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Is Jesus the Only Way to God?

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This article has been prepared for use by study groups in churches. The author discusses the human phenomenon of the religious quest; the uniqueness of Jesus as the incomparable man, preacher, teacher and healer; the significance of his death, resurrection and promised return; leads up to an understanding of his visible likeness to the invisible God; and finally the way for the Jesus of history to become the Christ of our faith. The discussion is set in the context of other Faiths—in particular Hinduism. Editor

The question, 'Is Jesus the only way to God?' is a very controversial one, for none of us is a spectator of religious truth. We are all active players in the game of living and we all have a world view and a set of values, whether we consciously acknowledge this or not. We belong to one or more cultures in which worldviews, cultures, social behaviour and customs cohere. Religion or the denial of it is always a dominating factor. We may be followers of a particular religion, or secular and indifferent to all religions, or ideologically atheistic or, as many are now doing, seeking for a New Age synthesis of many faiths. None of us can live in a cultural vacuum. To attempt to do so would result in insanity.

The question is ambiguous, for language has meaning within the tradition that uses it, as Ludwig Wittgenstein has clearly shown. The word 'God' carries different and contrasting meanings to people of different faiths. For some it is the personal Creator of all things; for others it is a stage to Ultimate Reality; to some it is 'life-force', for others it is the spirit world that pervades all of life and nature. The way to God implies a definable concept of salvation. Here too, people understand salvation and the way to obtain it in a multitude of ways. Later we will explore some of these ways.

I write as an unashamed follower of the way of Jesus Christ. I can do no other for he is my deliverer from evil, shame and guilt and Lord of my life in all its relationships. It is an illusion to think I can step outside my world-view and objectively debate the issues of ultimate truth and justice as the rationalists have argued since the eighteenth century European Enlightenment. Does this mean then that certainty of finding the way is impossible? Certainly not. If, as Christians argue, truth and justice are issues of personal relationships to God, to other people and even to nature itself, then the search is meaningful, and the experience of finding God confirmed. Truth to have meaning is never irrational. However, if the way to Truth is beyond all personal knowledge then its goal becomes the annihilation of self and knowledge itself. This is the goal of both Hinduism and Buddhism. It is total absorption in Ultimate Reality, as a river loses its identity on reaching the sea. The Ultimate is unknown. It is *neti neti*, 'not this, not that'. The answer is silence.

Using words in a Christian context, Christians affirm that Jesus is the only way to God. The purpose of this discussion is to unravel what this means and to find the way to experience it. One of the reasons I find this way to God convincingly true is that in Jesus the quests of other faiths find a coherent answer. Each religion or ideology is unique. It has its own sun around which the planets move. For example, Hinduism grapples with the nature of self, Buddhism grapples with the nature and cause of suffering, Islam with the way to submit to the Almighty Creator, primal religions with overcoming evil spirits, and so on. The Bible is a fascinating book showing how God in Christ fulfils each of these human aspirations and shows the way to a satisfying relation of peace and harmony with

the living God and with humankind. Jesus said to Thomas, 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me' ([John 14:6](#)).

I. THE HUMAN ENIGMA

We begin our discussion with reflections on human behaviour, and observe two contrary trends common to all people, religious or secular. The search for God begins here.

We Are Insatiably Religious

Everyone is insatiably religious or, to be more accurate, spiritual. Everyone, whether or not they are aware of it, has spiritual yearnings even though they might not actually be religious.

By this we mean they reach out for the reality that is beyond sense experience. They are looking for peace, harmony and justice, for stable values for themselves, their family and the community. Normally the intensity of this search grows with increasing age. Some search for these spiritual values within themselves, some for a transcendental reality and others turn to the realm of nature. Everybody is searching for something that is authentic, comprehensible and coherent—a worldview that makes sense and values that are appropriate for it.

In a world that is disintegrating with increasing poverty, violence, sexual abuse, corruption and fear of death, men and women are giving high priority to justice. We live in a world that is increasingly secular, materialistic and hedonistic. Yet in the midst of the obvious gains of modern society people are becoming increasingly dissatisfied and disillusioned. It is not surprising that more and more people are turning either to New Age philosophies and spiritualities, or to authoritarian faiths such as Islam. People are spiritually hungry. How else can we explain that our NZ weekly TV Guide regularly gives seven to eight pages to horoscopes, palmistry, clairvoyance, tarot and psychic readings and counselling. People may reject religion but they cannot escape the pull of spirituality.

During this century we have witnessed the rise and fall of another way to spiritual satisfaction. Marxists, who are generally atheists, have developed their own form of spirituality and even religion. They have a strong sense of social justice, a willingness to sacrifice for the future good of humanity. Their books are authoritative and sacred to them, and they see their leaders as saviours of the world. They strive for comradeship in community and share a vision for the whole world. Cuba and North Korea continue to pursue this path of cultic spirituality.

In some cultures the depth of the spiritual search is very real and intense. For 2500 years millions of sincere Hindus have prayed daily the sacred Upanishadic prayer. 'From delusion lead me to truth. From darkness lead me to light. From death lead me to immortality' (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28). Throughout the history of Hinduism there have been many saints who have pursued reality with great intensity. One such was Tukuram, a grain seller who lived near Pune, India 350 years ago. He followed the path of *Bhakti* or intense devotion. In one of his poems he cries:

As	on	the	bank	the	poor	fish	lies
And		gasps	and	writhes		in	pain,
Or	as	a	man	with		anxious	eyes
Seeks		hidden		gold		in	vain,—
So	is	my	heart	distressed		and	cries
To		come	to		thee		again
Have mercy Tuka says.							

It is very unlikely that he had any knowledge of Jesus but the intensity of the images used suggests that the living God was calling him. His search for God proved to be the bridge over which the great 20th century Brahmin Marathi poet, Narayan Vaman Tilak, came to faith in Jesus Christ.

The intensity of Hindus searching for God is a rebuke to Christians. In the Himalayas I have been privileged to climb to the sacred temple at Kedarnath at 13,000 feet and see the endless stream of pilgrims crying out to Shiva for a *darshan* or vision of God. I have also stood by the banks of the sacred Ganges where it breaks out of the Himalayas at Rishikesh and Hardwar, and empathized with the thousands of people bathing in the cold waters to be cleansed from their past sins. I have watched Tibetan Buddhists incessantly turning their prayer wheels and Zen Buddhists sitting perfectly erect in the traditional lotus position disciplining their minds to glimpse the meaning of life beyond rationality. I have often been awakened before daybreak by the call to prayer of the minaret. I have watched faithful Muslims prostrating themselves in a railway carriage or in the airport at the hour of prayer. Muslims have an intense desire to be faithful to God and no sacrifice is too great for them to make in the defence and proclaiming of their faith. Yes, the whole human race is incurably spiritual.

The Bible gives a clear explanation of this universal phenomenon. First, God the Creator of all things has created the human race, male and female, to be like himself ([Gen. 1:26–28](#)). We humans differ from the rest of the animal kingdom in that we have ‘eternity in our hearts’. We have the capacity to communicate directly with our creator, who has given us an innate awareness of right and wrong which we call conscience, the ability to attain personal freedom and the urge to create ideas, images and symbols, as we see in our art galleries, concert halls and factories. Television and computers are the creations of our own generation; we can only guess what future generations will create. To be human is to be spiritual and religious.

Further, the Bible depicts God as not only the Creator but also the Sustainer of all creation, the Liberator and the Redeemer. The God of the Bible is a God of compassion and love, a God who cares for the smallest and most insignificant sparrow and the flower in the field, but especially for the whole of the human race without distinction of ethnic heritage or culture. He is not an absentee god, who like a watchmaker, no longer has anything to do with his product, but a living God who moment by moment is calling all people to come back to him and he does this through his Spirit. He is patient and does not want anyone to be destroyed but wants all to turn away from their sins ([2 Pet. 3:9](#)). It may be better to think of God as a gardener who with loving care watches over each plant in his garden through each of the seasons of the year. When we gaze in wonder at the stars and planets of the heavens or examine a mountain flower or marvel at the eye of a bird, nature’s harmony, beauty, grandeur and purpose fill us with awe. We bow in worship and wonder at our own insignificance. A Biblical poet put it so well:

When I look at the sky, which you have made,
At the moon and the stars, which you set in their places—
What is man that you think of him; mere man, that you care for him?
Yet you made him inferior only to yourself;
You crowned him with glory and honour ([Psalm 8:3–5](#)).

We can understand why few atheists remain atheists on their deathbeds! The Holy Spirit of God is the hound of heaven who never leaves us alone.

We Are Incurably Rebellious

A second observation on human nature is equally important. We humans are in constant rebellion against God; we want to be the masters of our own fate. In selfishness and greed we refuse to live according to the moral laws of God, common to all religious faiths, but clearly expressed and summarised in the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God ([Exod. 20:1-17](#)) and personalised by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount ([Matt. 5-7](#)).

In our independence and desire for autonomy we want to be like God, to be equal to God or even be God. The universal expression of this state of rebellion is that we all create God in our own image or likeness or that of the created world, and then we seek to control God by our cultic practices ([Rom. 1:21-25](#)). In Biblical language we are all idolaters. For many the images created are visual images, some beautiful, some grotesque symbolizing the wrath and anger of God (such as Kali whose tongue drips blood and whose garland is made of skulls). Buddhists create images depicting the serenity of the enlightened Buddha. Others who reject idolatry in practice elevate their Holy Scriptures to the level of a sacred image. In the west our TV and glossy magazines idolise sexuality, wealth and fame. None is able to escape the downward pull of idolatry.

The Bible leaves us in no doubt as to the cause of this sad state of affairs. The story of the fall from innocence and purity by Adam and Eve vividly told in Genesis chapter [3](#) describes both the cause and the consequence of their fall. Men began to oppress women; the delicate balance of nature was upset as humankind began to abuse their calling to be stewards and gardeners of creation; family life broke up in dispute and ended in murder as in the story of Cain killing his brother Abel ([Gen. 4](#)). Adam and Eve were turned out of paradise and came under the judgement of death, a death that resulted in separation from the Creator.

In the New Testament Paul expounds this state of affairs with uncomfortable realism in his letter to the church in Rome ([Rom. 1-3](#)). He warns that although God's eternal power and divine nature is plain for all to see, yet men and women do not honour him as God but rather boast of their own wisdom. We are all without excuse and our conscience, which is the way we respond to God and his law, tells us so. The terror of human idolatry, whatever form it may take, is that we become slaves of the images we create. Idolatry, like drugs, is addictive. It ends in tragedy and death. In foolishness we deny the reality of our own sinfulness. The idealism of Marxism failed because communist leaders ignored the depravity of human nature. Every other utopia, religious or otherwise, will end in tragedy if this reality is ignored. Today poverty, violence, sexual abuse and racial oppression have more to do with selfishness and greed than with the failure of our political systems. Neither reason nor science nor democracy can stop the downward spiral of human society. World leaders live in fear of the future.

This a gloomy picture and we must be honest and recognize its reality, but we need not despair. Chaos and death are not inevitable for our world. There is hope. I want to put the case that this hope is in Jesus Christ. He is for the whole world. He deserves a hearing.

II. JESUS—THE INCOMPARABLE MAN

The apostle John wrote his story of the life and message of Jesus Christ with great compassion and insight into human nature. His Gospel is a very people-centred story. But it is of great significance that half his account is taken up with the death of Jesus Christ, his resurrection to a transformed life and his final appearance to his followers because John believed that the hope of humankind lies in this story. The Gospel according to John differs from the other three gospels. It does not begin with the birth stories of Jesus but with an extraordinary statement that the Word of God was with God from the beginning, shares in the creation of the world and is the source of life ([John 1:1-4](#)). John then makes

the astounding statement that this Word became a human being, was full of grace and truth and lived among us. 'We saw his glory, the glory he received as the Father's only son' ([John 1:14](#)). In order to understand this statement we have to begin by examining for ourselves the life and teaching of this man Jesus, who claimed to be God incarnate.

Did Jesus Live?

The first question we must ask is, 'Did he ever live or is he a myth of human imagination?'

The two gospel stories, Matthew and Luke, leave us in no doubt as to the locality of his birth in Bethlehem. The details of his life from the age of 30 until his death three years later are told with exact care, especially the details of his death on a Roman cross and the evidence for his rising from the dead. While each of the gospels tells the same story, the perspective of each differs. While there is evidence that they used some common sources or oral traditions the writer have their own priorities in the selection of stories and events.

We should think of the gospels as painted portraits rather than photographs. It is a mistake to think that we can reconstruct an objective history of Jesus any more than we can do this of any great figure of the past. It is generally understood that these gospels were written between 30 to 60 years after his death. Modern research and the hundreds of manuscripts of the gospels which have come down to us, some as fragments and others as whole accounts, suggest with confidence that the text we now possess is essentially the same as that of the original authors. *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* by Professor F. F. Bruce is a useful introduction to this subject for those who wish to pursue it further. So also is *The Evidence For Jesus*, by R. T. France, and *Jesus Christ, Man or Myth?* by E. M. Blaiklock.

However, the witness of his followers is not enough. We need the confirmation of historical evidence from outside his community. One of the earliest records is from Pliny, the Roman Governor of what is now North Turkey. In his numerous reports to the Emperor written about 112 AD he reports on the Christians in his province and their worship of Jesus Christ as God. Again, after the fire of Rome in 64 AD, Cornelius Tacitus, the Governor of what is now central and south Turkey, describes the death of Christians at the hands of the Emperor Nero and he notes that the name 'Christian' comes from the name Christ, who was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate, whose governorship ended in 36 AD. The above books list other support for Christ's existence.

A Unique Person

From the records it is clear that Jesus was a dynamic and youthful man in his early thirties who challenged all who met him, friend or foe. He was humble, deeply sensitive to the material needs of the poor, the sick and the diseased. He was at home with both the rich and the poor. He was able to show compassion to women, even prostitutes, and he had a love for children.

But he was no weak and effeminate man. In righteous anger he drove the greedy merchants from the courts of the temple of Jerusalem where they were charging extortionist prices for items needed in temple worship and in the exchange of money into temple currency. He accused them of turning the holy temple into a 'den of thieves' ([Matt. 21:12-17](#)).

Yes, Jesus was truly human. He knew hunger and thirst, joy and sorrow. He wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. He confessed the limitations of his knowledge of the time of his return to earth ([Mk. 13:26-34](#)). Yet he never made a false statement.

When he called men and women to follow him, he chose mainly fishermen and working class people. They immediately left their homes, friends and even their means of

livelihood and in faith followed him, sharing a common life and a common purse. He chose twelve men and bound them together into a unique community of disciples. There was the impetuous Peter, the gentle John, the hardened tax collector Matthew, Simon, the Zealot, the inquiring and critical Thomas and sadly, Judas who later betrayed him.

The women who followed and supported him in a much less structured way, were equally colourful and in the crisis at the crucifixion proved more courageous and faithful than did the men. Jesus' attitude to women was revolutionary for its time. He was a man of deep emotion and compassion, especially for the poor, the hungry and the diseased, but he was severe in his condemnation of hypocrisy especially amongst the Jewish religious leaders.

A Man of Faith and Integrity

Jesus was a man of prayer. He lived in constant communion with his heavenly Father and some of his prayers are preserved in the gospel records. His prayer life was real and spontaneous and in times of crisis he was known to have prayed all night. He enjoyed the quietness of the hills as places of prayer. At their request he taught his disciples how to pray. The Lord's Prayer ([Matt. 6:9-13](#)), the best known and most loved of all his recorded prayers, is a model for every Christian community to follow. He often fasted in times of prayer and encouraged his disciples to do likewise, so that with a clear mind and concentration they might give themselves to the sacred task of communion with God. His prayers of petition were always interlaced with prayers of thanksgiving and praise.

The moral life of Jesus was beyond reproach. His disciples who lived with him for three years could find no fault in him, nor could his critics and enemies. None could accuse him of being guilty of sin. At his trial before the Roman procurator his enemies had to resort to false evidence against him based on a misunderstanding of his teachings and claims. Pilate, the procurator, washed his hands of the responsibility of judging him for he could find no fault in him. Although Jesus constantly rebuked others for sinfulness, hypocrisy, selfishness and pride, none of his accusers could refute him. He spoke the truth but always with grace. He rebuked his disciples when they wanted to call down the fire of judgement on the Samaritans ([Lk. 9:54](#)) and yet he appealed to Judas for his support at the Last Supper with his disciples, knowing that Judas had planned to go out and betray him. On that fateful night before the crucifixion Peter lost courage and denied his Lord three times. Later he was broken hearted and full of remorse for his denial. Then it was the risen Jesus who came to him and with great sensitivity, asked him three times, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' ([John 21:15ff](#)).

He suffered temptation, whether alone in the wilderness or travelling with his disciples when they failed to understand him. Even his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, failed him in the hour of temptation in the garden of Gethsemane as he contemplated the physical and spiritual suffering of the cross he was about to embrace. The moment on the cross that none of us can fathom is when he cried out, 'My God, my God, why did you abandon me?' ([Matt. 27:46](#)). It was not just his strength of will but the uniqueness of the sustaining relationship to God his Father that kept him faithful in the times of temptation.

A Miracle Worker

Another sign of his uniqueness was his ministry as a miracle worker.

Miracles do happen. Science can explain some but not all. In the case of healing from sickness and disease the process of decay and death is reversed. There is a return from chaos to order. Much of Jesus' life was taken up with the healing of the sick and the diseased and such incidents are prominent in the gospel record. Jesus also had the

prophetic gift of knowledge of the unseen, of people's thoughts and of future events. His miracles were always a sign of redemption and in accord with the purposes of God. In some cases faith was important in the healing process; in others it was not.

However, the most impressive evidence of Jesus' power as a miracle worker was in the radical transformation in the lives of the people he met in his travels and in the lives of his disciples. Fishermen became fishers of men. Tax collectors gave their wealth. Critics became faithful followers and prostitutes became women of nobility and compassion. Sometimes their conversion was sudden and dramatic, while in some it appears to have been a quiet and slow transformation. Jesus always meets people at the point of their personal need.

Closely connected with his work of miracles was his supernatural power over the realm of unseen spiritual and demonic evil. He exorcised evil spirits that in some cases were associated with mental disorders such as schizophrenia, but in others were not ([Lk. 7:21](#); [9:42](#)). He took seriously the reality of demonic power, a sphere of reality that is not well understood today in the west and often denied. Having spent a working life in an Asian country where many willingly opened their lives to satanic power, I have no doubt about the reality of the spirit world nor of the power of Christ to overcome these unseen forces. The unseen world of spiritual powers is real and ever present but limited by the greater power of God.

When Moses confronted the Pharaoh of Egypt with the appeal to let the Hebrew slave community go, Moses demonstrated the power of the God of his people with a series of miraculous interventions. It is significant that the court magicians were able only up to a certain point to manifest similar miraculous power. The same is true today. The Hindu guru Sai Baba who lives in South India is noted for his miracles and his psychic powers. His devotees, who now number millions, hold him in honour as a 'god-man'. But like the magicians of Egypt, Sai Baba's power are limited. With Jesus it was different. With all the resources of heaven at his disposal he healed the sick and diseased and he exorcised evil spirits. He chose to exercise his miraculous powers to give honour to God and not to draw attention to himself. The difference in motivation, lifestyle and purpose between Jesus Christ and Sai Baba is self-evident.

A Preacher of the Kingdom of God

An equally impressive facet of Jesus' life was his unique gift of showing the way to God. While he taught that he was the true way to God he did so without any sign of boasting or of self-centredness. He called all who were burdened with heavy loads to come to him and he offered to share with them the yoke of burden-bearing ([Matt. 11:28](#)).

Jesus began his public ministry by preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God. 'The right time has come,' ([Mk. 1:15](#)). This Good News of the Kingdom of God was central to all his teachings. He taught that it was not a material realm of power but an inward reign of God's presence, dynamic and life changing. 'The Kingdom of God is within you,' he said ([Lk. 10:9](#), [17:21](#)).

Entering the Kingdom is the miracle of conversion or what John calls 'receiving eternal life'. To enter the Kingdom then is to receive Christ as Saviour and Lord. He is the source of the Kingdom's presence and power and in this sense he is the Kingdom. The Church as the people of God is called to make the Kingdom visible. But this happens only when Christ reigns supreme in the lives of its members and in their acts of service to others. The Church is the agent of Christ's Kingdom in the world and has the enormous responsibility to be faithful in witnessing to Christ and to the Kingdom. Jesus claimed that he was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of God's reign on earth but he shattered the complacency of his Jewish hearers when he taught that the Kingdom was

not just for them but for those who do the Father's will ([Matt. 7:21](#)). Further, he emphasized that some who thought they had a sure ticket to heaven would be rejected. In parables and stories he warned that many of the religious leaders would be left out of the Kingdom and that the poor, the lame, fallen women and even children would share in the Kingdom banquet ([Lk. 14:15-24](#)).

Jesus taught that in his coming death and resurrection from the dead he was inaugurating a new age in which both Jew and Gentile would share in the banquet of the Kingdom. Jesus knew from God's word to Abraham that all the peoples on earth would be blessed through him and that his coming into the world was to fulfil this prophecy of God. But he taught that the door to the Kingdom was narrow. When asked, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' he replied that only those whose lives were consistent with their words would be able to enter through the narrow door. And then against the background of the crushing condemnation that the last will be first and the first last he said, 'People will come from east and west and north and south and will take their places at the feast in the Kingdom of God' ([Lk. 13:29-30](#)).

A Teacher of the Ethics of the Kingdom

Jesus taught that to enter the Kingdom is not enough. The test is to live lives according to the Kingdom. In the well known Sermon on the Mount ([Matt. 5-7](#)) Jesus spelled out in detail the ethics of the Kingdom, calling for purity of motive and desire as well as outward action in attitudes, anger, marriage, promise keeping, love of enemies and compassion for the poor.

Many people of other faiths have been attracted to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount but few have been willing to enter through the narrow door. It was my privilege to visit Mahatma Gandhi's Ashram in central India, which was near where I worked, and to hold his Bible in my hands. I noted that [Matthew 5-7](#) was heavily underlined. Gandhi often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount but he made the mistake of believing that one could live according to the ethic of the Kingdom without acknowledging the reign in one's life of the one who was the king.

Yes, we have to enter the Kingdom before we have the power to keep its ethic. Jesus' teaching is unique. No other religious teacher has been able to penetrate so deeply the mystery of the relationship of thought and action and of inward and outward righteousness.

Jesus had the gift of teaching profound truths through parables and the use of symbols drawn from nature and from daily life. He was able to make the invisible visible and help people to understand the truth. He talked to the people about sheep and shepherds, salt and light, grapes and vinedressers, tenants and labourers, virgins and widows. Without any sign of egotism Jesus taught that he himself was the way to knowing God; 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall never hunger and he who believes in me shall never be thirsty' ([John 6:35](#)). He saw himself as the light of the world, as the resurrection and the life. He called God his Father in a way that differentiated his relationship to God from that of his disciples. Jesus was the true guru in the sense that there was perfect harmony between what he taught and how he lived. His life was an open secret.

III. JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH AND BEYOND

His Authority to Forgive Sins

The most important part of Jesus' teaching was about the meaning of his coming death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead and his ultimate return to earth.

He explained to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer violence at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed and on the third day be raised to life. His followers must be willing to take up their own cross and follow him ([Matt. 16:21-24](#)). In light of his self-understanding of who he was and why he came to earth he demonstrated his authority and power to forgive sinners.

A paralytic lying on a cot was carried to him by his friends and was let down through the roof into a crowded room. Jesus said to him, 'My son, your sins are forgiven' and then he healed him. To the religious leaders this was blasphemy. Jesus knew he had the right and the power to forgive people their sins because he knew that his forthcoming death on the Roman cross was a sacrifice for the sins of the world and the ground of God's reconciliation of sinners with himself. Referring to himself as the Son of Man he said, 'The Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people' ([Mk. 10:45](#)). Jesus was conscious that he came as a servant to suffer and die in the place of others. The way to God passes through the narrow door of repentance and faith—narrow because those who enter must do so in humility and in complete faith in Christ and his gospel. Jesus' message to a world of anger, violence and oppression began with an offer of forgiveness. Jesus saw himself as a good shepherd who sacrificed his life for the security of his sheep ([John 10:11](#)). While other religious teachers offer forgiveness to the righteous, Jesus offered forgiveness to sinners and the outcasts of society.

His death on the cross was a voluntary act of sacrifice for the sins of others. He came to serve and to give his life as a ransom to redeem many ([Mk. 10:45](#)). He was conscious that in his healing ministry and in his death he was fulfilling the prophecy of the suffering servant of [Isaiah 53](#) ([Matt. 8:16-17](#)). In the garden of Gethsemane he struggled with the costliness of his sacrifice, knowing that in death the love and justice of God were reconciled.

His Power to Give New Life

If Jesus' death was a victory over sin, his rising from the dead was a victory over death. He taught his disciples that on the third day he would rise from the dead and this happened. A careful study of the gospels is very convincing. Jesus died on a cross on a Friday afternoon, was buried in a tomb hewn out of rock and the entrance was sealed. On the Sunday morning he rose from the dead. The tomb was empty; he had passed through the burial clothes as a transformed body. He appeared to his followers, first to the women and in the evening to the whole group of disciples ([John 20:19-29](#)). During the next forty days he appeared again and again. His risen body was unique. His hands and sides bore the marks of the cross. He ate bread and fish with his disciples ([John 21:4-10](#)). They recognized his voice and appearance. Yet there was something radically different. His body was changed. It was no longer subject to the laws of space and time. He could appear and disappear and finally he ascended bodily into heaven.

His resurrection is the unique fact of history. As we have seen he demonstrated the continuity of his resurrected body with his earthly human body, and yet it was a new and transformed body: the sign and seal of heaven made visible. Jesus had raised several men and women from the dead who would die again in the process of time. But his resurrection marked the beginning of a new creation and a new hope for his followers, that they too would share in this hope of being transformed into the image of Christ.

Hindus may believe in many *avatars*, descents of God to earth; they may venerate the cross as an act of self-denial and self-sacrifice, which is a Hindu ideal, but they have no answer to the resurrection of the body. If Jesus is the only way to God it is because the salvation of the person, body and spirit, is a hope profoundly different from all other religious hope. It gives a new dimension to salvation not found anywhere else. It is true

that Muslims hope for the resurrection but as a recovery of the pleasures of this life, and certainly not to be transformed into the glory of the image of the risen Christ.

Such a miracle had never happened before and has not happened since and this being so it is not subject to scientific proof. The most convincing proof of his resurrection was the radical change that came in the lives of the disciples who had met the risen Christ. Before the resurrection they were cowardly and afraid but after meeting him risen from the dead they worshipped him with joy, their fears giving way to boldness and courage. Before he returned to the Father, the risen Christ commissioned his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit ([Matt. 28:19-20](#)). With this vision before them and empowered by the Holy Spirit who came upon them at Pentecost the disciples went out, turned the world upside down and took the Good News to the ends of the earth. It is believed that Thomas came to India, Mark went to North Africa and later disciples travelled as far as China. This radical change in the life of the disciples is inexplicable if Christ did not rise from the dead.

The story is told of a critic who asked the preacher how he knew Jesus was alive. In simplicity he replied, 'Because I talked to him for half an hour this morning.' This subjective answer may not convince everybody, but it does suggest that the risen Jesus draws near to those who open their lives to him.

His Promise to Return

There are more than 250 references in the New Testament to the return of Jesus. His promise to return is the climax of his teaching ministry. At the end of the present age, a time of great distress, all people will witness his return in 'power and great glory' ([Matt. 24:29-31](#)). Every eye shall see him. His coming will be sudden and unexpected. He will return to complete his Kingdom on earth, and as judge to establish the rule of righteousness. He will banish death, destroy all satanic power and judge the living and the dead. He will gather the nations before him and separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats—some to eternal happiness and others to remorse and eternal separation from God ([Matt. 25:31-46](#)). It is not for us to speculate on the details of Christ's final judgement but rather to take care that we are faithful in following Jesus in service to all in need—the poor, the sick and the prisoner.

IV. JESUS THE VISIBLE LIKENESS OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

Our response to the question, 'Is Jesus the only way to God?' is determined first of all by our understanding of the word 'God' and how people of other faiths use the term. In his letter to the Church at Colossae in Asia Minor (now Turkey), Paul boldly states, 'Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God' ([Col. 1:15](#)). God is spirit and not visible to the human eye. No one can bear the light of God's being and live. Yet, says Paul, in Jesus Christ we see God, not in his ontological being or essence but in his attributes of love and holiness and in his relationship to God as Father and God as Holy Spirit. The Biblical doctrine of God is consistently monotheistic: 'Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, The Lord is one' ([Deut. 6:4](#) NIV) Yet God is eternally personal and has revealed himself to his covenanted people as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—three centres of personal being and activity in creation and in redemption. The reality of God as one yet three was quickly grasped by the early New Testament Church, but it took the Church several centuries to develop a coherent theology of the Trinity to counter the alternative views of the word 'God'. Similar situations continue today. The Hindu rejoices to add Jesus to his pantheon of 'incarnations' of God, but to speak of God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is

foolishness to him as it is a stumbling block to Jew and Muslim. For the Christian, Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God because the incarnation was an unrepeatable event in time and space; the cross a once and for all atonement for sin; the resurrection the beginning of a new order of creation. The Christian hope is that when Jesus returns to reign on the earth 'we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is' ([1 John 3:2](#)). This hope has implications for daily living. John continues, 'Everyone who has this hope in Christ keeps himself pure, just as Christ is pure' (v. [3](#)).

Jesus makes God visible because the incarnation is God's saving act in human history. It reduces all other claims of God appearing on earth to myth. In Biblical times Greek religion conceived of the gods becoming men. In fact when Paul and Barnabas visited Lystra in what is modern Turkey and performed miracles of healing, the people thought that Paul and his companion Barnabas were human manifestations of their gods Hermes and Zeus and they wanted to worship them ([Acts 14:8-18](#)). Hinduism also takes seriously the possibility of the gods becoming men. Of the ten avatars or descents of Vishnu (God), Ram and Krishna are the best known and most loved of God in human form. Until recent times Hindus were willing to accept the stories about these *avatars* as mythical stories teaching religious truth. However, today there is a growing movement to believe that Ram and Krishna were historical persons born at a specific place and time. The prolonged rioting between Hindus and Muslims over the site of the birth of Ram at Ayodhya in North India indicates the importance that history now has for Hindu understanding. This movement from myth to history is no doubt in part the result of the impact of Christianity on Hindu India.

The Christians' celebration of Christmas and Easter has inspired Hindus to look for alternatives in their own religious faith. Lord Krishna is perhaps the most loved and honoured of *avatars*. He came to protect the good and destroy the evil and to establish righteousness on the earth. Yet his dalliance with the village cowgirls questions his ethical integrity. His disguise as a charioteer and his sudden escape back to heaven in time of difficulty further question the reality of his humanity. It is said of Krishna that when he walked on the sand he left no footprint. Hindu *avatars* come again and again, some in the form of humanity and others in the form of animals (such as a fish, tortoise, boar or a man-lion). *Avatars* emanate from God and return to God in an evolutionary process. They are sent to destroy the wicked but Jesus Christ came to save sinners and to reconcile them to God. Christ and Krishna are not alternate names for God as understood in trinitarian terms.

Today there are some Christian theologians as well as leaders of other Faiths who argue that all religions are equally true and valid paths to truth and salvation. While Hindus are searching beyond myth to history there are scholars in the west who are seeking to reduce history to mythology and believe that any claim to the uniqueness of Jesus is only in the realm of myth—human stories about God as Ultimate Reality. In this process of reductionism the word 'God' is emptied of all recognizable and knowable reality. All that can be said about God is '*neti neti*'—not this, not that. God is a word without specific content.

Paul in his letter to the Colossians continues: 'For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him' (v. [16](#)). This is an amazing statement. That the one we know as Jesus is also the creator of all that is. Paul then adds that Jesus Christ sustains and holds together the whole of creation, each part having its proper place. In our lifetime we have seen the wonder of man releasing the enormous power of the atom. What holds the universe from disintegrating in one Big Bang? It is none other than God in Christ!

Then Paul stretches our understanding further. This Son has entered into creation, become our redeemer and is now head of the body, his Church (vv. [18-20](#)). He is the Lord from Heaven who has become the Saviour of the world, It is only with the eye of faith that we can affirm that Jesus Christ is truly man and truly God. Such an incarnation can happen only once and need not happen again because Christ's work of liberation and redemption was completed on the cross and confirmed in his resurrection from the dead. It is not surprising that his followers believe Jesus Christ to be unique and final and the only way to God.

V. GRACE ALONE, THE ONLY WAY TO GOD

The Path of Merit

One of the marks of our fallen human nature is that we instinctively believe that we can find the way to God by our own effort. This is true of the followers of all religions, alas, including some Christians! Sadly many Christians with a nominal faith, hope that because of their church attendance and their living good and honest lives, God will have mercy on them and accept them into his Kingdom. In such cases they have no assurance of salvation. Some feel it would be presumptuous even to believe such a certainty.

Hinduism offers three paths to God, though the word 'God' has diverse and contradictory meanings within the Hindu fold. *Karma marga* the way of good deeds and faithful cultic practice is the most common. It centres on temple worship, pilgrimage and festivals through which merit is gained. The second, *Bhakti marga* is the way of devotion and love to God. It comes closer to the Christian understanding of steadfast love (*hesed*). Again its goal is to merit God's favour. The third way is *Jnana marga*, the way of higher and mystical knowledge. This is achieved through yogic discipline and ascetic practices. It is more a way of philosophy than popular religion. This is the path of the few.

The most loved of all Hindu Scriptures, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, offers all three ways as complementary. These paths are common to other faiths as well. They all have one thing in common. Gaining merit through self- action is necessary to win the favour of God(s) or to reach the negation bliss of nirvana.

Biblical Christianity rejects all three ways as merit earning paths to God, but uses all three in the pursuit of living the Christian life. Keeping the Law as a way of salvation is an impossible pursuit but law as a way of living is a necessity for the Christian believer. What makes the difference? The answer is the grace of God.

The Path of Grace Alone

Grace is God's sovereign act of his free will. It is the unmerited and undeserved gift of God to those who least deserve it.

Glimpses of grace are found in every religion for there is an awareness among all people of the majesty of God, the Creator ([Rom. 1:20](#)) and of the law of conscience ([Rom. 2:14-15](#)). In moments of true self-knowledge men and women despair of finding God by their own effort and cry out to God for mercy. This awareness of shame and guilt is itself evidence that the living God through the Holy Spirit is at work in every human heart calling them back to God. It is a sign of God's grace. Two examples of the sign of grace are sufficient. The Southern Vaishnavite faith since the days of Pillai Lokachari (1264-1327) has taught that salvation is by grace alone. Lokachari's guiding scripture was the *Charama Sloka* (verse) from the Gita where Krishna says, 'Abandon every duty, come to me alone for refuge. I will release you from all sin' (18:6). Yet even here grace became a crutch to salvation. Apart from the cross the true meaning of grace cannot be fully understood. The

second example comes from the *Pure Land* school of Japanese Buddhism, where instead of strict asceticism implicit faith in the name of Amida Buddha (the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light) ensures the grace of Enlightenment.

In contrast, the good news of Jesus Christ is that salvation is by grace alone. Paul summarised this way when he wrote 'For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts but God's gift so that no one can boast about it' ([Eph. 2:8, 9](#)). The realization of this truth gave birth to the European Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The human response is the empty hand reaching out in faith to receive God's free gift of grace. This path of grace alone demands our response of faith alone! To the question, 'Is Christ the only way to God?' our answer is shaped by our understanding of grace or the lack of it.

CONCLUSION

How then do we discover that Jesus is the true way to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? The first step is to begin to pray, yes, pray to Jesus. The story is told of Bilquis Sheikh, a high born Muslim and influential lady of Pakistan, who in her pilgrimage to faith made that leap of faith when at midnight she knelt by her bed and for the first time in her life dared to call God 'Father', a step no orthodox Muslim would dare to take. She knew from the Quran that Jesus was a prophet but now she understood that he was also the saviour of the world and her saviour. In the 13th century Anslem, archbishop of Canterbury, put it this way: 'I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand: for this I also believe, that unless I believe I will not understand.' When we take that step of faith we begin to discover that Jesus was not only an ideal man, a great miracle worker and one who sacrificed his life for others, but that he is the one who makes God visible to those who have faith. For some it is a giant leap of faith, for others it is one small step at a time. The path to God always begins with a first step. If people of other Faiths turn from their sinful ways and cast themselves entirely on the mercy of the creator-redeemer God, even if they do not know his name, this is a sign of God's grace upon them. We cannot claim that the grace of God is limited to the boundary of the Christian Church, but we can affirm with the early Church, 'Salvation is to be found through him [Jesus] alone; in all the world there is no one else who God has given who can save us' ([Acts 4:12](#))

It is not for us to judge others and God's response to them. At present we see through a glass darkly, but when Jesus returns we will see him face to face and those things which are hidden from us now will be revealed.

Jesus' call to us, his followers, is clear: 'to know him and to make him known'.

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* All quotations are from *Today's English Version* (Good News Bible) unless otherwise stated and used with permission.

Why Christianity of All Religions?