

10 Misconceptions of the Christian Faith

#5 Christianity Isn't Different from Other Religions

Are the major religions – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism – ultimately different? Some people contend that the distinctions among belief systems are superficial and insignificant. It is proposed that these religions simply use different terms to describe the same spiritual reality and therefore, one faith shouldn't be exalted above the others or claimed to be right to the exclusion of the others.

The Person of Jesus Christ. In reality there are many differences between Christianity and every other religion – more than this article can articulate. One of the most significant distinctions involves the identity of Jesus Christ. Jesus made outrageous claims about himself. He said that he was God: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). He forgave sins (Mark 2:5) and promised to come again to judge the world (Matthew 25:31-32). He claimed to be the Messiah (Mark 14:61-62), but most importantly, he claimed that no person can be welcomed by God the Father unless that person embraces him (John 14:6). Jesus confronts the world today with these claims, and we each must decide what we will do with him. There are essentially three ways of reacting to Jesus' self-claims: (1) He was a liar and tried to deceive those who followed him; (2) He was crazy and suffered from severe mental illness; or (3) He is the one true God, and everything he said about himself was absolutely true. The person of Jesus Christ defines Christianity. Christianity cannot exist apart from him, and other religions can't integrate Jesus into their faith without rewriting his teachings.

Faith vs. Works. Another important distinction of the Christian faith is how it answers the question, “How can I be reconciled to a right relationship with God?” Granted, not every religion asks the question in this way since some of them aren't monotheistic, but the essence of this question is found in each major religion. The solution that every other religion provides is captured in one word, namely, *works*. They all place the onus on humans to right their wrongs. In Judaism and Islam, emphasis is placed on performing good deeds to merit God's favor. In Buddhism and Hinduism, the cause and effect cycle is the energy that determines existence. Good actions lead to good outcomes and bad to bad; it's up to you to determine your fate. Christianity is absolutely opposed to the idea that humankind can make up for misdeeds by moral improvement. The New Testament teaches that people can only be made right with God by repenting of their sins and trusting in Jesus, not by sustaining a life of good works (e.g., Romans 3:28). Jesus' works – his sinless life, willing death and resurrection – alone merit God's favor. The Bible says that those who trust in Jesus and his work gain God's salvation, receiving forgiveness of sin and restoration to a right relationship with their Creator (e.g., Galatians 2:16).

An Impassable Chasm. There is good reason that Christianity insists that humanity cannot work its way to God. Humankind's rebellion and wrong-doing against God has created an impassable chasm between a holy God and themselves. This gap cannot be spanned by works, because good deeds do not nullify past wrongs nor can God's perfect moral standard ever be kept by fallen human beings. The only way to bridge the divine-human gap is by God's own doing. God took that initiative in providing an inconceivable solution – his perfect Son, Jesus Christ, sent as a personal substitution for humankind. How does one activate or appropriate this conciliatory offer found in Christ? Through the simple yet profound responses of repentance and faith. God requires each person to fully acknowledge his wrongdoing, admit that he needs help, and that he can't save himself. He calls for each of us to turn away from our wrongdoing and self-effort and embrace the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Figure 1: Human Works of Other Religions

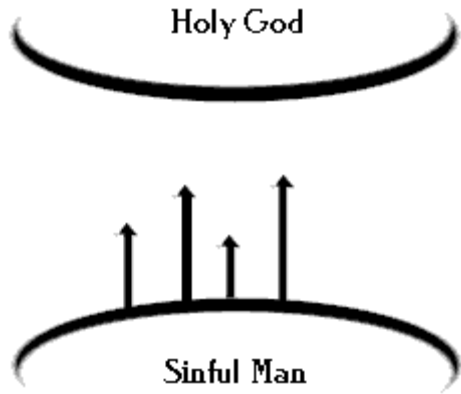
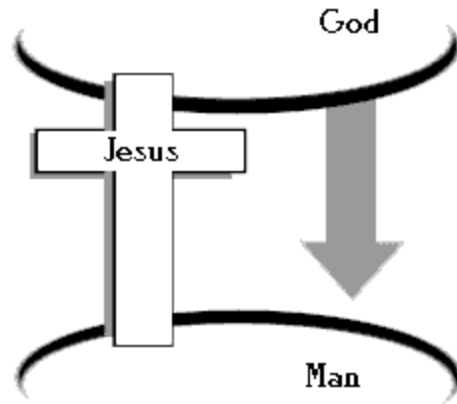


Figure 2: God's Work in Christianity



In terms of moral behavior, there are some similarities between Christianity and other religions, but the core of the faith is very different. Christianity believes Jesus is the one true God and that reconciliation to Him comes only through repentance of sins and faith or confidence in His ability to save.

That being said, all people are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and therefore innately valuable and worthy of respect. Never should the Christian understanding of the universe be forced on anyone by violence or coercion (Matthew 5:39). This is antithetical to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.