

## **The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ**

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When Christians speak of the “incarnation” of Christ there are two important implications. One is that “God” becomes much clearer through this self-revelation and self-limitation in human form. God in-essence becomes God in-relation, God-invisible becomes God-visible. The unspeakable and indescribable Reality becomes speakable and has a form. The mystery is made plain, at least for a moment, and we see God face to face. Those who knew Jesus of Nazareth, as attested in the synoptic Gospels, spoke of him as Immanuel, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

There is a second implication: In taking human form God sanctifies the human as well. Incarnation means that God finds us, and we find God. In the human faces of one another and in the human fabric of our lives; Christians cannot help but be inclusivists in Christology. As Christians see it, the “Christ event” of incarnation altered the meaning of the human condition not only for the tribe of Christians but for everyone. It disclosed a new image of the human as well as a new image of God.

Perhaps it is in the mystery of this double revelation of divinity and humanity that Christians can speak about the “uniqueness” of Jesus. I am sometimes uncertain about the language of uniqueness, for it often seems to be a declaration of exclusivity rather than an invitation to faith, discovery, and dialogue. When the “uniqueness” of Jesus Christ is used to exclude the stranger of another faith, it ceases to be Christian language. Or, in the language of Paul Tillich, who makes a similar point, “What is particular about him is that he crucified the particular in himself for the sake of the universal.”

The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are both central to the testimony of the early church as found in the New Testament. It is not one Jesus depicted in the Gospels, and it is a credit to the insight and honesty of the early church that several interpretations of Jesus were preserved in the New Testament. In the synoptic Gospels, for example, Jesus himself does not claim to be one with the Father as he does in the Gospel of John, but points continually to God his Father and challenges his followers to a God-centered life in which ethical action counts more than belief. Yet the Gospel of John opens by describing the Word, the Logos, who was present and with God even at the dawn of creation, and it is filled with theological discourses on the meaning of Jesus as the Christ to the faith community. Saint Paul, in the context of the new and growing community of faith, does not focus on the teaching of the historical Jesus but on the meaning of the Christ event for the early church. All of this is the treasured heritage of the Christian community, but it does not point to a seamless single view of Jesus Christ.

Uniqueness, to me, does not mean that the “Jesus story” is the only story of God’s dealing with humanity, nor the only and complete story. The language of *only* is the language of faith, not of statistics. Faith in Christ rest on two remarkable affirmations: Jesus Christ reveals to us the face of God, which is love. And Jesus Christ reveals to us the meaning of the human, which is love. This double revelation is enough. Indeed, the God whom Jesus Christ reveals is not a tribal god or a stingy one but has surely sought and

loved the sheep of every fold. And the humanity which Jesus reveals is not narrow, arrogant and dogmatic, but boldly open to claiming the stranger as neighbor. Both sides of the double revelation—the Godward and the human—must push Christians beyond the narrow obsession of singularity.

As a human being, Jesus, the man of Nazareth, was unique as all human beings are—born of particular parents, at a particular time, in a particular place, and with a wholly distinctive physique and personality. There are many documents and one can cite them with footnotes. His life is, in that sense, part of public history. For those of us who are Christians, the revelation of the Christ event is far more radical than this, however. On the divine side of the double revelation, we say that this particular human being also reveals the fullness of God's love. How that can be so is a mystery. That is the radical faith of the church, and those of us who are Christians live our lives in terms of that faith.

We all live by powerful, resounding stories, stories so true that they reveal to us God's purpose for the whole creation and the whole human family. Not every story is a story up to that revelatory task. There are inadequate and even destructive stories that may be compelling for a generation but cannot sustain the ongoing life of a culture. Some stories have been up to the task of anchoring an entire life-world, of sustaining generations of faith and nourishing whole cultures and civilizations.

As a Christian, I confess that Jesus enables me to see something of God that I do not know in any other way: God truly grounded in the soil of human life and death. Jesus did not point the way out of suffering, as did the Buddha. Jesus did not rescue humanity from suffering, as did the Hindu *avatars*. Jesus took on suffering himself, experiencing suffering and death as all of us do. Only by going through the valley of suffering and death did Jesus overcome the grip of suffering and death. Not only Hindus, but Muslims as well find this humbling humility of Jesus disturbing. As my friend, Is-Haq Oloyede, a law professor, put it in conversation, "God cannot be helpless! It is not fitting of God."

It is understandable that the early church struggled with the doctrine of incarnation, eliminating the extreme views in order to find a middle way between those who minimized Jesus' humanity and those who minimized his divinity. From the first century to the [twenty-first ], Christians have continued to wrestle with the meaning of Jesus Christ, the double revelation of the divine and the human. Some interpretations, called "high Christologies", emphasize his divinity; it is through the disclosure of God's presence in Jesus Christ that Christians can "see" God. Other interpretations, sometimes called "low Christologies" or "Christologies from below," emphasize the humanity of Jesus who is above all, God-with-us.

Christians should not be fearful or suspicious, therefore, of discovering the presence of God, which we now know in Christ, in the religious lives of people of other faiths. If we follow the Indian theologian Stanley Samartha toward what is called "Christology from below," one that begins with the man Jesus of Nazareth, we follow a route to the discovery of the incarnation that leads us to the poor, the ordinary, the unremarkable yet remarkable humanity that Jesus loved and shared. The route to affirming Jesus' divinity passes through

his humanity. As Samartha puts it, "At a time when there is so much degrading dehumanization in the world and such great need to bring out what it is to be human in such a world, to minimize the humanity of Jesus is to diminish seriously the resources for supporting the struggles for human freedom, dignity, and self-respect."

In so far as India has been drawn to Jesus, it is not so much because of the miraculous divinity of Jesus as the Christ, for divinity abounds in the life-worlds of Hindus, but because of his compelling humanity. It was this that found resonance in Gandhi when he said, "Christ died on the cross with a crown of thorns on his head defying the might of a whole empire. And if I raise resistance of a non-violent character, I simply and humbly follow in the footsteps of the great teacher."

--Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, Beacon, 2003, pp. 86-93.

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