

Resurrection and World Religions

By David Feddes

What religion do you think is true? On a multiple choice test in school, you can either choose one correct answer from a list, or you may choose “all of the above” or “none of the above.” Given a choice of the major world religions, which would you say is true? None of them? All of them? Or do you believe that one particular religion is God’s truth? Let’s consider the options.

What if none are true? If no religion is for real, then you should forget about faith. If there’s no God or supernatural power, then religion isn’t worth your time. Be an atheist.

What if all religions are right? If all roads lead to the same God, then it doesn’t much matter what you believe. Don’t bother seeking which religion is best. Just stick with whatever faith you happen to like, and you’ll be fine in the end.

But what if one faith, and only one, is right? What if there is just one way to God? In that case, you need to seek the truth. Leave any other way you’ve been following, and put your faith in the one true path to the one true God.

When the options are no religion, all religions, or just one religion, what’s your response? You might wonder if there’s any way to sort it out, any way to know whether you should be an atheist, support of all religions, or accept one faith in particular. One of the best ways to think these things through is to focus on the resurrection of Jesus. Did it happen or not? Did Jesus rise from the dead, or didn’t he? Thinking about this can bring some things into sharp focus.

Resurrection Buries Atheism

Belief in Jesus’ resurrection obviously marks a clear divide between Christians and atheists. If you believe that a person was killed and somehow came to life again, you can’t be an atheist. Nothing less than divine, supernatural power could do such a miracle. If you believe that at this very moment Jesus’ body is alive, glorified and immortal, then you have to believe in some kind of God. If Jesus lives, atheism dies. If you believe Jesus left his tomb, you have to bury your atheism.

But that’s a big “if.” How do you make up your mind? Is there any evidence to help you sort out whether Jesus defeated death? Well, if you close your mind to any possibility of God or miracles, then no amount of evidence will convince you. But if you’re willing to consider the facts, it’s hard to deny Jesus’ resurrection. A few days after his burial, his tomb was empty. Where did the body go? Jesus’ enemies tried to explain away the empty tomb by saying his disciples stole the body, but that’s not likely. Jesus’ followers were weak and scared, and armed soldiers were guarding the tomb to make sure the body stayed there.

Not only was Jesus’ tomb empty, but in the days and weeks that followed, many eyewitnesses—more than five hundred—said they saw Jesus alive, spoke with him, touched him, even ate with him. These witnesses were people of different occupations and personalities, including some hard-nosed skeptics who wouldn’t believe without seeing for themselves. But they did see, and they did believe, and nothing could make them change their story.

Many of the eyewitnesses were eventually arrested, tortured, and killed for spreading the message of Jesus. They went to their death insisting Jesus was alive. Would people lie just to get themselves killed? No, when they said they saw and touched Jesus and would rather die than change their story, they were telling the truth and this truth meant the world to them.

If you accept the evidence and believe Jesus rose from the dead, a couple of things become clear. First, atheism is false; there must be a God. Second, the religion of Jesus is a true revelation of God; Christ could not have conquered death if he was a phony. So if you’re thinking about the

multiple choice question "Which religion is true?" you can scratch out "none of the above." At least one religion is true, the religion revealed by Jesus.

But that still doesn't settle whether other religions might be equally true. Is the best answer to the religion question "Jesus" or "All of the above"? Are all religions equally true and equally helpful in bringing people to the ultimate good? Or is faith in Jesus decisively different and able to do what no other religion can do? The best way to sort through this is to explore how Jesus' resurrection relates to other world religions.

Who Jesus Is

Jesus' resurrection shows who he is: the eternal Son of God in human flesh. The Bible says Jesus was "declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). When Jesus' disciple Thomas saw the risen Christ, he worshipped him, saying, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). In defeating death and showing his divinity, Jesus stands apart from the leaders of other world religions.

The risen Jesus stands apart from Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Muhammad's preaching and military power conquered Arabia before his death in the year 632. Muhammad's body did not rise from the dead; he did not show himself to his friends after his death. Muhammad never claimed to be divine and never allowed anyone to worship him. Indeed, Muhammad's writing in the Koran says it's grievous to say God has a son. How can all religions be true if the Christian view of Jesus is considered blasphemy by Muslims? Somebody must be wrong on this vital point. Muhammad considered Jesus a prophet but insisted that nobody could be the Son of God. Muhammad rejected anything in the Bible that differed from his own teaching, despite the fact that Muhammad lived 600 years after Jesus. The New Testament gospels were written by personal friends of Jesus who knew him well. They heard him claim equality with God, saw him die, saw him alive and victorious over death, and worshiped him as Lord and God. And Jesus accepted their worship, something Muhammad would never have done.

The risen Jesus stands apart from Confucius, another major figure in world religion. Confucius was a smart man who made a major impact on the behavior and beliefs of millions, especially in China, but when Confucius died at age 73, his body remained dead. After his death, some people began to revere and worship him. Worshipping and praying to dead ancestors was common among the Chinese, and the dead Confucius became a leading object of devotion. But Confucius never claimed to be divine. He gave advice on how to deal with other people, much of it quite sensible. He also admitted that he did not measure up to his own standards. Unlike Confucius, Jesus said he lived perfectly, without any fault. Unlike Confucius, Jesus spoke of being on a level with God (John 8:46-58). And Jesus' claims were shown to be true when he rose from the dead.

The risen Jesus stands apart from the Buddha. The Buddha lived over eighty years and then died. The Buddha's body did not rise from the dead, and he never said he would rise. Many people have made statues of the Buddha, but nobody ever saw or touched the Buddha himself after his death. Unlike Jesus, the Buddha never claimed to be God. He didn't even believe in a personal God but in an impersonal nirvana. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke of a loving heavenly Father, spoke of himself as the Father's eternal Son, and rose again to prove it.

The risen Jesus stands apart from Hinduism and other Eastern religions related to it. There are many forms of Hinduism, but most Hindus recognize various gods and goddesses. They believe that "all gods and goddesses are but various aspects of the one Absolute *Brahman*," the vast force that pervades all things. What's more, they believe each human and every other form of life has God within. To find God you simply look inside yourself. In Hinduism the ultimate goal is to escape

your bodily existence, get out of the cycle of one reincarnation after another, stop being a distinct person, and merge your consciousness with the God-force, *Brahman*. All things are one with God, whether they realize it or not, so it's no big deal to say Jesus is God. Isn't everybody? Some Hindus give Jesus a special place as an avatar, one of a number of incarnations of the God-Force that have been especially effective in helping others to find the God within. But Jesus, in rising from the dead, turns out to be different from any avatar or guru. Jesus is unique. He is the one and only person who is truly God incarnate in human form. If we want to find God, we must seek him in Jesus, not in ourselves or in anything else.

Jesus' resurrection demonstrates his divinity and sets him apart from the leading figures of every other religion. Only Jesus claimed to be God's only Son. Only Jesus established his claim by dying and coming back to life in an immortal body. The risen Christ himself said, "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18).

What We Need Most

The resurrection shows the difference between the Son of God and the founders of other religions, and the resurrection also shows that what we need most is different from what other religions say we need most. What we need most is for someone to save us from our sin and give us victory over death. Jesus' death is the only sufficient payment for the sins of the world, and his resurrection brings victory over death and unending enjoyment of a new creation in fellowship with God. Again, this sets Christianity apart from other world religions.

According to Hinduism, the problem is not that we've offended a holy and personal God who rules over us. The problem is that we haven't yet discovered the impersonal God-force who is already inside us. The Hindu goal is not physical resurrection and eternal life as a person with a distinct identity enjoying fellowship with a personal God. The goal is to escape the physical world completely and lose your identity in being merged into the vast impersonal oneness of Brahman. The way to do this is through meditation and continual effort. You go through as many lives and reincarnations as it takes until you achieve this.

Buddhism, which began as an offshoot of Hinduism and has much in common with it, takes a similar approach. According to Buddhism, humanity's biggest problem is lack of awareness, and what you need most is to give up all desire, achieve release from physical existence and personal identity, and lose yourself in nirvana. You must achieve this entirely through your own efforts. Theravada Buddhists have a saying:

No one saves us but ourselves,
No one can and no one may;
We ourselves must tread the Path:
Buddhas only show the way.

The Buddha told his followers not to count on any god or gods to help them but only on themselves: "Those who, relying upon themselves only, shall not look for assistance to anyone besides themselves, it is they who shall reach the topmost height." Jesus, on the other hand, says, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). You can't pay for sin or conquer death on your own. You cannot rely on yourself only; you must depend totally on God.

Hinduism, Buddhism, and related religions tend to be pantheistic, teaching that all is God and God is all. The physical world turns out to be unreal, and individual identity turns out to be an illusion. Indeed, the view that all is God means that there is no real distinction between God and other beings, no real distinction between good and evil, light and darkness, life and death. This idea

appears at a popular level in the *Star Wars* films: the Force has a good side and a dark side, but both sides are part of the same universal Force. This is like the yin/yang of Taoism: opposites turn out not to be opposites after all.

But according to Jesus, sin is not one with holiness, and death is not one with life. Sin is bad. Death is an enemy. Our great problem is that we are sinners doomed to die, and we can't change our predicament. But Jesus can, and he has. To deal with sin, Jesus lived a perfect life, gave himself as a sacrifice to pay the penalty of sin, and credits his holiness to those who rely on him. To deal with death, Jesus entered into it, overcame it by the power of God, and rose to life in a glorified, immortal body. It is by faith in his blood and his victory over death, not through our own achievements, that we enter eternal life. Jesus' resurrection marks Christianity as utterly different from pantheistic religions that deny the seriousness of sin, the tragedy of death, and joy of having an immortal body and belonging forever to a personal and holy God.

Islam and Judaism differ from pantheist religions and are closer to Christianity in some important ways. There is belief in a personal Creator and creatures who are distinct from the Lord, and there is also an awareness that sin offends God, that death is a bad thing, and that personal, bodily existence is a good thing. But Islam and Judaism refuse to recognize Jesus as the Son of God and reject the crucified and risen Christ as the source of forgiveness and eternal life. Despite some common ground between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus represents a great difference and a parting of the ways.

Jesus and his early followers were Jewish, and a significant number of Jewish people today believe in Jesus as the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scripture. But the religious institutions of Judaism insist that faith in Jesus means the abandonment, not the fulfillment, of Jewishness. Some branches of Judaism largely ignore life after death, while other branches teach that a person's destiny depends on one's own level of righteousness, not on God's grace in Jesus the Messiah.

Islam likewise bases eternal life on working for it, not on faith in Jesus as Savior. Muslims don't believe the resurrection happened because they don't believe Jesus died in the first place. Most Muslims think Jesus was a prophet who went straight to heaven, that he never died on the cross at all. In their opinion, sin is not covered by Jesus' blood and death is not defeated by Jesus' resurrection. Islam teaches that people are saved by being good enough and deserving it, so Islamic teaching denies that all people are born into the powerful grip of sin, and Islam rejects biblical stories about great sins committed by people of faith, such as Noah's drunkenness and King David's adultery and murder. Noah and David were prophets of God, so they couldn't possibly do anything so bad! But the fact is, they did do those bad things. They were saved not by being good enough but by repenting and trusting God to forgive their sins for the sake of the coming Savior God had promised.

There is no way to avoid or minimize the difference between faith in the risen Jesus and all other religions. Only Jesus' atoning death meets our need to be rescued from the guilt and grip of sin, and only Jesus' resurrection defeats death and provides eternal life. As the Bible puts it, Christ Jesus "has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10).

The Appointed Judge

Another major difference between resurrection faith and other world religions has to do with the final judgment. Judgment Day is coming, and the presiding Judge won't be Krishna or Confucius or Muhammad or the Buddha or the Dalai Lama. The Judge will be Jesus. The Bible says God "has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has

given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). Nobody will be exempt from appearing before Jesus. "He will judge *the world*," people of every place and background. In Jesus' resurrection, God provides proof "to *all* people" of who the Judge will be (and who it won't be).

The resurrection also shows the nature of the final judgment. Your future is not reincarnations in various bodies. Your future is exactly one resurrection in an immortal body. You will not merge with an impersonal force called Brahman or nirvana. You will stand before a Judge named Jesus, and he will either welcome you to the joy of God's new heaven and earth or else banish you to the misery of hell. As the biblical prophet Daniel put it, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). You only live once; you only die once; you only are resurrected and judged once (Hebrews 9:27-28). You must be ready to face the Judge when the time comes. His judgment is final. After that there will be no second chances. Your future will be fixed: everlasting life or everlasting contempt.

If Jesus will preside as Judge and we can be saved only through faith in him, does that mean non-Christian religions are wrong about everything? Various religions may contain important insights. They may know something of the human hunger for a spiritual dimension and offer moral guidelines on how to treat each other. But does this mean all religions are equally true? No, most religions are right about some things, but only biblical faith is right about the things that matter most: recognizing Jesus as God with us, dealing with sin and defeating death, and making us ready to stand before the Judge. Jesus is not just one among many paths to God; Jesus is the only Way. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned," says the Bible, "but whoever does not believe in him stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:18).

Some traditions assume humanity is basically good and then offer advice on how to become even better. In the tradition of Confucius, for example, the first sentence millions of children have learned to read is, "Human beings are by nature good." With guidance and tradition, good humans become better. But if you assume you're good by nature, you will never be ready to face Jesus the Judge. You are a sinner. Your sins are not just occasional mistakes; your sins arise from a sinful nature that you can't conquer just by advice and traditions.

"You must be born again," says Jesus (John 3:7). You must receive a new nature through faith in Christ and have his Holy Spirit take charge of your life. The gospel of Christ is not just a nice person telling nice people how to be a bit nicer. The gospel is God's power to save sinful people headed for hell, make them new, and bring them to heaven. The gospel tells you how to get ready to face Jesus the Judge and rejoice to see him. That brings us to a final difference between faith in Jesus' resurrection and all other world religions: our eternal destiny.

Final Destiny

If you believe in the risen Jesus, you know that the final destiny of the Lord's people is personal and physical. Some religions teach a final future where people leave their physical bodies behind forever, escaping the world of matter into the realm of pure spirit. Even their spirits don't remain individual and personal but are absorbed into one vast impersonal God-force. But Jesus' resurrection contradicts such ideas. On the first Easter, when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, he was still the same person they had known and that his body remained real. "It is I myself!" Jesus said. "Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:39).

Since Jesus rose physically and continues in his body for eternity, we may be sure that our bodies and the physical world are part of the splendid new creation that awaits us. The intellectual and spiritual joys will be great, but the physical dimension will also be wonderful. The physical creation around us is not headed for ruin but for renewal. Our bodies are not burdens to be trashed but blessings to be treasured and eventually transformed. The Bible says Jesus "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). Biblical faith declares, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:25-26).

So don't believe any teaching which says the human body or the physical world doesn't belong in the ultimate future. Matter matters. Jesus resurrection means that bodies are forever.

Don't believe anyone who says the ultimate good is to escape personal, individual existence and be swallowed up in a universal, impersonal power. The ultimate good is to know the personal love of God in Christ and to experience his resurrection power and life. In the Bible one of Jesus' early followers said, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:8,10). Already on earth we aim to know Christ better, and when at last we see our Lord face to face, our joy will be complete. We will have the personal identity God created us to have; Jesus will be the same person he has always been; and we will enjoy unending friendship with the Lord and with all his people forever and ever.

Are you beginning to grasp how faith in the risen Jesus differs from all other religions? At first it may sound appealing to say all religions are equally true, but it turns out to be nonsense; the differences are too great. It may sound open-minded to say all roads lead to God, but it turns out that the roads and the destiny at the end of the road are very different from what we find in the risen Christ.

If you've been confused by the variety of religion options, it's time to cut through the confusion. Zero in on just one thing: the resurrection of Jesus. If there were no resurrection, if Jesus remained dead, then the Christian faith would be false and empty. You could then forget about Christianity and either be an atheist or pursue another religion. But Jesus did rise again, and he's very much alive. Accept him as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. There is no other.

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