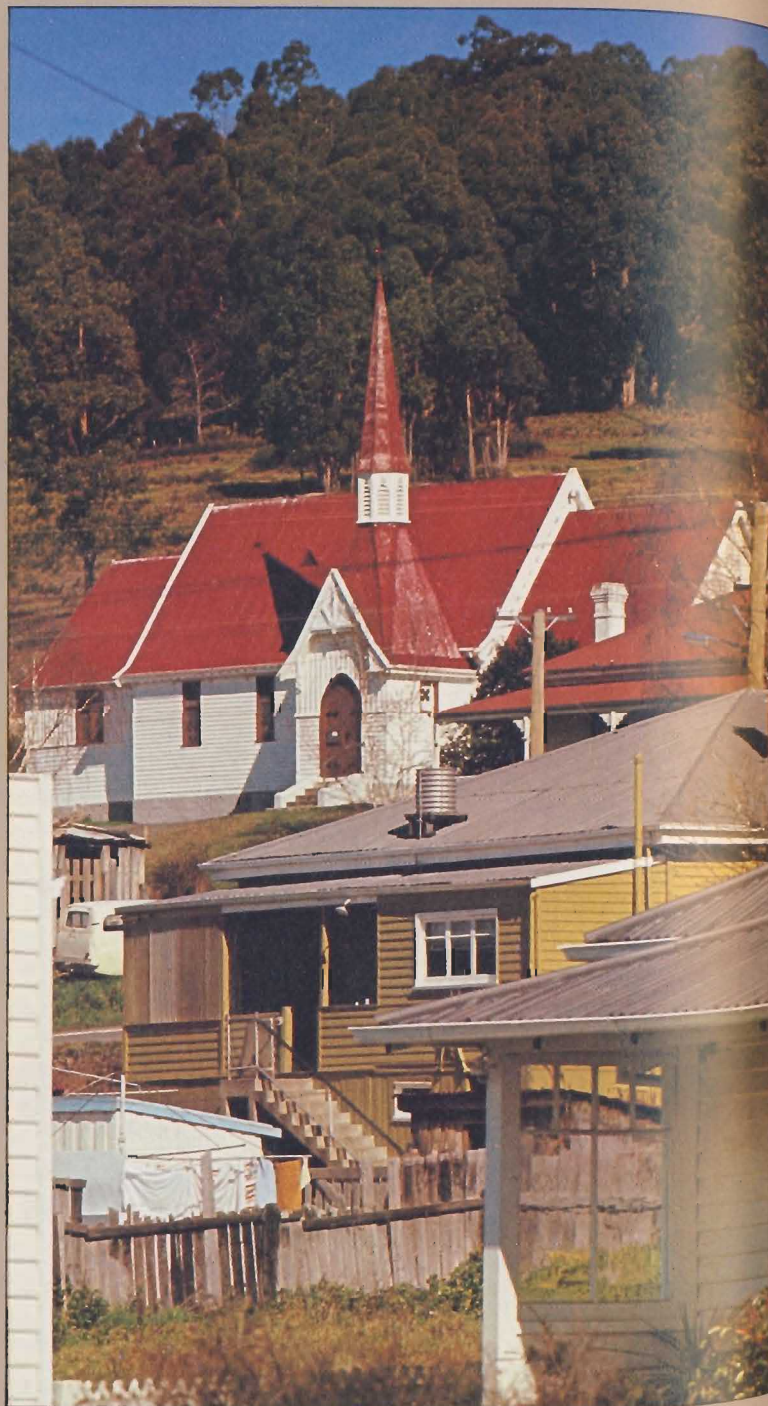


most Pentecostals. The Council exists not so much to sponsor unity schemes as to enable the churches to debate matters of common concern, and where possible, to speak and act as one. It has been particularly active in the fields of social involvement and education, and in taking up the cause of oppressed peoples in Third World countries. Assemblies of the Council meet every seven years.



*In remote Australian communities the local church serves the needs of the people, as in this country town in Tasmania.*

*The 'church' is strictly not a building but a gathering of people. But the word is also used of the places where Christians gather for worship, prayer and learning.*

## The Claim to be Unique

Christopher Lamb

The Christian claim is that Christianity is unique: Christianity is not. Christianity can be classified under the normal headings of a study of human society and religion. It has a long and complex history, leading to different forms, a massive literature, distinctive rituals and characteristic social forms. All these can be paralleled by the communities of other world faiths, especially Judaism and Islam, and scholars have compared the 'truth-claims'—for example, the finality of the Qur'an—which are made in the different religious traditions.

This study of comparative religion has alarmed some Christians because in it the features of different religions have been placed side by side and their essential similarity examined. When this process moves from the externals to the inner core of religious faith, Christians often feel their faith is being 'relativized', reduced to the common level of human experience.

### Christianity and religion

I believe Christians need fear this kind of study as little as a loving married couple fear the sociologist who tells them they belong to the same sub-group of society and have been culturally conditioned in the same way, and that is why they are happy. They know there is more to it than that! And Christians know that they belong to the human race and that God's creative power has made

them one with all other human beings in the way that their minds and bodies and their social natures work. Therefore it is foolish to resist the idea that, as historians and sociologists look at it, Christianity is one more of the religions of the world. But history and sociology is not the whole story, though it may be told as if it is.

For many who live in the North Atlantic region, however, Christianity is still identified with the culture which has dominated world history in recent centuries by its technological and industrial skills. As this region enters a period of relative decline, Christianity, associated with the past, is thought to be in decline too. So the general impression left by comparative religion seems to be confirmed by observation of present trends. Christianity is relative to other religions, and relative to the success and prosperity of the culture which has adopted it.

Strictly speaking this is undeniable, but it states only part of the truth. The fact is that Christians began as a socially deprived and frequently persecuted group, and for much of their history European Christians belonged to a culture which was backward in comparison with the Muslim community. Moreover, Christianity may be in institutional decline in Europe, but it is certainly not so in Africa, Latin America or east Asia. The resilience

**'Give glory to your Son, so that the Son may give glory to you. For you gave him authority over all mankind, so that he might give eternal life to all those you gave him. And eternal life means knowing you, the only true God, and knowing Jesus Christ, whom you sent. I have shown your glory on earth; I have finished the work you gave me to do. Father, give me glory in your presence now, the same glory I had with you before the world was made.'**

Jesus' prayer,  
John 17: 1-5



of Christianity under the harsh conditions of the Soviet Union and Maoist China is also highly significant.

When the student of religion searches for explanations of the past and present vitality of the Christian faith he cannot find the secret in any one culture or any particular stage of economic and cultural development, for that vitality has existed in every kind of human situation. What has always sustained Christians has been the conviction that they have a personal relationship with a unique Saviour who is both God and man.

### Christianity and culture

Today Christians in the West have to come to terms with more than the studies of religion which have gone on for more than a century in European and American universities. They must adjust to the living presence of people of other faiths as fellow-citizens. Islam is now the second most numerous faith-community in Western Europe, far outstripping Judaism. Western countries have substantial populations of all the principal world faiths, as well as adherents of the cults and new religious movements. Since many of these new citizens are from Asian backgrounds, they encounter prejudice and discrimination because of their skin-colour and way of life. Christians and others have attempted to fight these evils by affirming the value of Asian cultures, and resisting the view that the Western way of life is intrinsically better than any other. Many now accept that only a minimum of adjustment should be required from the newcomers to Western society, and that justice and common sense both point to the basic equality of all cultures.

It is clear that religion and culture are inextricably entwined, and many will go on to assert that the basic equality of all cultures means the radical equality of all religions. Even some who are serious about their own Christian identity will say, 'We have our way to God and they have theirs. Ours is true/works for us, and theirs

is true/works for them.' Such attitudes strike most of our Western contemporaries as tolerant, balanced and true to the complex social situations of our time. Often one senses an underlying feeling of guilt about the imperialist exploitation of the past, and the devaluation of Asian cultures which went with it. A new tolerance of faiths is often reckoned to be part of the reparation due to the East from the West.

It is important to notice that Christians with much longer experience of life in multi-faith societies do not often share these attitudes. Christians in the Middle East have maintained their discipleship for centuries without admitting any such fundamental identity between Islam and Christianity. If they had adopted such an idea they would have had no reason to reject Islam for themselves, but they preferred to accept an inferior position in society and occasional persecution rather than put the two faiths on the same level.

A bishop from Sri Lanka noted in 1979 that British Christians were unwilling 'to make critical evaluation of the experience and truth-claims' of other religions, and warned them that this stemmed in part from 'the general loss of self-confidence among many people in the Western world in a post-imperial era. Bishop Wickremesinghe went on to describe how people of different faiths—Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian—lived and worked together in the same national culture of Sri Lanka, trying to establish justice, peace and prosperity, yet never losing sight of the fact that their respective understandings of the truth were in the end irreconcilable. He talked of what will surely be the experience of many Western nations in the future, how other religions 'are always present before us as alternative explanations of the mysteries of life and death, and especially of suffering. In our region comparative religion is not confined to university faculties or small groups with an interest in this subject. It is a facet of our normal experience and within which we have to make concrete options in the traumatic situations we face as we go through life.'

### Christianity and other faiths

Western Christians do not have the same opportunities as Sri Lankans. Nevertheless there are many opportunities to meet people of other faiths, and to study their beliefs at firsthand. It is vital that Christians do not come to easy conclusions about other faiths without some such study of them. Because the claims of the different religions conflict, it is extremely tempting to compare the best of your own faith with the worst of another. Sometimes those who insist that there are positive features in other faiths are thought to be disloyal to their own. There is no doubt that Christian history is full of 'religious tribalism'. Because people were unwilling to believe anything good about other faiths all sorts of inaccuracies and distortions became accepted as fact. Europeans still suffer from the caricature of Islam popularized in the Middle Ages, and Jews have been grossly and consistently libelled by Christians, even by respected church leaders and theologians. This has been one of the

principal causes of the centuries-old persecution of the Jews.

Of course Christians have not been alone in misrepresenting other faiths. Muslims have made their own misrepresentations of Christianity, but with the growth of modern communications this 'bearing of false witness' is both unnecessary and dangerous. It mattered less what a Hindu believed about a Christian or a Buddhist about a Jew if they were never likely to meet. But today they will and do. God is not honoured by lies, and the Christian faith is not defended by defaming other faiths. Such defamation is in any case likely to be self-defeating, since uncommitted people who take the trouble to investigate what lies behind the propaganda will feel that it is Christianity which is exposed as false.

But a Christian may happily set aside self-serving descriptions of other faiths and still feel that his study of other faiths must come to a stop somewhere. Even the specialist in his technical vocation of study

*In many parts of the world, Christians have seen the need to be involved in education as part of their total contribution to the community.*





cannot adequately examine all the possible alternatives to the Christian faith. No religion can be properly understood without a real knowledge of its scriptures in their original language. Is he then to attempt the mastery of Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit and Pali, as well as New Testament Greek? It is a lifetime's work to plumb the depths of even one other faith. It is true that there are many scholars to help us, and Christians have actually made much deeper studies of other faiths than, for the most part, scholars of other faiths have made of Christianity. But can a Christian say nothing about his faith and other faiths with confidence unless he can make a claim to be some kind of expert?

To put the same question more sharply: can we be sure that in making Christ central to our lives rather than one of his rivals we are not making a great mistake? Or is that very form of the question evidence of our theological vulgarity, and the Christian faith is really only our path to God, neither better nor

worse than many others?

This second position is very widely held, but it is well to be clear what is involved in it. If the Christian path is only one of many, and perhaps not even the best, then it is arrogant to suppose that others may benefit from my religious experience, when that experience is so limited and partial. Evangelism then becomes impossible, and mission must be limited to service, for proclamation would be 'theological imperialism'. The church then is to be limited to biological growth alone. Moreover, all the missionary activity of the past must be called in question, including the missionary activity which created the churches of Europe and the ancient churches of the Middle East. In short, the very basis of the church is destroyed, for our existence as Christians is little more than a historical accident and rests on an illusion—the illusion that there was a message to take to the ends of the earth.

If this is the consequence of the conventional view, how can we be

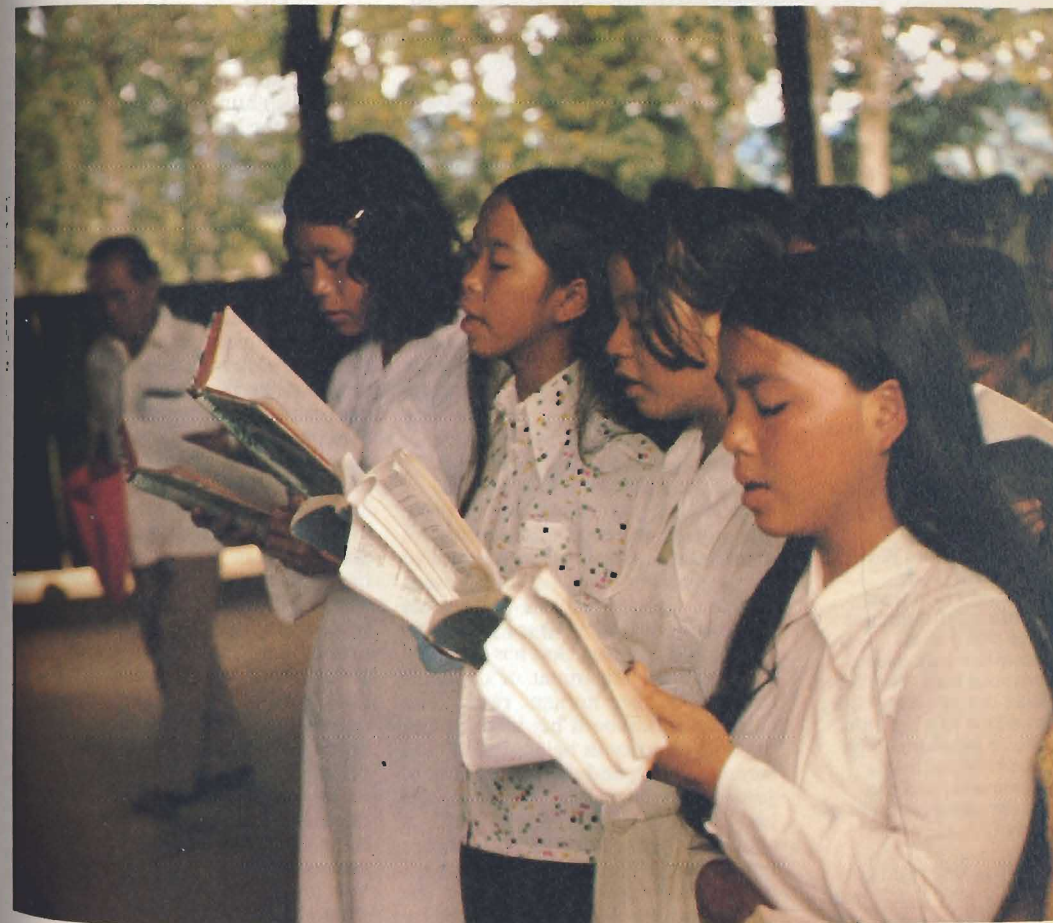
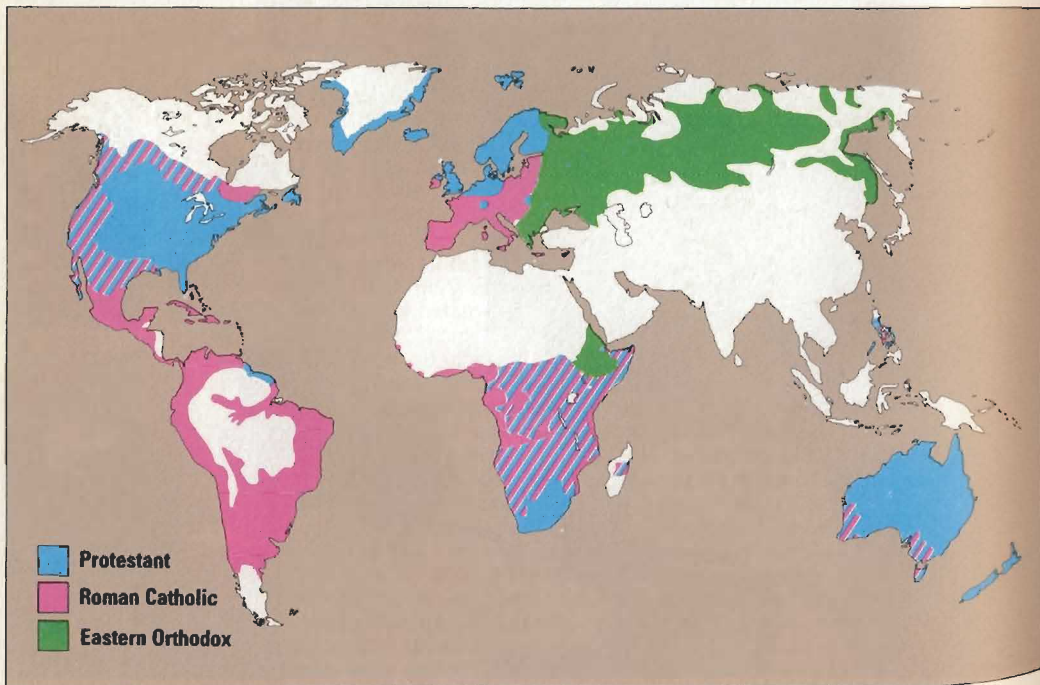
sure it is mistaken? The whole question hinges of course on the person of Jesus Christ. For the Christians of the New Testament Jesus Christ is uniquely definitive of the authority and love of God. Jesus himself claimed to be 'the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me'. And shortly after his death and rising again, the first disciples were saying to the Jewish leadership about Jesus: 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.' And the missionary Paul was later to write to a church in Asia Minor that 'He is the image of the invisible God ... he exists before

everything, and all things are held together in him.' Jesus is the true centre of human history and the person in whom God has revealed himself with complete authority.

Such is the consistent witness of the New Testament, but how can such a claim be proved? The evidence of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and the testimony of his followers over centuries can be set out for inquirers, and evangelists and writers are constantly doing it. But if it were possible to *prove* that Jesus was finally authoritative for men, appointed by God, it could only be done by citing another authority more final than Jesus himself, and the proof would collapse. The most

Young Christians from East Malaysia lead the singing in their open-air church.

The Christian world (approximate present-day distribution)







Christian doctors in Korea pray together for God's help before an operation.

**'Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.'**

The opening words of John's Gospel, speaking of Jesus

elegant logic and compelling arguments in favour of Jesus are no more than requests to listen to him and look at him. His life and teaching are self-authenticating—they are their own authority, because only in this way can they be ultimately binding on us.

### The uniqueness of Christ

This means that when a Christian sets out to consider the nature of other religious traditions, he does so on the basis of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the perfect expression of God's nature in human terms, and in Jesus God has reversed his previous judgement of condemnation on the human race. The Christian finds both his identity and his total security in belonging to God through Jesus, and the community of Jesus. His personal shortcomings and inadequacies, though still a source of pain and grief to him, are not allowed to rob him of his sense of being favoured by God, and he knows the privilege of being used by

God in his plan for the whole of mankind. He prays continually for the special quality of joyous affection which marked the life of Jesus and hopes to pass after this life into his presence.

He looks for echoes and reflections of the Spirit of Jesus everywhere, including the communities of other faiths, and is delighted when he finds them, not trying to belittle them but being glad that 'God has not left himself without witnesses', as the apostle Paul put it when speaking to a pagan audience. For acknowledging the supreme authority of Jesus means a committed mind but not a closed mind. Commitment to Jesus is commitment to a total availability to every human being. Jesus' openness to every kind of person was notorious to his religious critics, who were frequently scandalized by the company he kept. His parables reflected the basic human goodness to be found in the Samaritan, theologically at odds with Judaism. He said about a pagan soldier who took him at his word, 'I tell you this: nowhere, even in Israel, have I found such faith.' Christians need not fear that commitment to Jesus means that they will not be open to others, for his own example precludes that.

At the same time a Christian cannot be loyal to Jesus and also consider the possibility of other fundamental loyalties for himself. He cannot remain a Christian and have an open mind about the final authority of Jesus. If he does it means that he really takes his own judgement as the final authority, usually on some philosophical principle. Of course I have to be responsible in the end for all my judgements, but that is not the same as saying that I am capable of pronouncing my judgement on Jesus. Once I have found where the final word of God is expressed, I can only submit to it. I cannot sit in religious or philosophical judgement on it. I can only respond with my whole being, which is why love, the expression of the whole person, is at the root of Christianity. And human beings are only able to respond in love to God because of the love he has shown them in Christ.

### Religion under judgement

Jesus continually sought this whole-hearted response to God, for which another word is 'faith'. 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' he asked. His complaint against the religion of his day was that it was not whole-hearted but hypocritical. At times it was even manipulative and cynical. Here Jesus passes judgement not just on the religion of his own day but on all established religion, including Christianity in its historic and contemporary forms. Jesus' harshest words are reserved for the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious and theological leaders of Judaism—not because he wanted to destroy the Jewish faith (other rabbis made similar attacks) but because the very best of human religion is inwardly corrupt. Human frustration and evil are not brought about by external things, and cannot be dealt with just by external means: for it is 'out of the heart', said Jesus, that come 'evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.' Religious prescriptions do not reach the heart of the matter, so at the heart of Christianity lies the knowledge that religion is not free from the desperate wickedness of man, for Jesus was condemned and crucified by the religious authorities, acting in concert with pagan politicians.

### Beyond religion

Christianity in all its historic forms is not unique. It shares in the sinful character of all human activity, and is most at risk when it tries to deny that

character. But it carries the message of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, of his final authority for men and women, and his final solution to the helplessness of a world fit only for the scrap-heap. For Jesus came, not with a new 'religion', a new code or a new philosophy, but to meet human bankruptcy and rottenness with its pain and separation from God and to absorb it into himself by his total obedience to God—to the point of an agonizing and humiliating death. He came also to initiate a new order, a completely new start for the human race, a new creation which began with his own resurrection from death. Men and women are invited to abandon their own futile attempts to reach and please God and simply to put their trust in Jesus, who alone truly knows him. They are invited to become part of the community of those who live by that faith and share the life of Jesus while they wait for the new age in which all will acknowledge him.

So Christians say 'yes' to Christianity as the vehicle of Jesus, but 'no' to it when it betrays that message, as it often has. Christians say both 'yes' and 'no' to other faiths too. Yes, when insights from them fill out and underline and tell in a new vocabulary the glory of God as Jesus has shown him to be. But no, when as so often in human thought and action, the image of God in man is defaced because man has turned his face away from God to bow down to ideas and idols of his own invention, or when the glory of God in Jesus is set aside and controverted. If Christianity is unique, it is only because Christ is. If it ceases to witness to him, it ceases to have any value for the human race.

**'Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his own heart; but whoever does not believe God, has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed what God has said about his Son. The Testimony is this: God has given us eternal life, and this life has its source in his Son. Whoever has the Son has this life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.'**

John's first letter, 5:10-12

**'Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest.'**

Matthew 11:28-29