, by definition is therefore exclusive and narrow. It has to exclude errors in order to qualify to be truth. If I should insist that the sum of 2 and 2 can only be 4 and nothing else, no one in his right mind would accuse me of being narrow minded! In fact, in every department of life we proceed on this basis in our search for truth. However, when it comes to the most important issues concerning God, we abdicate our intellectual responsibility by embracing the wrong kind of broad-mindedness in our pursuit of truth. From John 14:6, we conclude that Jesus made this unique claim for Himself as the Truth. There is no reason why His claim should be rejected out of hand just because it is unique. For this very reason, in fact, we ought to investigate His claims all the more seriously.

Secondly, we turn to the question of whether empirical evidence exists which would force us to accept His claim of uniqueness. Here again we refer back to another statement of Dr. Radhakrishnan made in a different context, 'Christians are ordinary people who make extraordinary claims!'

The most astonishing claims Christians make relate to Jesus Christ. This Man lived in a country about 4000 km. west of India in an obscure part of the globe which was under Roman rule 2000 years ago during His lifetime. He did not travel more than 200 miles of a single journey in His life; He never wrote a book, and did not speak a foreign language. He lived under the stigma of an illegitimate birth, and had a public exposure of about 31/2 years and died a criminal's death. He is reputed to have risen from the dead three days after His death. Yet His influence has spread far and wide throughout the world. Christians claim that this Man was the unique - spiritual not biological - 'Son' of God and outside of His Name, there is no salvation for humankind. What a stupendous claim! The awesomeness of this claim is seen in stark relief by C.S. Lewis: "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I do not accept His claim to be God'. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse." (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York; The Macmillan Company, 1952).

To facilitate our consideration of Jesus' claims within the limitations of space, I suggest that we look into (i) the prophetic record within Jesus' Jewish community which predicted the coming of such a person, (ii) the historicity of His life, (iii) His unusual birth, (iv) His spotless life and incomparable teaching both implying His claim to deity, (v) His sacrificial death, (vi) His resurrection, and (vii) the continuing influence of His life in the world.

1. Jesus was born as a Jew. His community believed in the divine inspiration and authority of the Scriptures consisting of 22 books (the same as the 39 books of the Christian Old Testament). These books had consistently predicted the coming of a special Personage whom the Jews called the Messiah, or the Anointed One. The last of the Old Testament books was completed in the Hebrew language by the 5th century B.C. The Greek translation of the Old Testament was ready by 250 B.C. There are at least 300 references to the Messiah in the Old Testament out of which 61 specific fulfillments are quoted by Josh McDowell in his book, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict - Vol I* (Here's Life Publishers, Inc., Calif., 1991; pp.144-166). Using the science of probability, Peter Stoner says that 'the chance that any man might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled...eight (of these) prophecies is 1 in 10¹⁷'. After considering 48 prophecies, Stoner says, "...We find the chance that any one man fulfilled all 48 prophecies to be in 1 in 10¹⁵⁷." (*Science Speaks*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1963). This piece of evidence has a two-way confirmation; it establishes that Old Testament as authoritative while confirming the uniqueness of Christ.

2. Few people would seriously question the historicity of Jesus. There has been a spate of publications in the recent past questioning the authenticity of Christ. The interesting fact is that these authors do not seem to agree with one another in details of their theses except in their sole aim of debunking the historical Christ. Over against this tendency, we see the near-total unanimity of the ancient documents, both biblical and extra-biblical, to bear witness to the Person of Jesus. F.F. Bruce, Rylands Professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester could say, "some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth', but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is an axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar." (*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th Revised edition. Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972). (The question of reliability of Scripture will be dealt with separately in a future issue of Truth For The Times).

3. It is reasonable to expect that if God were to become man, His entry into the world would be, to say the least, unusual. God could have made His advent into the world in such a spectacular way that there would have been no doubt that it had taken place. But, as argued earlier, God in order to identify Himself entirely with the human race, the incarnate God had to be both human and divine. This was accomplished in the wisdom of God in the virgin-birth of Christ. This event was one of the prophecies of the Old Testament about the Messiah (Isaiah 7:14) and it is stated by Matthew, the gospel-writer to the Jews, to have been fulfilled literally (1:23). This miraculous birth also ensured that the child would be free from the taint of original sin, an indispensable requirement for the task Jesus was required to perform on earth.

4. One of the characteristics of the synoptic Gospels which Christians are likely to miss is the matter-of-fact way in which they record the life-story of Jesus Christ. They do not use public-relations methods to promote the Master but are dispassionate and routine narratives of His life. It is wrong to think that the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) are strong statements about the deity of Christ. They really are cold-blooded (and in the case of Luke, investigative) accounts of what He said and did. Only John makes it a point to add his own comments in his gospel. Matthew would consider it his duty to his fellow-Jews to refer to prophetic passages of their Scriptures which find their fulfillment in Jesus. But it is impossible to miss how naturally the following facts emerge from the Gospels:

Firstly, the unique moral character of Jesus Christ stands indelibly printed on the pages of the narratives. Even His worst detractors could not point an accusing finger at Him. At His trial, it was difficult to find two witnesses who would agree to any of the false charges brought against Him. More importantly, Jesus Himself was self-consciously guilt-free of any sins of omission or commission. During the course of His life, He could ask the Pharisees, "Which one of you can convict Me of any sin?" (John 8:46). When He stood on trial before Pontius Pilate, one could not say who was on trial! Even Pilate came to the conclusion that there was nothing faulty, wrong or criminal about this strange Prisoner that has been brought before him and he pleaded repeatedly with the crowd to let Him go. Jesus lived an exemplary life. We need only to read some of the autobiographies of great men and women who have gone before us to see that they were mortals subject to the same moral frailties that you and I experience in our normal human life. However, we cannot but come to the conclusion that Jesus lived an exemplary moral life, which He constantly affirmed without a trace of pride.

Secondly, we shall try and analyse the teaching of Jesus Christ. We would find that His didactic content was of a value and quality vastly different from and superior to the philosophies and world views in the various cultures of our world. To demonstrate this dimension, I shall identify one crucial aspect of His teaching. He defined all virtue only in terms of relationships. He always linked vertical relationships with God with horizontal relationship with fellow human beings. Jesus placed equal emphases on both. Today's philosophies emphasise one or the other. We may have a philosophy which says that in order to be related to God, one has to cut oneself off from society. On the other hand, we have worldviews which say that by rightly relating to man, one can rightly relate to God. This critique would also apply to all philosophies which bring about an unhealthy dichotomy between the spiritual and material worlds. To the Jewish lawyer who asked Him the question, 'What is the greatest commandment?', Jesus indicated two commandments co-equal in status - "You shall love the Lord your God...You shall love your neighbour as yourself". This is unique among all the teaching that we have in the world, firstly because worship of God was taught by Jesus as one of intimate personal love-relationship. Worship is commonly taught in religious and ritualistic terms only. It is also assumed that a loving fellow-human is a natural human phenomenon. The second aspect of Jesus' teaching which is unique addresses this assumption. By putting the first commandment first, Jesus made it clear that we can selflessly love others only when our self is dealt with adequately by our relationship to God. At the same time, He also made it clear that our selfless love of others is the only demonstrable evidence that we truly love God. No amount of external religiosity as an expression of love to God can replace these relationships. By this master-stroke of a combination, He dealt with a third misapprehension that human relationships were relative and did not amount to much in the sight of God. In Jesus' teaching, relationship with God as well as relationship with one another were both spoken from an absolute stand-point. It is this dimension of teaching which is unique to Jesus Christ. It is out of these combinations of relationships that virtue of any kind could flow, e.g., rude and angry language against anyone was forbidden because it was tantamount to brutal murder (Matthew 5:21,22) and His standard of moral purity equated a lustful look with the physical sin of

adultery (5:27,28). It is difficult to gainsay the conclusion that His teaching was exceptional.

Thirdly and inescapably, one has to conclude from the above two considerations that His claim about Himself was unique. He, as One Who claimed equality with God offered forgiveness to others. The Jews who were listening to His teaching had no doubt that He claimed to be God. Whether it was about forgiveness (Mark 2:5-7), His Messiahship (Matthew 26:63-66), or His pre-existence (John 8:58,59), His Jewish audience was convinced about His claim to deity and their leaders proceeded to have Him put to death.

5. Jesus by His life and teaching exemplified the all-important factor of God's love for us. He as God expressed forgiveness of sins to those who sought it. He proclaimed this forgiveness as the sole basis on which one could come into a personal relationship to the Father. He also made it clear to His disciples and others that the purpose of His life was to give it up as a 'ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28). (This ransom was effective sacrifice for sins offered to God only because he was sinless by nature [due to His unique birth] and by choice [because of His consistent obedience to the laws of God]). From the time Peter, His chief disciple made a bold confession about His true identity, He began to speak about the sacrificial death that He was to accomplish. When Peter tried to dissuade Him, received a stern rebuke (Matthew 16:16, 21-23). Jesus' death should never be confused with those of great men and women of history who were martyred for standing up for worthy causes.

6. The resurrection of Christ came as the legitimate climax to His unique life and death. During His life He had foretold His disciples directly (Matthew 16:21) and others parabolically (Matthew 12:40) about His resurrection from the dead. The resurrection is thus the crucial factor in establishing the exceptionality of Jesus Christ. Frank Morrison, a British lawyer of the 1930's undertook an expedition to collect circumstantial evidence to disprove the resurrection. (Such evidence is admissible in all courts of law in civilised countries to prove or disprove events of which there are no living eye-witnesses). When he finished sifting and analysing the evidence, he reached a stunning conclusion: that the resurrection had actually taken place! He has pieced all his evidence together in his book, *Who Moved the Stone?* The first chapter of this book is entitled, 'The Book that Refused to be Written'. In this chapter, he tells his own story of how he set out to disprove the resurrection and how he has ended up proving it. The remaining chapters of the book are devoted to a scholarly examination of the evidence. One of the factors that need to be considered in this context is the psychology of the disciples. They were 11 cowardly men who shut themselves up in an upper room because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Later, some of them returned to their original job of fishing apparently because they thought that the cause of their beloved Master was a lost one. What galvanized them into action so much so that within their own lifetime, much of the then-known world could hear the message of Christ? Some of them paid for His message with their lives. Would they have done so if the resurrection was a hoax? If the resurrection were not true, then Christianity would be the biggest fraud perpetrated on the human race!

7. What about the influence Jesus has left over the world? The great historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, says: "As the centuries pass, the evidence is accumulating that, measured by His effect on history, Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet. That influence appears to be mounting". (*American Historical Review*, LIV, January, 1949).

William Lecky, a historian and a skeptic says: "...It was reserved for Christianity to present to the world an ideal character, which through all the changes of eighteen centuries has inspired the hearts of men with an impassioned love; has shown itself capable of acting on all ages, nations, temperaments and conditions; has been not only the highest pattern of virtue, but the strongest incentive to its practice; and has exercised so deep an influence that it may be truly said that the simple record of three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and all the exhortations of moralists. This has indeed been the wellspring of whatever is best and purest in the Christian life. Amid all the sins and failings, amid all the priestcraft and persecution and fanaticism that have defaced the Church, it has preserved in the character and example of its founder, an enduring principle of regeneration." (History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1903). It would be reasonable to conclude that the source of that influence could not have been but exceptional.

One cannot think of a better conclusion to this essay than this quote from C.S. Lewis: "You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

DEITY AND HUMANITY – NORMAN GEISLER

Christianity is unique among world religions, and Christ's true uniqueness is the centerpiece of Christianity. The truth about Christ is based primarily on the New Testament documents which have been shown elsewhere to be authentic. The New Testament record, especially the Gospels, is one of the most reliable documents from the ancient world. From these documents we learn that numerous facets of Christ are absolutely unique.

Jesus Christ was unique in that he alone, of all who ever lived, was both God and man. The New Testament teaches the fully unified deity and humanity of Christ. The Nicene Creed (AD 325) states the uniform belief of all orthodox Christianity that Christ was fully God and fully man in one person. All heresies regarding Christ deny one or both of these propositions. This as a claim alone makes him unique above all other religious leaders or persons who have ever lived, and it can be backed up with factual evidence. Some of this evidence is seen in other aspects of Christ's uniqueness.

THE SUPERNATURAL NATURE OF CHRIST

UNIQUE IN MESSIANIC PROPHECIES. Jesus lived a miracle-filled and supernaturally empowered existence from his conception to his ascension. Centuries before his birth he was foretold by supernatural prophecy.

The Old Testament, which even the most ardent critic acknowledges was in existence centuries before Christ, predicted the where (Micah 5:2), the when (Daniel 9:26), and the how (Isaiah 7:14) of Christ's entry into the world. He would be born of a woman (Genesis 3:15) from the line of Adam's son Seth (Genesis 4:26), through Noah's son Shem (Genesis 9:26–27), and Abraham (Genesis 12:3; 15:5). He would come through the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10) and would be the son of David (2 Samuel 7:12f.). The Old Testament

predicted that Christ would die for our sins (Psalm 22; Isaiah 53; Daniel 9:26; Zechariah 12:10) and would rise from the dead (Psalms 2:7; 16:10).

All of these supernatural prophecies were uniquely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This is not true of any great religious leader or person who has ever lived, including Muhammad.

UNIQUE IN CONCEPTION. Christ was not only supernaturally anticipated; he was also miraculously conceived. While announcing his virgin conception, Matthew (1:22–23) points to the prophecy of Isaiah (7:14). Luke, a physician, records this miraculous inception of human life (Luke 1:26f.); Paul alludes to it in Galatians 4:4. Of all human conceptions, Jesus' stands as unique and miraculous.

UNIQUE IN LIFE. From his very first miracle in Cana of Galilee (John 2:11), Jesus' ministry was marked by its miracles (cf. John 3:2; Acts 2:22). These were not healings of delusional illnesses, nor were they explainable on natural grounds. They were unique in that they were immediate, always successful, had no known relapses, and healed illnesses that were incurable by medicine, such as persons born blind (John 9). Jesus even raised several people from the dead, including Lazarus whose body was already to the point of rotting (John 11:39).

Jesus turned water to wine (John 2:7f.), walked on water (Matthew 14:25), multiplied bread (John 6:11f), opened the eyes of the blind (John 9:7f.), made the lame to walk (Mark 2:3f.), cast out demons (Mark 3:10f.), healed all kinds of sicknesses (Matthew 9:35), including leprosy (Mark 1:40-42), and even raised the dead to life on several occasions (Mark 5:35f.; Luke 7:11–15; John 11:43-44). When asked if he was the Messiah, he used his miracles as evidence to support the claim saying, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised' (Matthew 11:4-5). This outpouring of miracles was set forth ahead of time by prophets as a special sign that Messiah had come (see Isaiah 35:5-6). Nicodemus even said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him' (John 3:2).

UNIQUE IN DEATH. Events surrounding Christ's death were miraculous. This included the darkness from noon to 3 p.m. (Mark 15:33) and the earthquake that opened the tombs and rent the temple veil (Matthew 27:51-54). The manner in which he suffered the excruciating torture of crucifixion was miraculous. The attitude he maintained toward his mockers and executioners was miraculous, saying, 'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). The way in which he actually died was miraculous. As Jesus said, 'I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (John 10:18). At the very moment of his departure, he was not overcome by death. Rather, he voluntarily dismissed his spirit. 'Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit' (John 19:30).

UNIQUE IN THE RESURRECTION. The crowning miracle of Jesus' earthly mission was the resurrection. It was not only predicted in the Old Testament (Psalms 2, 16), but Jesus himself predicted it from the very beginning of his ministry: He said, ' 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.' ... But the temple he had spoken of was his

body' (John 2:19, 21; Matthew 12:40–42; 17:9). Jesus demonstrated the reality of his resurrection in twelve appearances over forty days to more than 500 people.

UNIQUE IN THE ASCENSION. Just like his entrance into this world, Jesus' departure was also miraculous. After commissioning his disciples, 'he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them' (Acts 1:10). Contrary to the view of some, this was not a 'parable' but a literal bodily ascension into heaven from which he will return in the same literal body to reign in this world (Acts 1:11; Revelation 1:7, 19–20). The great Christian creeds clearly emphasize the miraculous bodily ascension of Christ.

UNIQUE IN SINLESSNESS. Some of Jesus' enemies brought false accusations against him, but the verdict of Pilate at his trial has been the verdict of history: 'I find no basis for a charge against this man' (Luke 23:4). A soldier at the cross agreed saying, 'Surely this was a righteous man' (Luke 23:47), and the thief on the cross next to Jesus said, 'This man has done nothing wrong' (Luke 23:41).

For a description of what those closest to Jesus thought of his character, Hebrews says that he was tempted as a man 'yet without sinning' (4:15). Jesus himself once challenged his accusers, 'Which of you convicts me of sin?' (John 8:46), but no one was able to find him guilty of anything. This being the case, the impeccable character of Christ gives a double testimony to the truth of his claim. Jesus' sinlessness was unique.

THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST IS UNIQUE

Christ's character was unique in other ways. To a perfect degree he manifested the best of virtues. He also combined seemingly opposing traits.

In Exemplifying Virtues. Even Bertrand Russell, who fancied he saw flaws in Christ's character, confessed nonetheless that 'What the world needs is love, Christian love, or compassion.' But this belies a belief in what most others acknowledge, namely, that Christ was the perfect manifestation of the virtue of love.

Jesus' willing submission to the ignominious suffering and death by crucifixion, while he maintained love and forgiveness toward those killing him is proof of this virtue (Luke 23:34, 43). He alone lived perfectly what he taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). He did not retaliate against his enemies; instead, he forgave them. He rebuked his disciples for misusing the sword (Matthew 26:52), and miraculously reattached and healed the amputated ear of one of the mob who came to take him to his death (Luke 22:50).

Jesus was the perfect example of patience, kindness, and compassion. He had compassion on the multitudes (Matthew 9:36), to the point of weeping over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37). Even though he justly condemned (in no uncertain terms) the Pharisees who misled the innocent (Matthew 23), he did not hesitate to speak with Jewish leaders who showed interest (John 3).

In Combining Seemingly Opposite Traits. One of the unique things about Christ is the way he brought together in his person characteristics that in anyone else would seem impossible. He was a perfect example of humility, to the extent of washing his disciples' feet (John 15). Yet he made bold claims to deity, such as, 'I and the Father are One' (John 10:30)

and 'before Abraham was, I AM' (John 8:58; cf. Exodus 3:14). The claim, 'I am meek and lowly in heart' (Matthew 11:29) sounds arrogant, but he backed his words among little children (Matthew 18). Yet he was so strong as to overturn the tables of those who merchandised God's house, cracking a whip to chase away their animals (John 2). Jesus was known for the virtue of kindness, yet he was severe with hypocrites who misled the innocent (Matthew 23).

Life and Teaching. As Jesus himself declared, the substance of what he taught finds its roots in the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17–18). He condemned meaningless traditions and misinterpretations of the Old Testament (Matthew 5:21f., 15:3–5). Though the essence of what he taught was not new, the form and the manner in which he taught it was unique. The Sermon on the Mount employs a fresh teaching method.

The vivid parables, such as the good Samaritan (Luke 10), the prodigal son (Luke 15), and the lost sheep (Luke 15:4f.), are masterpieces of communication. Parables stand at the heart of Jesus' teaching style. By drawing on the lifestyles of the people to illustrate the truths he wished to convey, Jesus communicated truth and refuted error. Also, by speaking in parables he could avoid 'casting pearls before swine.' He could confound and confuse those who did not wish to believe (the outsider), yet illuminate those who did desire to believe (the insider). While the use of allegories and parables themselves was not unique, the manner in which Jesus employed parables was. He brought the art of teaching eternal mystery in terms of everyday experience to a new height. The 'laws of teaching' identified by modern pedagogues (Shafer, Seven Laws), were practiced perfectly in Jesus' teaching style.

The manner in which Jesus taught was unique. The Jewish intellectuals admitted, 'No one ever spoke the way this man does' (John 7:46). As he taught in parables, he was thronged by the multitudes (Matthew 13:34). As a lad, he impressed even the rabbis in the temple. For 'Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers' (Luke 2:47). Later, he confounded those who attempted to trick him so that 'No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions' (Matthew 22:46).

CHRIST IS SUPERIOR

Jesus Christ was unique in every way. From his complete deity to his perfect humanity; from his miraculous conception to his supernatural ascension; from his impeccable character to his incomparable teaching—Jesus stands above all other religious or moral teachers.

Christ Is Superior to Moses. As a Jew himself, Jesus had no argument with Moses, the prophet who brought the Jewish law and led the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage to freedom as an independent nation. Moses and Jesus were prophets of the same God, and Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the law (found in the writings of Moses) but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). Jesus implies that Moses' words are God's words (compare Matthew 19:4–5 with Genesis 2:24). However, in many respects, we find that Jesus is superior to Moses.

Christ is a superior prophet to Moses. In Deuteronomy 18:15–19, Moses predicted that God would raise up a Jewish Prophet with a special message. Anyone who did not believe this prophet would be judged by God. This passage has been traditionally interpreted as

referring to Messiah. Genesis 3:15 is also understood by many to refer to Jesus as the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent.

Christ's revelation is superior to that of Moses. 'The Law was given through Moses; Grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). While Moses set up the moral and social structures which guided the nation, the law could not save anyone from the penalty of their sins, which is death. As Paul says, 'by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the law comes the knowledge of sin' (Romans 3:20). The revelation which came through Jesus, though, was one in which the sins which the law made known are forgiven, 'being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus' (Romans 3:24). Christ's revelation builds on the foundation of Moses by solving the problem of which the law made us aware.

Christ's position is superior to that of Moses. Moses is the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, but Jesus is more than a prophet. As the Epistle to the Hebrews says, 'Moses was faithful in all his house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ was faithful as a Son over his house' (Hebrews 3:5–6). While Moses served God, Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with the right to rule over all servants.

Christ's miracles are superior to those of Moses. Moses performed great miracles, but Christ's miracles were greater in degree. Moses lifted the bronze serpent to give healing to those who would look, but in this he was merely following instructions. He never made the blind to see, or the deaf to hear. Also, there is nothing in Moses' ministry to compare with the resurrection of Lazarus or of Christ.

Christ's claims are superior to those of Moses. Moses never made a claim to be God and did nothing other than fulfill his role as a prophet. Jesus did claim to be God and predicted his own resurrection to prove it.

Christ Is Superior to Muhammad. Muhammad, the founder of Islam agreed with Jesus and Moses that God is one, that he created the universe, and that he is beyond the universe. There is considerable agreement over the events of the first sixteen chapters of Genesis, to the point where Hagar was cast out from Abram's house. After this, the Bible focuses on Isaac while Islam is concerned with what happened to their forefather, Ishmael. The teaching of Muhammad may be summarized in the five doctrines:

2. Allah has sent many prophets, including Moses and Jesus, but Muhammad is the last and greatest.
3. The Qur'an is the supreme religious book, taking priority over the Law, the Psalms, and the Injil (Gospels) of Jesus.
4. There are many intermediate beings between God and us (angels), some of whom are good and some evil.
5. Each man's deeds will be weighed to determine who will go to heaven and hell at the resurrection. The way to gain salvation includes reciting the Shahadah several times a day ('There is no God but Allah; and Muhammad is his prophet.'), praying five times a day, fasting a month each year, almsgiving, and making pilgrimages to Mecca.

Christ offers a superior message. Jesus made superior claims to those made by Muhammad. Jesus claimed to be God. Muhammad claimed only to be a mere man who was

a prophet. If Jesus, then, is not God, he is certainly no prophet. Jesus offered a superior confirmation for his claims. Jesus performed numerous miracles. Muhammad performed no miracles and admitted in the Qur'an that Jesus did many. Only Jesus died and rose from the dead.

Christ offers a better way of salvation. Unlike the God of Islam, the God of the Bible reached out to us by sending his Son to earth to die for our sins. Muhammad offered no sure hope for salvation, only guidelines for working oneself into Allah's favor. Christ provided all that is needed to get us to heaven in his death, 'For Christ also died once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that he might bring us to God' (1 Peter 3:18).

Christ offers a superior model life. Muhammad spent the last ten years of his life at war. As a polygamist he exceeding even the number of wives (four) he had prescribed for his religion. He also violated his own law by plundering caravans coming to Mecca, some of whom were on pilgrimage. He engaged in retaliation and revenge, contrary to his own teaching.

Jesus Is Superior to Hindu Gurus. In Hinduism a guru is a teacher. The Hindu scriptures cannot be understood by reading; they must be learned from a guru. These holy men are worshiped even after their deaths as supposed incarnations of the gods. What they teach is that humans need liberation from the endless cycle of reincarnation (samsara) which is brought on by karma, the effects of all words, deeds, and actions in the present and all former lives. Liberation (moksha) is obtained when the individual expands his being and consciousness to an infinite level and realizes that atman (the self) is the same as Brahman (the one absolute being from which all multiplicity comes).

In other words, each Hindu must realize personal godhood. Such a realization can only be achieved by following Jnana Yoga— salvation by knowledge of the ancient writings and inward meditation; Bhakti Yoga— salvation by devotion to one of the many deities; Karma Yoga— salvation by works, such as ceremonies, sacrifices, fasting, and pilgrimages, which must be done without thought of rewards. Each of these methods will to some extent include Raja Yoga, a meditation technique involving control over the body, breathing, and thoughts.

Hinduism as it is actually practiced consists largely of superstition, legendary stories about the gods, occult practices, and demon worship.

Christ teaches a superior worldview. Jesus teaches a theistic worldview. But pantheism, the realization of godhood, is the heart of Hinduism.

Christ's teaching is morally superior. Orthodox Hinduism insists that suffering people be left to suffer, because it is their destiny, as determined by karma. Jesus said, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' He defined neighbor as anyone in need of help. John said, 'But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?' (1 John 3:17). Also, many, if not most, gurus use their esteemed position to exploit their followers financially and sexually. The Bagwan Sri Rajneesh accumulated dozens of Rolls Royces as gifts from his followers. The Beatles became disenchanted with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi when they learned that he was much more interested in the body of one of the women in their party than with any of their spirits. They admitted, 'We made a mistake.' Even the respected guru Mahatma Gandhi slept with women other than his wife.

Jesus gives a superior path to enlightenment. While the gurus are necessary to understand the sacred writings of Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, there is no esoteric or hidden truth in the Bible that must be explained apart from ordinary understanding. Christian meditation is not an effort to empty the mind, but rather to fill it with the truth of Scriptural principles (Psalm 1). Inward meditation is like peeling an onion; you keep tearing off layer after layer until, when you reach the middle, you find that there is nothing there. Meditation on God's Word begins with content and opens up the meaning until it yields contentment of soul.

Christ teaches a better way of salvation. The Hindu is lost in the karmic cycle of reincarnation until he reaches moksha and is left to work the way out of this maze alone. Jesus promised that we would be saved by faith (Ephesians 2:8–9; Titus 3:5–7), and that we could know that our salvation is guaranteed (Ephesians 1:13–14; 1 John 5:13).

Christ Is Superior to Buddha. Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha is a title meaning 'enlightened one') is inferior to Christ. Buddhism began as a reformation movement within Hinduism, which had become a system of speculation and superstition. To correct this, Gautama rejected the rituals and occultism and developed an essentially atheistic religion (though later forms of Buddhism returned to the Hindu gods). His basic beliefs are summed in the Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by desires for pleasure and prosperity.
3. Suffering can be overcome by eliminating desires.
4. Desire can be eliminated by the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is both a system of religious education and the moral precepts of Buddhism. It includes (1) right knowledge ('Four Noble Truths'), (2) right intentions, (3) right speech, (4) right conduct (no killing, drinking, stealing, lying, or adultery), (5) right occupation (which causes no suffering), (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness (denial of the finite self), and (8) right meditation (Raja Yoga).

The goal of all Buddhists is not heaven or being with God, for there is no God in Gautama's teaching. Rather they seek nirvana, the elimination of all suffering, desires, and the illusion of self-existence. While a liberal branch of Buddhism (Mahayana Buddhism) now has deified Gautama as a savior, Theravada Buddhism stays closer to Gautama's teachings and maintains that he never claimed divinity. As to his being a savior, it is reported that Buddha's last words were, 'Buddhas do but point the way; work out your salvation with diligence.' As a variant form of Hinduism, Buddhism is subject to all of the criticisms mentioned above. Jesus' teaching is superior. Further:

Christ fills life with more hope. Jesus' teaching is superior to Buddha's in that Jesus taught hope in life, while Buddhism sees life only as suffering and selfhood as something to be eradicated. Jesus taught that life is a gift of God to be enjoyed (John 10:10) and that the individual is to be honored supremely (Matthew 5:22). Furthermore, he promised hope in the life to come (John 14:6).

Christ offers a better way of salvation. The Buddhist also teaches reincarnation as the means of salvation. However, in this form the self or individuality of the soul is eradicated

at the end of each life. So even though you live on, it is not you as an individual who has any hope of attaining nirvana. Jesus promised hope to each man and woman as an individual (John 14:3) and said to the thief on the cross beside him, 'Today you shall be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43).

Jesus is a better Christ. Jesus claimed and proved to be God in human flesh. Buddha was a mere mortal man who died and never rose again. Jesus, however, rose bodily from the grave. Gautama simply wanted to bring his 'enlightenment' to others to help them to nirvana, where all desires and individual existence is lost.

Christ Is Superior to Socrates. Although Socrates never started a religion, he has attracted a great following. Socrates never wrote anything, but Plato, his disciple, wrote a great deal about him, although these accounts may be as much Plato's ideas as the thought of Socrates. Plato presents Socrates as a man convinced that God has appointed him to the task of promoting truth and goodness by making humans examine their words and deeds to see if they are true and good. Vice, in his opinion, was merely ignorance, and knowledge led to virtue. He is credited as the first person to recognize a need to develop a systematic approach to discovering truth, though the system itself was finally formulated by Aristotle—a disciple of Plato's.

Like Christ, Socrates was condemned to death on the basis of false accusations from authorities who were threatened by his teaching. He could have been acquitted if he had not insisted on making his accusers and judges examine their own statements and lives, which they were unwilling to do. He was content to die, knowing that he had carried out his mission to the end, and that death, whether a dreamless sleep or a wonderful fellowship of great men, was good.

Christ has a superior basis for truth. Jesus, like Socrates, often used questions to make his hearers examine themselves, but his basis for knowing the truth about human beings and God was rooted in the fact that he was the all-knowing God. He said of himself, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.' He was, in his very being, the fount from which all truth ultimately flowed. Likewise, as God, he was the absolute Goodness by which all other goodness is measured. He once asked a young man to examine his words by saying, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.' Jesus was the very truth and good which Socrates wanted to understand.

Christ gives more certain knowledge. While Socrates taught some true principles, he often was left to speculate about many important issues, such as what happens at death. Jesus gave a sure answer to such questions, because he had certain knowledge of the human destination (John 5:19–29; 11:25–26). Where reason (Socrates) has insufficient evidence to make a definite conclusion, revelation (Jesus) gives answers which might never be anticipated.

Christ's death was more noble. Socrates died for a cause and did so with courage, which is certainly to be commended. However, Jesus died as a substitute for others (Mark 10:45) to pay the penalty that they deserved. Not only did he die for his friends, but also for those that were, and would remain, his enemies (Romans 5:6–7). Such a demonstration of love is unequalled by any philosopher or philanthropist.

Christ's proof of his message is superior. Rational proofs are good when there is sound evidence for their conclusions. But Socrates cannot support his claim to be sent by God with anything that compares to the miracles of Christ and his resurrection. Pagan prophets and prophetesses, such as the Oracle of Delphi, do not compare with the precise biblical prediction and miracles. In these acts there is a superior proof that Jesus' message was authenticated by God as true.

Christ is superior to Lao Tse (Taoism). Modern Taoism is a religion of witchcraft, superstition, and polytheism, but it was originally a system of philosophy, and that is how it is being presented to Western culture today. Lao Tse built this system around one principle which explained everything in the universe and guided it all. That principle is called the Tao. There is no simple way to explain the Tao. The world is full of conflicting opposites—good and evil, male and female, light and dark, yes and no. All oppositions are manifestations of the conflict between Yin and Yang. But in ultimate reality Yin and Yang are completely intertwined and perfectly balanced. That balance is the mystery called the Tao. To understand the Tao is to realize that all opposites are one and that truth lies in contradiction, not in resolution.

Taoism goes beyond this to urge living in harmony with the Tao. A person should enter a life of complete passiveness and reflection on such questions as, 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' or 'If a tree falls in the forest when no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?' One should be at peace with nature and avoid all forms of violence. This system of philosophy has many similarities with Zen Buddhism.

Christ brings superior freedom. Jesus allows humans to use their reason. In fact, he commands them to do so (Matthew 22:37; cf. 1 Peter 3:15); Taoism does not, at least on the highest level. Taoism engages in the claim that 'Reason does not apply to reality.' That statement itself is self-defeating, for it is a reasonable statement about reality. It is either true or false about the way things really are, and not contradictory, yet it claims that ultimately truth lies in contradiction. Jesus commanded: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment' (Matthew 22:37–38, emphasis added). God says, 'Come now, and let us reason together,' (Isaiah 1:18). Peter exhorts us to 'give a reason for the hope that you have' (1 Peter 3:15b).

Jesus encouraged the use of freedom to choose, never imposing himself on the unwilling (Matthew 23:37). Taoism asks each follower to set will on the shelf; to give up the power to change things. Jesus says that each person has a choice and that this choice makes the difference. Each chooses to believe or not believe (John 3:18), to obey or disobey (John 15:14), to change the world or be changed by it (Matthew 5:13–16).

Jesus allows each person the freedom to be saved. Taoism offers only a way to resign oneself to the way things are. Christ offers a way to change both who we are and what we are, so that we might know the joys of life. Rather than accepting death as an inevitable end, Christ provides a way to conquer death by his resurrection. Lao Tse can make no such claim.

Conclusion

Christ is absolutely unique among all who ever lived. He is unique in his supernatural nature, in his superlative character, and in his life and teaching. No other world teacher has claimed to be God. Even when the followers of some prophet deified their teacher, there is no proof given for that claim that can be compared to the fulfillment of prophecy, the sinless and miraculous life, and the resurrection. No other religious leader (except some who copied Christ) offered salvation by faith, apart from works, based on acting to take away the guilt for human sin. No religious or philosophical leader has displayed the love for people that Jesus did in dying for the sins of the world (John 15:13; Romans 5:6–8). Jesus is absolutely unique among all human beings who ever lived.

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