

“What Makes Christianity Different?”

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by Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery

This week I would like us to consider together the uniqueness of the Christian gospel. What is it that makes the gospel of Jesus Christ different from every other religion in the world?

Many people today deny there is any such difference. In our modern pluralistic culture, it is frequently asserted that there really are no substantial differences between the major world religions. This is an interesting assertion, for it contains both an element of truth and an element of error.

Let's firstly admit the element of truth. If one surveys the major world religions, one notices at least four common concerns. The first is *the quest for God*: the longing to know who (or what) is ultimate in the universe. The second is *a diagnosis of humanity*: an interest in understanding what is the fundamental problem with people. The third is *the search for salvation*: the desire to know how to fix the problem and bring people into harmony with the divine. Finally, most religions are also concerned with *a prescription of purpose*: what is the meaning of life?

To this extent, our modern observers of religion are correct. All the major world religions, though they offer different answers to these questions, are indeed asking the same questions. Everybody is looking somewhere for identity and meaning. If we think about it, *every* approach to life – even a secular, non-religious one – is religious in the sense that it offers answers to these questions.

Are there other ways in which all or many of the major world religions agree? I believe so. Some time ago, I had the privilege to address a group of people from diverse religious backgrounds about the ways in which different religious perspectives deal with the problem of death. Is death natural, or unnatural? What, if anything, can be done to defeat it?

In the course of our discussion, the group respectfully discussed four different approaches to these questions: pagan, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian. From this discussion arose two conclusions.

The first conclusion was this: though pagan, Hindu, and Islamic religions *differ radically* on *how* we must deal with death, they all *agree* that it is *we who must do it*. In other words, though the search for salvation works *very differently* for a pagan, a Hindu, or a Muslim, all three systems were agreed that the success of that search *depends on the believer's effort*.

The second conclusion was that *the Christian religion is completely different*. The Christian gospel “depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy,” (Rom 9.16). Christianity teaches that people are far worse than they think, and so any self-salvation project is hopelessly doomed. But it also teaches that God is far better than people imagine, and so self-salvation is unnecessary. What do I mean?

The Christian religion offers not self-salvation, but *substitution*. In the Christian gospel, the Son of God became the Son of Man – Jesus Christ. This Jesus lived the perfect life you and I can never live. Then he died the humiliating death you and I deserve. In both life and death, Jesus acts as a *substitute for others* (2Cor 5.21) – and his resurrection is the proof that God accepted the transaction.

It is because of this substitution that the Christian search for salvation is not about *earning* salvation for yourself, but about *receiving* salvation from God. Jesus has already done all the work. All that you and I must do is trust him. “A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ,” (Gal 2.16).

And so it is that modern observers of religion are both correct in several respects *and* wrong at one crucial point. Every major world religion is asking similar questions. And though we all mean different things by the word, all people – religious and otherwise – are seeking ‘salvation’ somewhere. Yet where every other religion in the world offers a *prescription*, the Christian religion offers *substitution*.

Whether you are a Christian or not, do you see the difference?

Jeremiah Montgomery is pastor of Resurrection Orthodox Presbyterian Church, State College. Visit the church’s website at www.resurrectionopc.org. He quotes the English Standard Version of the Bible.