

## TRUE FOR ME, TRUE FOR YOU? What is Christianity?

### Introduction

Whether they realize it or not, everybody has what philosophers call an “epistemology.” What on earth is that? In simple English, it’s a way of determining what is true and what is not. In fact, I would argue that “true” and “false” are the categories that make the world go around. You might even say that’s my “epistemology!”

Unless you walked here, you got here by car. Inside your car is a computer that regulates how much gas goes into each cylinder, and when the spark plugs should fire. That computer runs on a language that consists of only two words: “true” and “false.” Every computer does. Every piece of new technology you rely on to get through the day runs on a language of “true” and “false.”

So do you! Unless you’re an early riser, your alarm went off this morning, telling you that the statement “it’s time to get up” is true, and the statement “stay asleep” is false. Unless you know that you set your alarm clock to go off a little early, and you hit “snooze.” In that case the statement “it’s time to get up” is only true after you’ve pressed snooze twice - or three - or four times. If you ARE an early riser, you got up because it was light out, so the sun answered the question “it’s time to get up” with true.

What’s all this “true” and “false” about? It’s like this: just like a computer, each of you has a “program” that tells you what is true and what is false. Every human being has one. Just try and get around it in your mind.

### EXAMPLE 1:

IF “I refuse to accept that something has to be either true or false” IS TRUE, THEN “Everything must be either true or false” MUST BE FALSE. But this violates the first statement! It means THAT “Everything must be either true or false” IS FALSE, NOT **TRUE AND FALSE!**

∴ Therefore everything must be either true or false. It cannot be both.

### EXAMPLE 2:

IF “If Joe likes lobster, and Mary does not,” IS TRUE, then “Lobster tastes good” IS TRUE and “Lobster tastes horrible” IS ALSO TRUE. Doesn’t that mean the statement “Lobster is good” IS TRUE AND FALSE? No, because the statement is a preference. “Good” must be defined. If we define “Good” as “Good for all people,” THAT IS FALSE, NOT TRUE. If we defined “Good” as “Good for Joe,” IT IS TRUE, NOT FALSE.

∴ Therefore everything must be either true or false. It cannot be both.

### EXAMPLE 3:

IF “God’s character cannot be known” IS TRUE, then the statement “God is Love” IS FALSE. If Christianity teaches “God is Love” and Islam teaches “God’s character cannot be known,” then EITHER ISLAM OR CHRISTIANITY IS TRUE, but BOTH CANNOT BE TRUE.

∴ The statement “All Religions Are True” IS FALSE!

This statement shouldn't seem outrageous. It's hardly a complicated bit of logic, though it may seem so. Cicero, one of the greatest philosophers and thinkers of the Roman Empire (106 BC to 43 BC), realized the truth of the logic. Faced with the variety of religions of his time (and Christianity and Islam hadn't arrived on the scene!) he wrote:

There is in fact no subject upon which so much difference of opinion exists, not only among the unlearned but also among educated men; and the views entertained are so various and discrepant, that, while it is no doubt a possible alternative that none of them is true, it is certainly impossible that more than one should be so. (Cicero, *De natura deorum*)<sup>1</sup>

## **Different Religions**

Let's consider, first, the four major religions world religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. They are the largest by a long shot, and so the whole idea that there are millions of religions out there, too many to chose from, is not really true.

## **Hinduism**

Hindus make up the third largest religion in the world, largely due to the population of India. The population of India is over 1 billion, and the vast majority of the world's Hindus are found there. Hinduism is a vast, sprawling, religion, incredibly difficult to pin down. There are four different branches of Hinduism, and they vary as to their exact beliefs. But I'll summarize the key beliefs that all four branches share.

First, Hindus believe there is one formal, divine principle in the world: Brahman. This Brahman is “infinite in form, immortal, imperishable, impersonal, and all-pervading.”<sup>2</sup> A story is told of a Hindu philosopher, Sankara, who was trying to teach his student what Brahman is. The pupil would ask, “Sir, teach me the nature of Brahman.” Sankara would say nothing. The pupil asked a second time, and a third time, with no answer. The pupil accused him of teaching nothing. Finally Sankara answered, saying, “I teach you indeed, but you do not follow. His name is silence.”<sup>3</sup>

Brahman is the only true reality. What we see around us is Maya, an illusion, superimposed on top of Brahman, the true reality. Humanity is Brahman, only Maya, the illusion around us, makes us believe we are individuals. You are me, and I am you, and we are Brahman. Brahman can manifest himself in the world in certain individuals. For example, Krishna, who is one such individual. So even though Hinduism worships hundreds of gods in various forms, it sees these as simply the manifestation of the one Brahman in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> John Warwick Montgomery. *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus*. (Hamburg, Germany: VKW, 2003), 13

<sup>2</sup> Norman Geisler. *Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 316

<sup>3</sup> Geisler, 316.

The goal of human life is to free ourselves of the belief that we are individuals, either through meditation, work, knowledge, or love. If we free ourselves through diligent work, we become Brahman and cease to exist as individuals, like a drop of water becoming one and disappearing into a pool or lake. If we don't do this, we are subject to the endless cycle of rebirth – reincarnation – based on the quality of our works.

### **Buddhism**

One person once told me that if Hinduism were Roman Catholicism, Buddhism would be Protestantism. Gautama Buddha, the founder of the philosophy of Buddhism, was a prince in India who ran away from his life in the pursuit of wisdom. He tried poverty and he tried excess, and in the end, discovered the eight-fold path that he believed would lead to contentment.

Buddhists do not believe in “God”, strictly speaking. There is no personal or even impersonal creator of all things, some kind of divine super-being. Like Hinduism, Buddhism believes that All is One and One is the All, and we are all a part of the All. Those who are Buddhas, or enlightened beings, perceive this all, while the rest of us who are not yet enlightened are part of it, but don't perceive it.

The goal of life is to follow the eight-fold path “religiously” out of the endless cycle of reincarnations to nirvana. Nirvana is not really heaven. Like the Hindus, it is more a complete connection with the All, and a realization that “you” do not exist, and at the same time “you” are God. The only way you can reach this Nirvana is by ridding yourself of all dualistic thinking. You know, by asking “What is the sound of one hand clapping,” or “I am empty handed holding a shovel.”<sup>4</sup>

If this is difficult to understand, you're not alone. Both Hinduism and Buddhism are so radically different from Judaism and Christianity that to understand them takes a great deal of effort. After all, our worldview is still shaped by Christian ideas. For example, westerns view time as moving from A to B, whereas Hindus and Buddhists view time as circular, ever repeating, with no beginning or ending. We view God as a personal being; they view God as something completely different and very difficult to wrap your mind around. What should be obvious, however, is that one cannot say that both Christianity and Hinduism are “true,” so different are they.

### **Islam**

In Islam, we come to a faith that actually looks a lot more like Judaism and Christianity. If for that reason alone, it's a lot easier to get your brain around. First of all, for the Muslim, there is only one God. You may here people refer to the Muslim God as “Allah,” but that's just Arabic for “God.” There the similarities between Islam and Christianity, at least when it comes to God, come to an end. The Islamic God is unknowable, in and of himself. You can't see him, hear him, or know anything about him as he is. We can say that God is forgiving, but we cannot say that it is his nature to be forgiveness. Christian Scripture, for example, says that God is Love. A Muslim could say that God shows love, but could never say that God IS love.

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<sup>4</sup> Geisler, 791.

Humanity was created by God as “vice-regents,” according to the Qur’an (Surah 2:30). Following the Old Testament, the Quran records that Adam and Eve fell into sin by the temptation of Iblis, or Satan. Now mankind is called upon to follow God’s guidance, and fulfill God’s wishes. Those who do so will be richly and physically rewarded in the next life, and those who do not will burn in eternal hellfire, “a fire blazing fiercely” (Surah 101:11). Much of the moral guidance God gives in the Qur’an is indistinguishable from what will be found in the Bible, except when it comes to dealing with the enemies of God. Here’s what the Qur’an says about dealing with the enemies of the faith:

Slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. God is forgiving and merciful" (Surah 9:5).

Have faith in God and his messenger, and fight for God’s cause with your wealth and with your persons. . . . He will forgive you your sins and admit you to gardens watered by running streams; he will lodge you in pleasant mansions in the gardens of Eden. This is the supreme triumph" (Surah 61:10-12).

Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors. And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter. (Surah 2:190)

The punishment of those who wage war against God and His Apostle, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land. That is their disgrace in this world, and a heavy punishment is theirs in the hereafter. (Surah 5:36-38)

Now someone may ask, “But weren’t there holy wars in the Bible?” Yes, under very specific circumstances in the Old Testament, there were indeed what we might call “holy wars.” In fact the entire invasion of Palestine could be considered a “jihad.” Notably, though, it was God who was considered to be the one fighting, and not Israel. Consider the battle of Jericho. The inhabitants had six days to change their minds about their habits, and chose not to. When it was discovered after the battle that one of the generals had profited from the fighting, they were wiped from the camp. Jesus made it clear at his coming that the era of union of church and state was over in him – Israel was now a spiritual body, the Church. Nowhere in the New Testament do we have the call for slaughter and carnage, crucifixion and removing of limbs that we find in the Qur’an.

### **Christianity**

Which brings us to Christianity. What IS Christianity, exactly? You’re going to hear a few different answers to that question. Not an infinite number of answers, but definitely more than one. The answer I’m going to give you is the Lutheran answer, which is basically a stripped down version of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox answer, save one essential point I’ll point out at the end. So you could argue that the vast majority of Christianity agrees about the

vast majority of the teachings of the faith. [The following is based on the Pamphlet: “What is Christianity?”]

### *What is Christianity?*

Christianity is not a philosophy, a way of life, or a moral code. Christianity is about a person: Jesus of Nazareth. The message of Christianity is that Jesus is the Messiah promised throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Christianity is the message that Jesus is the Christ.

### *Why a Messiah or Christ?*

Running throughout the Jewish Scriptures, or Old Testament, is the belief that the only true God of the universe is a gracious but jealous Creator who desires to save the people of the world (his graciousness) from his anger at their continual rebellion against him (his jealousy). In the beginning, so the earliest Scriptures record, humanity was created at peace with God, in loving submission to each other, and entrusted with the care of all creation. Rather than accept that role, humanity chose to make itself God. So here we are, thousands of years later, finding out that being God is a lot harder and less rewarding than we’d hoped. Maybe it would have been better to serve in God’s Paradise than rule in our own created Hell of poverty, famine, drought, wars, and violence.

### *What was promised about the Christ?*

The promised Christ or Messiah was going to change all that. God would make humanity, and the universe humanity’s rebellion had twisted, into the perfect creation God had always intended it to be. His Christ would rule the universe “with justice and with righteousness.” (Isaiah 9:7). The nations would be his heritage, and the ends of the earth his possession (Psalm 2:8). He would usher in a new heaven and a new earth that God would make for those who worship him. The eyes of the blind would be opened, the lame would walk, and the deaf would hear (Isaiah 35:5-6). This Christ would be intimately related to God, one who would stand in God’s presence “as a Son of Man” (Daniel 7:13). Yet this Christ would be “crushed for our iniquities,” and by his wounds we would be healed (Isaiah 52:5).

### *Was Jesus this Christ?*

Jesus himself claimed to be the Christ. When the majority (though not all) of the ruling Jewish authorities accused Jesus of claiming the title, he didn’t correct them. If Jesus had, it’s unlikely he would have been crucified, a historic fact denied by none but the most hardened historical revisionists (See Josephus’ Antiquities, and also Sanhedrin 43A). More than simply claiming to be the Christ, he did the works the Christ was supposed to show. The lame did walk. The blind did see. The deaf did hear. The good news of reconciliation between humanity and God was preached. Even the dead returned to life! More than that, Jesus claimed that God was his father – a Jewish phrase that would have meant claiming equality with God! Jesus also claimed he had to die, for only by the death of God’s own Christ could God and humanity be reconciled, and the work of new creation begin.

### *What did Jesus the Christ do for us?*

And die he did, on a Roman executioner’s cross, in first century Palestine. But his death was not the end – his disciples claimed that they saw him alive, resurrected, three days after his very dead body had been laid in the grave (See N.T. Wright’s The Resurrection of the Son of God). They

recorded encounters with their risen Lord and Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, who explained the meaning of his death from the writings of the Jewish Scriptures. Now there was peace and reconciliation between God and man, in him.

*What does h continue to do for us?*

The risen Lord Jesus Christ continues to bring this reconciliation to us and work his new creation. His death and resurrection were not mere historical events: the results of those acts are delivered to us in real, physical ways. Through the washing of water done in accord with his promise, people are brought to faith in Jesus and made part of his Church, his newly created humanity. Jesus feeds that new humanity with his own body and blood, given to us through the bread and wine of a Supper he instituted the night before his death. His teachings are preached and cherished by his Church, which themselves form his people into the new creation he desires for all of humanity.

*So what is Christianity now?*

Christians await Christ's return to complete his work of new creation. In the meantime, they gather around those places where Jesus, the Son of God, is present and working the beginnings of God's new creation, in his Church. Christians gather regularly to hear his teachings and participate in the acts Christ promised to be physically and spiritually present – in the water used for baptism, and in the bread and wine of Christ's Holy Supper. In this way Christians keep the faith in Jesus' last promise to his disciples: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20). Christ calls to you as well, to be part of his newly created people!

That's the last fundamental difference- choice. Only God can call, only God can take a fallen human and make them a Christian. What Christians do is preach the message whereby that conversion can happen. So I conclude with the final words of the Bible:

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." (Rev. 22:17-17)

## **Questions and Answers**