

Occasionally you run into Christians who seem to think that if you just tell the world about Jesus, they would change their ways and all come begging to be baptized. But it doesn't really work that way. In fact most people of other faiths **have** heard of Jesus but they view him very differently.

Muslims revere Jesus as the son of the Virgin Mary. In fact Mary is the only woman mentioned in the Qur'an. And they believe that God took Jesus directly up into heaven. Not only do they uphold the virgin birth but they maintain that Jesus and his mother were untouched by Satan. In a word, Jesus and Mary are sinless.

Even their greatest prophet Muhammad had to be purified by angels before he received prophethood. Even Muhammad is not presented as a miracle worker but Jesus performs miracles. He heals the blind, cures the lepers and, to quote the Qur'an "brings forth the dead by [Allah's] leave." And he never dies. Muhammad himself dies.

However, while it is true that Jesus is taken up into heaven, in their version, this was done to save Jesus from the crucifixion. He asks God to save him from the cross and the ascent to heaven is God's answering of that prayer. Jesus is so great a prophet that God kept him from being killed. Muslim scholars say, "If Jesus had been crucified, it would have meant that God had failed his prophet." And, when Jesus returns, they assert that he will return as a Muslim, fight against Satan and will eventually die a natural death.

Hindus find the concept of one God too restrictive so their land is peppered with more than 300,000 local deities. But, Hinduism has some universal qualities which all Hindus share in common. Their deities offer to everyone, through rigorous spiritual practice, the chance to realize god-consciousness – to see that we and god are really one being. The Hindu folk story goes, and it is a strong tradition in the culture, that Jesus slipped away from his parents, journeyed across Southeast Asia learning yoga meditation, and then returned home to Israel to become a guru to the Jews.

The life stories of Jesus and the Buddha are strikingly similar. It is reported in some traditions that Buddha was conceived without sexual intercourse and born to chaste woman just as Jesus. Both leave home for the wilderness where each is tempted by a Satan figure. Both return enlightened, work miracles and challenge the religious establishment by their teachings. Both attract disciples and both are betrayed by one of them. Both preach compassion, unselfishness and altruism and each creates a movement that bears the founder's name.

The striking difference in the two religions is this: It is the goal of every Buddhist to achieve Buddhahood, to become Buddha himself, to achieve Nirvana where you yourself no longer exist. In Christianity a Christian can never become Christ or seek to end our personal existence. What the Buddhist does to the Christ figure is strip him of his divinity, make him into a mere man. It is common, in Buddhist circles to regard Jesus as an **emanation**, a partial and inferior copy of the Buddha.

Today, in Jewish circles, Jesus is almost completely ignored though Jewish students and scholars agree that Jesus was a Jew. But that is about all. The Torah teaches that we must sanctify life in the here and now of home and family, community and society. But Jesus doesn't fit neatly into those rather narrow interests.

And all those different versions of who Jesus was leave out the same important factor: **The Cross**. "The cross is what separates the Christ of Christianity from every other version of Jesus. In Judaism there is no precedent for a Messiah who dies, much less as a criminal as Jesus did. In Islam, the story of Jesus' death is rejected as an affront to Allah himself. Hindus can accept only a Jesus who passes into peaceful samadhi, a yogi who escapes the degradation of death". The figure of a crucified Christ, says a leading Buddhist "is a very painful image to me. It does not contain joy or peace, and this does not do justice to Jesus as an emanation of the Buddah."

**The Cross**. There is not room in other religions for a Christ who experiences the full burden of mortal existence. But Jesus himself is very clear: **Unless the grain of wheat dies, it will not bear fruit**. In all those other religions, death is seen as a failure, an end to your accomplishments, even a sign of God's disfavor. Losing everything is just losing. But in Christianity it is in losing that we gain everything. It is when we place our trust and hopes in God alone that we find what was always beyond our reach. "Sir," the visiting Greeks say, "we would see Jesus." Which Jesus do you want to see? Is there room in your view for a crucified Christ?

Can you follow a savior who says you may have to lose everything to gain everything worthwhile?

Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr condemns the cross-less Christianity that is promoted by liberal "feel good" churches. He says they preach a **false gospel** in which "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministry of a Christ without a Cross." But there is no real Christianity without the Cross.

Our world today encourages us to be inoffensively neutral. They misrepresent it as tolerance, but it is really the sin of despair... the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die." Our world doesn't like the Cross.

Jesus often taught the truth in paradoxes drawn from daily life. "If you're going to find your life, you're going to have to lose it," he said. "It is only in giving that you receive." "If you want to be first, you must become last." "If you're going to be master, you must become a servant." And all of those paradoxes are wrapped in one: We must die if we want to live.

Our failure to let go and let some things die is a primary spiritual disease for our age, for new life can't come without some death. The failure to forgive leads to death of relationship while anger and bitterness ravage the spirit like a cancer. Holding on to regrets strangles hope before it can lift us to new life. Trying to control events and other people leads to frustration, stress, and exhaustion.

During this season of lent we remember that forgiveness and letting go of control are spiritual exercises in the art **of dying so that new life may abound.**