

Do All Roads Lead to God?

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INTRODUCTION: the mountain

You stand in awe at the foot of the mountain. You trace the line of the path on which you stand as it begins to wind up the mountain, its line growing ever thinner before eventually disappearing behind a ridge just a fraction of the way up. Other paths to the east and west lead up the mountain side too and you wonder which route will lead you to the summit.

As you scratch your head, a hiker passes by. You call to him, asking which path to take. Without even stopping, he confidently tells you all these paths lead to the summit, as do many others that start elsewhere around the mountain's base. Sceptical, you trot along behind him as he powers ahead, asking how he knows – has he climbed the mountain before or does he have a map? He laughs! No, he has never been up the mountain before, nor does he have a map, but he knows all the paths must get to the top eventually. Why else would they be etched into the mountain face by thousands of boots that had walked them before and had never come back? You're really not sure. You can think of a very good reason why none of them had come back! Plus, some of the paths, including the one you're on, have signs claiming to be the only safe route and telling you to avoid all others. You wish the lone hiker well but decide to wait for a better authority.

A while later, a woman appears coming down the mountain on a path a short distance to the west of your location. You ask if she has been to the summit and she affirms with a smile that she has, using the very path she is now descending. You're relieved – you've found your path! You ask her if it's true that all the paths lead to the top. She thinks they might, although she didn't see anyone else at the summit who hadn't come on her path, nor did she see any other paths leading on to the plateau she had climbed to. She had heard, though, that some of the other paths did get to the top, although none were as picturesque or as easy as the one she'd used. She bids you farewell and walks off towards the nearby village.

You're about to start your climb when you hear, then see, a mountain rescue helicopter coming in to land. As it nears the ground, an ambulance comes up the road, lights flashing. You watch, fascinated, as the chopper crew unload a man on a stretcher and transfer him into the vehicle. After the commotion dies down, you walk over to the helicopter and engage the pilot in conversation. He's been flying rescue missions here for five years. You ask him about this theory that all paths lead to the summit of the mountain and he tells you not to be so ridiculous. Only one path is safe, he says, and it's not the one you are standing at. How can he be sure, you ask? The pilot responds with a smile, "Because I have flown over the mountain and I've seen all the paths."

Some paths, he tells you, are only loops go part way up, then turn and come back down. Others, like the one you're on now go up as far as a false summit from which the true peak, permanently shrouded in clouds cannot be seen. You think sadly of the woman as he tells you how frequently people make that journey and wrongly claim they have been to the top. Still other paths, like the one to your east – which the confident man went up – lead along treacherous ledges until they meet an abrupt end on the edge of a ravine. Many hikers fell over these edges when the fog came down on the mountain, keeping his team in constant busyness. You tell him about the man you saw then, as he scrambles to take off again, you thank him and head for the only path you can trust – the one he has seen from above the mountain.

Clarifying the question

The story of the mountain is, of course, an allegory for the spiritual quest. God (or ultimate reality) is at the top of the mountain, and the various paths are different religions that claim to lead to Him (or it). This paper sets out to address the question whether all religions are paths to the true God. There are two ways this may be true – universalism and pluralism – and two ways it may be false – atheism and exclusivism. The question of atheism, which claims there is no God at the top of the mountain, is important, but will not be addressed in this paper. My aim here is to consider the other three possibilities.

1. Universalism – everyone will be saved in the end

Universalism claims that God is all-embracing, accepting everyone in the end whatever values they have lived by. It has been claimed by a minority of people in most religions, including Christianity, but the mainstream belief in most faiths is that some people will not be united with God eternally. Universalism sounds nice at first thought, but most people will reject it if they think it through. It can only be true either if God has very low standards, in which case there is no justice and even Hitler gets in to Heaven, or if God plays us like puppets, overriding our rejection of Him and forcing us in to accepting His rule. If so, it really doesn't matter what we believe or how we live and religion becomes pointless.

2. Pluralism – there are many ways to God

Most people who claim that all roads lead to God aren't advocating universalism, but suggesting that sincere followers of various religions will be accepted by God in the end. This position may be called **pluralism**. Pluralism seems like a nice option, side stepping apparently arrogant claims that any one religion is right while also avoiding the unpalatable thought of some very nasty people being accepted by God. Pluralists speculate that God may have given different people diverse paths, or that there may have been one original path to which human beings have added their own theories, or that our perspectives on God are inevitably limited and every religion contains some truth. If we could only strip away the accretions of doctrine and theology that surround the essence of religion, we would find that they all offer real knowledge about God.

3. Exclusivism – there is only one way to God

The third alternative, **exclusivism**, is the terribly old-fashioned sounding belief that there is only one true way to God. At the risk of losing your interest, this is the position I intend to argue for. In the hope you will come with me, I hope to show that it is the only authentically Christian position.

Who is qualified to answer the question?

In the mountain illustration, the only person who could authoritatively say which roads led to the top was the one who had a bird's eye view – the helicopter pilot. The accusation that it is arrogant to claim that only one road can lead to God seems fair when we realise that to know this with certainty, we would need to: (a) know who and where God is; (b) know all the possible roads that have claimed to lead to Him; and (c) be completely

fair in our assessment. It should be obvious that no ordinary human being has this knowledge. I certainly don't, and I am not qualified to write this article on my own authority. Returning to the illustration, for a human person to see that all roads lead to God at the top of the mountain, they would have to occupy a position in the sky above the top. They would have to be above God!

Few religious people, of course, would claim to have this perspective on their own authority. It has, however, become fairly common for 'spiritual but not religious' people in the contemporary West to say exactly this kind of thing. God, they claim, cannot be known with any clarity, but we will all reach God in the end. We don't need to follow any religious authority – organised religion is a killer – we just need to engage with the spiritual aspect of our being. People like Ziad, a young man who contributed to a BBC web page on the theme of spirituality:ⁱ

[I believe] all religions are expressions of the one truth. Like the base of a mountain, humans have compelled themselves to be different. The more we detach ourselves from our ego, the closer we reach the divine spark which is to be alive, to be conscious and share that consciousness with others.

I'm sure such people don't mean to be arrogant, but I hope you (or they) can see when they consider things that this is actually a very bold claim to make. To stake our eternal well-being on our own opinion seems risky in the extreme, like the hiker without a map who set off at full stride on the path of his preference. There is a reason why so many people throughout history have followed recognisable religions and why religion is alive and well – even on the increase in its adherence and influence – in most regions of the world. It is, at least in part, because they have preferred to trust another authority above their own. The question becomes, however, how reliable those authorities are.

Two types of religion

In the second half of the twentieth century, the fact that knowledge is partial and perspectival – we only know the parts of truth that we can see from our own cultural perspective – became more widely recognised in the West. This was a helpful corrective to discriminatory and imperialistic approaches of the past. It contributed to the suspicion of all authorities, including religious ones, and the rise of non-religious spirituality. In fact, this shift is, in many ways, a shift from one of the two major forms of religion to the other.ⁱⁱ

A. Mystical religions – we can know ultimate spiritual reality through experience

Some religions can be described as **mystical**. They claim that ultimate spiritual reality can be known through the inner experience of human beings. The largest mystical religions – Hinduism and Buddhism – originated in India, and a host of smaller ones began either in China or India. Rudolf Otto used the word 'numinous' to describe the experience of awe mixed with a sense of being drawn to the mysterious divine nature that mystical religions report.ⁱⁱⁱ The emphasis is on experience and religion, as suggested by nineteenth century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, can be defined as, "a feeling of absolute dependence".^{iv}

Within mystical religions, the idea that followers of different faiths are experiencing the same divine being is unproblematic. Indeed, it is relatively unimportant whether the religion has a historical founder or whether its followers believe the right things. What matters is that they have the right experience, which is potentially accessible to everyone, even if we may need teachers or gurus to point the way learned in their own experience. The shift to religionless spirituality in the West is, effectively, a shift towards mysticism.

B. Prophetic religions – we can only know God through God’s revelation to us

The other major division of religions can be described as **prophetic**. These faiths claim that God has revealed truth that we otherwise could not know in words given to prophets. The main prophetic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – share a common origin in the Semitic peoples and adherents all claim Abraham as their progenitor. Where they differ is over the prophet whose teachings are believed to be the final or supreme revelation of God: Moses in Judaism; Jesus in Christianity; and Muhammad in Islam.

Prophetic religions often value experience, and most have a mystical strand – Kabbalah in Judaism, Sufism in Islam and some forms of both Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity^v – but they argue that experience must be consistent with and tested against revealed truths about God. How else can we know if it is God we are experiencing as opposed to some false or deceiving spirit? Prophetic religions claim to have historical origins and to uphold true doctrines.

Authentic religion?

The question of authority is, clearly, more important in prophetic religions than mystical ones. Some mystical religions, such as Hinduism, have no historic founder or unifying doctrines.^{vi} Buddhism is exceptional in claiming to derive from one historical teacher, the Buddha. If we are to decide what versions of a religion are authentic, we must return to the teachings of its founder. Here we have a problem, however, since we do not have direct access to the founders. Neither Jesus nor Muhammad nor the Buddha wrote a book, while Hinduism does not have a single founder. We do, however, have books (Scriptures) that claim to be faithful records of their teachings, and we can compare the characteristics of these books.

A. Buddhist scriptures – the Tripitaka

The main Scriptures of **Buddhism**, agreed across all branches, are the Tripitaka, which is believed to have been written in first century BC, around 300-400 years after the Buddha’s life. By the time these scriptures were compiled, Buddhism was sponsored by kings in the Indian subcontinent. The earliest accounts of the Buddha’s life are a century older, but this gap is so long that scholars debate the historicity of the Buddha.

In line with what I said earlier about mystical religions, many Buddhists argue that it does not matter whether the Buddha was a historical figure. His story – whether true or fictional – serves as an example of how to attain liberation. The Buddhist scriptures present the Buddha as an exemplar of one of the reform movements within Hinduism that seemed to have been common around his time. He broke with some aspects of Hinduism, such as the caste system, presenting an alternative understanding of ultimate reality and the path to it.

B. Islamic scriptures – the Qur’an

The Scriptures of Islam, known as the Qur’an, were compiled after the death of Muhammad from oral accounts of people who attributed them to the prophet. A single, standard version of the Qur’an in Arabic is accepted by all Muslims. It is the version approved by the third ruler of the Muslim community (Caliph) after Muhammad, Uthman (reigned 644-656 CE), around 20 years after the prophet’s death. He had the centralised authority to destroy alternative readings.

The Qur’an recounts some episodes that appear in earlier Scriptures associated with Judaism and Christianity, even referring to Jesus as a miracle worker born of the virgin Mary. Muslims claim that there were many

prophets before Muhammad, some of whom are named in the Qur'an. Islam, however, disagrees with these older religions in important ways and some details in the Qur'an contradict accounts in the Bible. Muslims explain this by saying that the earlier prophets' teachings were consistent with Muhammad's but that the books that record them, found in the Bible, were distorted after their deaths and only Muhammad's words, in the Qur'an, were preserved without error.

C. Christian scriptures – the Bible

The Christian Scriptures about Jesus, the **Gospels**, record the life and teaching of Jesus, focusing on his death and claiming that he rose again. The earliest, Mark, was written around 40 years after the events it describes, when Christians were a tiny and powerless group on the margins of the Roman Empire.

The Gospels are, however, only four of the 66 books contained in the Bible, which were written by around 40 authors over a period of around 1500 years.^{vii} Jesus located the significance of His teaching and life within the wider story of the books that preceded him (the Hebrew Scriptures that Christians call the Old Testament) – Creation, sin and God's covenant with the nation of Israel – claiming to be the continuation of Israel's story and the fulfilment of prophecies contained in them. He also authorised the writers of the other New Testament books, the earliest of which can be dated to around 20 years after Jesus' death.^{viii}

Importantly, there are thousands of manuscripts of biblical books that demonstrate a remarkable degree of consistency in preservation of the text over long periods of time; many more than we have for any other ancient text. We can say with confidence that the Bible books we have contain what was originally written and, at least in the case of the Gospels, that they were written by people who were close to the events in place and time.

What is unique about Christianity?

Comparing the scriptures of these three major religions, we can say that Christianity has three distinctive features:^{ix}

- a. **Multiple supporting texts** (unlike the single text of the Qur'an) written over a period of time (unlike both the Tripitaka and the Qur'an);
- b. **Accounts of the founder's teaching written within living memory of his life** (unlike the Tripitaka) without sponsorship or potential interference from people with the power to alter the contents (unlike both the Tripitaka and the Qur'an);
- c. **A founder whose teaching is a detailed engagement of, and interpretation of, older texts known to us.** Christians identify prophetic predictions of Jesus in the Old Testament, but there are no credible predictions of the coming of either the Buddha or Muhammad in earlier sources. Indeed, neither the Qur'an or the Tripitaka have an overarching narrative like the Bible.

The Bible is truly unique among books claiming to be scriptures. Authentic Christianity can be tested against the life and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. It is harder to establish an authentic basis for testing Buddhism against the Buddha's teaching and in the case of Islam, whilst the Qur'an may be an authentic record of Muhammad's proclamations, it does not have these three authenticating marks that the Gospels have.

Don't all religions basically teach the same things?

It is often suggested that all religions basically teach the same thing. Often the 'thing' they are said to encourage is love for others. It is not difficult to see why this claim might be popular with politicians and leaders who want to encourage peaceful co-existence and for whom love for everyone sounds like an attractive quality. There are, however, three significant problems with the claim.

A. Are they really so similar?

Firstly, it exaggerates the similarities and underestimates the differences between religions. The ethical standards of different religions often have similarities, but a closer look reveals important differences, even when concepts seem superficially similar. Such commands like 'love others' tend to be located within ethical codes more detailed than simple principles like love or justice.

Comparing Buddhism and Christianity, for example, both agree that people should not steal, lie, kill or commit adultery, but the Christian insistence on honouring one's parents flatly contradicts the Buddha's example of renouncing family to seek enlightenment. More importantly still, Christian commandments about loving other people are always set in the context of loving God first – only by doing so, we believe, can we learn to truly love others – whereas Buddhism has no concept of love for God.

B. What is love?

Secondly, a command to love requires some additional definition. The meaning of a command to 'love' others, for example, is modified by the meaning of the word 'love', additional teachings about how it should be expressed, and the people it commands us to love. Other religions certainly command loving, or compassionate, behaviour towards others, but these duties are often limited to family or people within our families.

The Qur'an, for example, contains statements that appear to command believers to kill non-believers. Christ, by contrast, commanded his followers to love everyone, even including their enemies, and only to repay evil with good. He intensified the meaning of love even further by presenting himself as the ultimate standard.

C. Is religion basically ethics?

Thirdly, the whole project of comparing ethical standards assumes that religion is primarily about ethics. That may be true of some religions, which claim that we can earn God's approval by good works, but not of Christianity. The more important aspects of religions are often the points where they diverge. This fact is captured, along with the ill-informed nature of claims that all religions are the same, in a stanza of a poem by Steve Turner:^x

We believe that all religions are basically the same,
at least the one that we read was.
They all believe in love and goodness.
They only differ on matters of
creation sin heaven hell God and salvation.

An illustration from my professional background in medicine may help. Ethics may be thought of as regimes for healthy living, like advice on diet and exercise. These are, clearly, always good for the patient, but if she has a life-threatening cancer that results from earlier deviation from the guidelines, lifestyle adjustments will not save

her life. She needs a more radical solution, including surgery to cut out the tumour, which she can't perform herself.

Religions make very different proposals as to the diagnosis of our basic problem and the proper cure. In Buddhism, the disease is desire and the illusion of the permanence of the self that arise from it, the remedy is freedom from egocentric desires, and the treatment is adherence to an eightfold path the Buddha taught. In Christianity, by contrast, the disease is rebellion against our Creator (sin), the remedy is a gift of eternal life made possible by Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection, and the treatment is to repent of sin and trust in Jesus Christ. If Christianity is correct, then, to follow Buddhism would be like eagerly feeding a patient who is wasting away because of cancer nutritious food, hoping to fatten her up again, rather than allowing a skilled surgeon to cut out the tumour.

The problem of arrogance

A possible objection to claims that any one religion is true to the exclusion of others is that they sound arrogant and judgemental. On a surface level, this seems like a fair accusation, especially if we acknowledge, as I have already, that no human being has absolute and infallible knowledge, especially about spiritual matters. It is, however, important to recognise that most of the major religions of the world make exclusive claims.

Hinduism – a pluralistic religion

The one exception among the four religions with the largest numbers of adherents is Hinduism. There is no central authority to determine what is orthodox Hindu belief and 'Hinduism' is basically a Western term for the collected phenomenon of Indian religious beliefs and practices that did not fit into one of the other recognisable religions. Historically, however, some reforming movements and minority groups within Hinduism have been rejected as *nastika* (heterodox) on the basis that they depart from the basic Hindu principles of reverence for the Vedas (the core Scriptures of Hinduism) and belief in the soul (*atman*). Two of these *nastika* groups have developed into distinct religions – Jainism and Buddhism.

The concept of *nastika*, although its limits are debated among Hindu schools, suggests that Hinduism is not as limitlessly inclusive as it may initially seem. It is, nevertheless, more diverse than any of the three religions discussed earlier in this paper. The challenge of delineating the boundaries of Hinduism led in 1986 to a court case in India to determine whether a particular sect was a distinct religion. The Supreme Court eventually ruled on the case and, in the process of doing so, outlined a set of defining criteria for Hinduism.^{xi} These include a commitment to the authority of the Vedas (excluding *nastika* groups) along with a statement that Hinduism includes a "Recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are many." In other words, Hinduism is by definition pluralistic.

Totalitarian inclusivism

Hindus are often proud of their inclusivism and contrast it with the imperialistic approaches of other religions. Hindu writer Sheshagiri Rao, for example, describes claims made by some Christian missionaries in India about the exclusivity of Christianity as "totalitarian claims [that] betray pride and self-righteousness". He also criticises an alternative view advanced by Roman Catholicism since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s that some Hindus are "anonymous Christians" and that Hinduism contains partial revelations from God awaiting fulfilment in Christianity as "supercilious and patronizing notions". In the same article, however, Rao argues, in true Hindu

form, for a pluralistic view of salvation and lends support to the claims of a Hindu teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, whose views he describes as illustrative of Hindu attitudes to Christianity, that the Hindu deities, Allah and Christ are all expressions of one God and that "paths are many, but God is one. [...] Differences are in languages and perceptions, not in substance".^{xii} Rao argues that an increasing number of 'Christians' are coming to see the reality, long understood by Hindus, that religions are just different expressions of the same reality.

The irony here is that Rao does to Christianity what he accuses Christians of doing to Hinduism. His claims for the concept of pluralism could be said to be totalitarian and his view that many Christians are, in effect, 'anonymous Hindus' (my term, not his) could be said to be patronising. My point here is not to attack Rao or other Hindus, but to point to a fundamental logical contradiction in the claim that all roads lead to God. How can two systems of belief that flatly contradict each other be equally true? The idea of all roads leading to one destination could be true if the destination is on the same piece of land as the starting point, but, as an island dweller, I know that all roads don't lead to London because there is no road link from Ireland to Britain. If I want to get to Buckingham Palace to see the Queen of England, I need to go by air or sea – no road will suffice.

A self-defeating claim

From the perspective of prophetic religions like Christianity, the claims of different religions are less like comparing roads and more like different claims about how an Irish man like me can get to London. Mystical religions tell me that I don't need to leave Ireland. Some say I just need to realise I am already in London or London is in this place, while others claim there is a road or several roads that lead to London. Meanwhile, prophetic religions are telling me that I need to leave Ireland to get to London, but they suggest different ways to get there.

Put simply, the claim that absolute truth about religion cannot be known is self-defeating, since it is an absolute claim.^{xiii} As illustrated in the story of the mountain with which I opened this article, by saying that I know that all religions lead to God I am making a claim that is just as arrogant – perhaps more so – than the claim that a particular way leads to God and others do not. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity simply cannot all be true; they are fundamentally contradictory (even Hinduism!). This does not answer the question who is right and who is wrong, but I hope I have illustrated that each religion must be taken on its own terms. Either we give up trying to determine what is true and just try our best at some religion or none, or we consider seriously the claims of authentic expressions of religions.

We are accustomed to recognising that some things are true and others are not in the realm of the physical world. As I indicated earlier, my old craft of medicine depended on confidence that some drugs work while others do not and it mattered hugely which I prescribed to my patients. I may not always have made the correct judgement and knowledge about medications was always developing, but there is a fundamental principle of truth in medicine. Why would this not be true in spiritual matters?

The uniqueness of Christ

A Christian answer to any question must centre on the person of Jesus Christ. Returning to my image of the Irish man in Belfast trying to figure out how to get to London, the answer is that he cannot do it on his own steam and, even if he could, the Queen would not receive him at Buckingham Palace without a valid invitation. This is the equivalent of the Christian claims about salvation (getting to God). If the Bible is true, the premise behind the claim that all roads lead to God is fundamentally wrong as we cannot reach God ourselves even if we want to, because we are alienated from God by sin. This disease is not within our power to cure. Worse than this, we

are also surrounded by ideas that are false and that feed our sinful desires or hold us in fear at a distance from God. It is even worse than the prospect of me trying to walk and swim to London (although I am sure I would sink some way into the Irish Sea) – it is not just that there is a great gap between God and me – it is like a quadriplegic person trying to do it – we are separated from God and powerless to even begin the journey. But the amazing claim of Christianity is that God reached out to us, revealing His will and intentions through prophets over many centuries and then supremely in the person of Jesus Christ. It is like the Queen sending repeated messages to me inviting me to the Palace and then, finally, sending Prince Charles in a private helicopter to come, find me and transport me to the grounds of Buckingham Palace. This leads to the key point I want to emphasise in this paper: the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

By any measure, Jesus is unique. He has had a unique influence on human history – around one third of the world's population now identifies in some sense as Christian and values that came into Western civilisation from His teachings have become the foundation for the contemporary global order of human rights and justice. These facts alone should convince even the greatest sceptic that it is worth considering who Jesus was and what He taught. More importantly, however, it is by considering Jesus that we get to the heart of Christian belief and that the differences between Christianity and other religions become clearest. John Stackhouse (2002, p.191) writes:^{xiv}

The question of Christianity and other religions [...] takes on a different color when it shifts to “Jesus and other religious leaders.” Christianity may look more or less like other world religions in many generic respects: Christianity offers salvation, as do others; Christianity teaches high moral values, as do others; Christianity encourages regard for the neighbour, as do others. But Jesus himself does not look like every other religious leader. No other such figure is said to be God incarnate; no other suffers for the sins of the world; no other rises from the dead as the firstborn of a general resurrection to come; and so on.

Jesus claimed to have entered our world from the presence of God. He said: “I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father” (John 16:28). To return to the illustration I began with, here is someone coming down the mountain from the peak and saying He will return the way He came. John, one of Jesus' appointed apostles put it like this: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). Notice John's claim is even bolder – the person who came down the mountain to show us the way to the top was none other than God. If these claims are true, then Jesus is the only person who can speak with true authority about God and the way to God, because He has travelled that road in coming into the world and in returning to His Father and His knowledge of His Father is complete because He is One with God. If this is true, then only Jesus is qualified to answer the question whether all roads lead to God.

Consider the uniqueness of Jesus in by comparison with other religions and their founders in five respects:

A. His status – born in poverty and rejected power and position in this world.

The Buddha was born in wealth and privilege as a prince in a palace and Muhammad, whilst not necessarily rich, was part of an influential merchant family and tribe. The Buddha walked away from his privilege, whilst Muhammad walked into greater power, becoming a military and political leader. Indeed, this fact about the prophet of Islam caused one author to put Muhammad above Jesus in his ranking of the 100 greatest people in history, since Muhammad was “the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels.”^{xv} This statement seems somewhat ironic to me, since the remarkable thing about Jesus is precisely that he made such a great and lasting impact on the world despite never having held a position of status in the world. His life turns the norms of this world on their head and testifies to a different set of values.

B. His identity – God incarnate

The profound ethical teachings of Jesus (see above) are not the most remarkable thing that He is recorded as saying. The Gospels record that Jesus claimed to be God and Christians have worshipped Him as God from the earliest times.^{xvi} Importantly, the claim is not that Jesus is God in some nebulous sense or that He embodies some vague concept of deity, but specifically that He is one with the God of Old Testament history – the One God who created all things and is sovereign over all. The Buddha, although some Buddhists revere him with godlike qualities, did not make a claim like this, but rather did not give a clear indication of whether God existed. Muhammad, meanwhile, considered the claims of Christians that Jesus is God's Son as a serious sin and claimed that Jesus, like himself, was a prophet, a servant and messenger of God.

In Hinduism various gods (believed by many Hindus to be expressions of one true god) are believed to have appeared in human form as avatars at different points in history. Similarly, the Greek and Roman gods were believed to temporarily take on human form. What is different in the case of Jesus is that the God He claimed to be is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the one who created all things and is distinct from them (the Hindu and Greek ideas were of lesser gods or not truly separate from creation) – and that the incarnation is permanent. In Jesus, God was permanently united with humanity. Jesus remains human and will return in human form. In Him, our humanity was lifted from its fallen position into privileged relationship with God.

C. His actions – working miracles

Most Buddhist texts do not claim that the Buddha worked miracles, although later Buddhist traditions make the unverifiable claim that he had several supernatural powers, but refused to use them, while others claim he performed some dramatic miraculous feats like emitting water and fire from different halves of his body simultaneously or walking as a baby. These 'miracle' accounts, as well as being late developments in Buddhist thinking, have no correspondence to human experience and achieve no beneficial end. Muhammad, meanwhile, worked no miracles except the Qur'an (it is often claimed that Muhammad was illiterate).

Jesus, by contrast, is said in the Gospels to have worked powerful miracles that demonstrate the reality of His claim to be God. The Qur'an actually agrees, acknowledging that Jesus was a miracle worker. Importantly, the nature of Jesus' miracles differs from those sometimes associated with the Buddha. They were never for his own benefit or to gain attention, but always to bring help and relief to others. Furthermore, they are generally extensions or accelerations of what is natural or reversals of the effects of sin. As such, they demonstrate His sovereign power over nature and His mission of restoring the fullness of God's kingdom by redeeming human beings from sin.

D. His death – for others' sins

The death of Jesus, which is the focal point of the Gospels, is unique as are Christian claims about what it achieved. Muhammad died in his 60s of a fever that some traditions say was caused by poison, although it was most likely due to an infectious disease. The Buddha is said to have died at the age of 80, most likely of food poisoning. Jesus, by contrast, died at humiliating and excruciating death in his early 30s at the hands of the Roman occupiers of Judea as the result of a plot by religious leaders, having been betrayed by a close friend, denied by another and abandoned by many more. These details make Jesus' death remarkable in its humiliation, obscurity and pain, and his subsequent influence even more so. The most important point about the death of Jesus is, however, what Christians believe it achieved.

The Gospels record Jesus as saying He would die as a ransom for many other people (Matthew 20:28) and telling His disciples shortly before He died that His blood would be poured out for the forgiveness of sins and to forge a new relationship or covenant with God (Matthew 26:28). They also tell that His death happened at Passover and that He understood His life to be a fulfilment of the Old Testament. As the apostle Paul wrote in his succinct summary of the heart of Christian faith, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3). Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, and He died to fulfil the pattern of sacrifices that the Old Testament contains. There is simply no parallel to this in other religions. Indeed, most Muslims do not believe that Jesus died on the cross and although other religions have some references to sacrifices, their meaning is often not clear.

E. His resurrection – returning from the dead

The apostle Paul’s summary of the things of “first importance” continues as follows: “that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Later in the same passage, he even says that Christian faith is pointless if Jesus did not rise from the dead and ties this historic event with the future hope Christians have of a general resurrection of those who have believed in Him to share in eternal life with Him when he returns.

Buddhists believe that the Buddha at his death attained final release from the cycle of reincarnation, ultimately ceasing to exist as an individual distinguishable from the cosmos. He cannot return. Muhammad, meanwhile, is believed by most Muslims to have gone to paradise, the reward for faithful believers in Allah. Interestingly, however, Islamic tradition says that Jesus, who was also a prophet, will return before the final day of judgement. This is another indicator of the special place Jesus has in Islam. Muslims do not, however, believe that Jesus rose from the dead.

The truly unique Jesus

These are the kind of claims no one can afford to ignore. If they are true, they mean that Jesus and His teachings have supreme importance for every person. C.S. Lewis’s famous trilemma helps us think through the consequences.^{xvii}

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t 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 the 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. 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 with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

The point is clear. If we are going to take Jesus seriously, rather than reducing Him to the Jesus we would prefer, we must allow His claims to confront us. We may reject them, but we cannot ignore them.

Do all roads get there in the end?

It is time to revisit the question that forms the title for this paper. Do all roads lead to God? More specifically, is there good reason to have confidence in either universalism or pluralism? So far, I have established that there are fundamental differences between the world's major religions and that Jesus stands out as unique among the great religious leaders. I have also suggested that there are excellent reasons to believe that Christianity is not only unique and, therefore, interesting, but also true and, therefore, cannot be ignored. If I am correct, then we can say that all religions do not lead to God, but that was not the question that we started by asking unless the only roads we can conceive of are religions. Is it not possible that every individual's path through life will ultimately end up with God whatever religion they follow?

The Way, the Truth, and the Life

In working towards an answer to this question, let us return to Jesus. Did He teach that all roads lead to God? Jesus made numerous profound and sweeping claims about Himself in terms of His identity, His relationship to God and His significance in the history and destiny of humankind. In possibly the boldest of these He said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

It is hard to see how Jesus could be more exclusive than this – no other way, no other truth, no other life! I may sound arrogant in making such an exclusive claim, but please note it is not me who is saying it, but Jesus. You may reject it, but you cannot have Jesus plus any other person who claims to have insights into God or spirituality or the meaning of life that you cannot find in Jesus. Others are alive; Jesus *is* the life – the source and sustainer of life itself. Others teach some truth; Jesus *is* the truth – all other claims must be evaluated against Him. Others have a way; Jesus *is* the way – He alone can bring us to God and this way is not an impersonal set of principles, but a living person who must be known, trusted and obeyed. Jesus was not a pluralist and authentic Christianity is not compatible with pluralism.

Two eternal destinations

Importantly, too, Jesus did not leave room for us to claim that He is the only way to God, but that everyone will end up coming to God through this way whatever path their life has taken. Jesus insisted that He would reject before His Father those who reject Him (Mark 8:38). He taught that some people would end up consigned to "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). His parables are full of references to divine judgement and to people who end up outside the feast that is an image of the eternal destiny of God's people. Even some who claimed to do great works in His name and who call Him Lord will not enter the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 7:21-23).

This is not necessarily to say that only Christians can be in Heaven,^{xviii} but it is to say that no one will be there except through Jesus Christ and that no one who has heard the truth about Jesus and rejects Him can be there. Christians long for as many people as possible to share in God's gift of eternal life, but the Bible clearly teaches that some people will not. Jesus was not a universalist and authentic Christianity is not compatible with universalism.

CONCLUSION: all roads can turn to God

So, in conclusion our answer to the question, “Do all roads lead to God?” must be, “No.” Only Jesus leads to God and in the person of Jesus, God reached down to us. Those who reject Jesus cannot be accepted by God. Yet in another sense, all roads may lead to Jesus. By this I mean that the invitation to salvation in Jesus is extended by the Bible to everyone. No one is so far from God that they cannot turn to Him and be saved. To quote the apostle Paul quoting a Greek poet: “[God] is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27-28).

Jesus did not come to call a select group of people and condemn everyone else. Rather, He came to reveal to all people the life-giving truths that the God who created us, loves us and wants us to live with Him, but also the stark reality that without the forgiveness for sins that comes through Jesus we cannot share in this hope. He calls us to turn from our own claims to knowledge – including the claims that we can save ourselves through adherence to any religious system we choose or value or that we can decide who God should accept – to trust instead in His claim to be God and the only way to God.

To become a Christian is to acknowledge our sinful rebellion against God, to believe that Jesus died for my sins and rose again, and to confess that He is now my Lord – the one who calls the shots in every area of my life. This is a truth that changes everything and a call that demands our all.

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Ziad on BBC website, *21st Century Spirituality*, Available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/spirituality> [Accessed 8 Apr 2018]
- ⁱⁱ Hundreds of religions have been described across human cultures, but the four religions that account for more than three quarters of the world’s population – Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism – will be the basis of my discussion in this paper. If all religions are paths to God, it should be evident in these three religions.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Otto, R. (1923) *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. by J.W. Harvey. London: H. Oxford University Press.
- ^{iv} There is some dispute over whether Schleiermacher’s German phrase should be translated as above or “an absolute feeling of dependence” – see Behrens, G. (1998) Feeling of absolute dependence or absolute feeling of dependence? (What Schleiermacher really said and why it matters). *Religious Studies*, 34, p. 471-481. Whichever is the better translation, the fact remains that Schleiermacher is describing religion in experiential terms.
- ^v In fact, I maintain there ought to be a mystical, or a strong experiential dimension to Christian faith, but that this is secondary to the prophetic origins of Christianity. A person becomes a Christian through a mystical response, led by the Holy Spirit, to the gospel message revealed prophetically through Jesus and His apostles, with the result that he or she becomes a new creation in Christ.
- ^{vi} One of the few agreed defining features of Hinduism is that its adherents accept that there are multiple pathways to the divine. There are Hindu scriptures, the most foundational of which are the Vedas, but those oldest Hindu texts, whilst universally respected by Hindus and generally believed to have been spoken by the gods in ages past, do not form the basis of contemporary Hindu practice, which is influenced much more by later scriptures and teachers that do not have universal approval across Hinduism.
- ^{vii} Some scholars suggest it was more like 1000 years, while others say less, but the point still stands. The Bible is unlike the Qur’an, which was given by one man in one period of time and is not part of a wider story.
- ^{viii} It should be noted that this short time period between the earliest Christian writings, which include claims about Jesus that the Qur’an denies, is a direct challenge to the Muslim claim that Jesus’ teachings were distorted after his death.

^{ix} There are other pointers to the reliability of the Bible, such as archaeological evidence, correspondence to other historical sources, and the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy in the New Testament. These cannot be explored in detail here, but much has been written about them.

^x Turner, S. *Creed*. Available: <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/creed/> [Accessed 9 Apr 2018]

^{xi} Complete judgement of the Supreme Court of India, *Hinduism Today*. Available: <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=5047> [Accessed: 5 Dec 2017]

^{xii} Rao, S. (2009) 'Christian Views of Hinduism: A Hindu Response', in Race, A., and Hedges, P.M. (eds.), *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*. London: SCM. Quotes are from pages 278, 279 and 282.

^{xiii} This paradox has often been recognised in the postmodern claim that there is no absolute truth or that it cannot be known reliably.

^{xiv} Stackhouse, J.G. (2002) *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.191.

^{xv} Hart, M.H. (1992) *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*. New York: Citadel Press. p.3.

^{xvi} For details of these claims see my paper *Is Jesus Jehovah God*. Available: <https://www.paulcoulter.net/theology> [Accessed 8 Apr 2018]

^{xvii} Lewis, C. S. (1952) *Mere Christianity*. London: Collins. p.54-56.

^{xviii} Christians who recognise the uniqueness of Jesus differ in their views about whether people who have never heard about Jesus, perhaps including some who follow other religions, can be saved through Jesus by exercising faith in what they do know about God. This difference of view among Christians is not unimportant, but it does not bring the central Christian claims about the uniqueness of Christ and the fact that He claimed to be the only way to God into question. Nor does it remove the responsibility upon Christians to share the good news about Jesus since Christians on both sides of the debate agree that only those who trust in Him can be certain of salvation and receive the fullness of God's blessings now.