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# **The Role the Person of Jesus Plays in Religious Pluralism Today**

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There is no more well-known figure in global history than Jesus. He is deeply loved by many, and he is deeply polarizing with others. And yet, some have asked the question, “How should Jesus be understood in a pluralistic, global landscape?” All cards on the table, I am an evangelical Christian. That means that I believe some very specific things about Jesus. In the next few paragraphs, I’d like to consider how Jesus is experienced and understood, both by those in the Christian community and those who are not.

### **Do other religious groups respect Jesus?**

The answer to this is, yes. There are various religious groups throughout history who are not Christians, but who have positive and sometimes even enthusiastic things to say about Jesus. Let’s consider two examples.

First, let’s consider Islam. So many Christians today believe that Muslims are diametrically opposed to Christianity and, to be clear, there are fundamental and irreconcilable differences between the two faiths and what they believe about Jesus. But many Christians would likely be surprised to know that nearly all Muslims have a high view of Jesus while acknowledging that they believe some things about him that are distinctly different from the Christian belief.

For instance, Jesus, Mary, and the angel Gabriel are all prominent characters in the Qur’an (as are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and other Bible characters). Muslims believe that Jesus (called “Isa” in Arabic) was a prophet of God and was born of Mary who was a virgin. They also believe he will return to Earth before the Day of Judgment to restore justice and defeat “the false messiah” — also known as the Antichrist. Mary (called “Maryam” in Arabic) has an entire chapter in the Qur’an named for her — the only chapter in the Qur’an named for a female figure. In fact, Mary is the only woman to be mentioned by name in the entire Qur’an. Mary is mentioned more times in the Qur’an than in the New Testament. Muslims believe that Jesus performed miracles: The Qur’an discusses several of Jesus’s miracles, including giving sight to the blind, healing lepers, raising the dead, and breathing life into clay birds.<sup>1</sup>

Islam isn’t the only faith or figure that is not Christian and yet has a positive view of Jesus. Consider these quotes from Gandhi.

*What does Jesus mean to me? To me, he was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had.*

*Jesus lived and died in vain if He did not teach us to regulate the whole of life by the eternal law of love.*

*Jesus, a man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2017/12/18/10660648/jesus-in-islam-muslims-believe-christmas-quran>

Not only did Gandhi believe and say those things, but when one of his best friends, Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones asked Gandhi what he would recommend to help Christians do a better job of engaging India as a follower of Jesus, consider Gandhi's response:

*First, I would suggest that all of you Christians, missionaries, and all, must begin to live more like Jesus Christ. Second, Practise your religion without adulterating it or toning it down. Third, Emphasize love and make it your working force, for love is central in Christianity. Fourth, Study the non-Christian religions more sympathetically to find the good that is within them, in order to have a more sympathetic approach to the people.*

Obviously, there are many, many other examples that we could reference about how some people outside of Christianity view Jesus - this wasn't meant to be comprehensive, but it is intended to demonstrate that there are some ways in which Jesus can be a unifying character among various faiths in a pluralistic environment.

### **Can Jesus be a unifying figure across faith traditions?**

The short answer to this is yes, and no. Jesus is a complex figure and there are a variety of aspects to his life and teaching that we need to consider. Let's begin with the "yes" part of that answer, starting with some of his ethical teachings. The truth is that some of Jesus' ethical teachings can help be unifying among people of various faith traditions. Consider the following:

#### *Love for others.*

Jesus taught us that we are to love everyone. In particular, he taught that his disciples - his followers - would be known as such by their considerable love for each other.<sup>2</sup> This kind of radical love, regardless of belief or behavior, was a mark of Jesus' own life. In fact, Jesus taught that loving God with your total being was the most important commandment, but beyond that, the most important thing in life is to love your neighbor to the degree that you love yourself.<sup>3</sup> In our current cultural moment, most of us regardless of religion or faith tradition would agree that we could use more love for one another.

#### *Sacrifice for others.*

Not only did Jesus teach that his followers should be known for their love, but he also taught that they should be known for their willingness to sacrifice for one another. In fact, Paul teaches us, about Jesus, that Jesus' sacrifice on behalf of his followers is proof of God's love.<sup>4</sup> Selfless acts of sacrificial love are sadly lacking in what is becoming an increasingly selfish culture. The idea that we could sacrifice ourselves, and our own good, for the benefit of others, is a moral good.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Love for the marginalized.*

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<sup>2</sup> John 13:34-35, *I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:29-31, *Jesus answered, "The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these."*

<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:8, *But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

<sup>5</sup> John 15:13, *No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends.*

There is increasing attention paid to those on the margins of society; those who are outside the typical scope of popular culture. Jesus definitely has something to say about that situation. He was known to elevate the prospects of women, children, Samaritans, and others who were not readily accepted in the first-century context that he was in. Jesus was particularly concerned with our ability to love our neighbors, whom he deemed as anyone in need.<sup>6</sup> We are to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves<sup>7</sup>, care for the poor<sup>8</sup>, watch out for the sojourner, or immigrant<sup>9</sup>, serve the “least of these”<sup>10</sup> and look after orphans and widows in their distress.<sup>11</sup>

Each of these expectations can generally serve as unifying characteristics that allow Jesus, and his life and teaching, to bring people together, even if they are not Christian.

### **Jesus’ teaching vs. cultural norms**

Not only does Jesus have some ethical teaching that can be supported by both Christians and non-Christians alike, but there are some ways that Jesus led and taught that stood in contrast to the cultural norms of his (and our) day, and yet are universally understood to be a benefit to the culture at large.

*Jesus teaches us to die to ourselves. Culture teaches self-advancement.*

Jesus teaches us that, to follow him, we must deny ourselves<sup>12</sup> and yet this stands in contrast to cultural norms that encourage us to advance ourselves, even at the expense of others.<sup>13</sup>

*Jesus teaches fulfillment comes through sacrifice. Culture teaches self-exaltation.*

Doctored resumes. Public lies. Overstating our credentials. These and more have all become sad examples of a morally sick society. And yet Jesus teaches the opposite of that. Jesus taught that you cannot follow him and be someone who exalts themselves, particularly when this self-exaltation comes at the expense of others, or if it comes through deceit.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 10:30-37, *Jesus took up the question and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and fled, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down that road. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way, a Levite, when he arrived at the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan on his journey came up to him, and when he saw the man, he had compassion. He went over to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on olive oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him. When I come back I’ll reimburse you for whatever extra you spend.’ “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” “The one who showed mercy to him,” he said. Then Jesus told him, “Go and do the same.”*

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 31:8-9, *Speak up for those who have no voice, for the justice of all who are dispossessed. Speak up, judge righteously, and defend the cause of the oppressed and needy.*

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 41:1, *Happy is one who is considerate of the poor; the Lord will save him in a day of adversity.*

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 25:35, *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in, Deuteronomy 10:19, You are also to love the resident alien, since you were resident aliens in the land of Egypt.*

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 25:40, *And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’*

<sup>11</sup> James 1:27, *Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

<sup>12</sup> Luke 9:23, *Then he said to them all, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.*

<sup>13</sup> Galatians 2:20, *I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

<sup>14</sup> Luke 14:27, *Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:28-33, “For which of you, wanting to build a tower, doesn’t first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, after he has laid the foundation and cannot finish it, all the onlookers will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This man started to build and wasn’t able to finish.’ “Or what king, going to war against another king, will not first sit down and decide if he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If not, while the other is still far off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. In the same way, therefore, every one of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple. Luke*

*Jesus teaches discipline. Culture teaches the pursuit of pleasure and indulgence.*

There are few things that are better predictors of success in life than the pursuit of self-discipline. This is true in your vocation, in physical exercise, in academics, and more. And yet we live in a culture where people are glad to throw off self-restraint and indulge themselves. Jesus taught that self-discipline is at the heart of every follower of his.<sup>15</sup>

### **What about Jesus' exclusive claims?**

At the beginning of this piece, I said that the answer to the question, *Can Jesus be a unifying figure across faith traditions?* Is both yes and no. We have evaluated why it might be true that Jesus can, at points, be a unifying character, but how is true that Jesus can also NOT be unifying? The answer to that is found in Jesus' exclusive claims. What did Jesus say about himself, and the world around us, that would cause disagreement between people of various faith traditions?

*Scripture reveals that Jesus made and believed exclusive truth claims about himself.*

Jesus made a number of claims of exclusivity that force us to make a decision about whether we believe them or not. Two of the most significant claims are that 1.) Jesus was deity<sup>16</sup> and 2.) Jesus was the only way to eternal salvation.<sup>17</sup> This is obviously going to cause some division. There is a significant difference between believing that Jesus is an ethical teacher, that Jesus is a prophet, and that Jesus is God, or that Jesus is not only God but also the only way to know God and experience eternal life. So, while the ethical teachings of Jesus can be unifying, the exclusive claims of Jesus will necessarily divide.

*Jesus' ethical teaching was a product of his truth claims.*

In other words, Jesus believed that his greatest teaching was his teaching about how he came to reconcile the world to God. He believed that his ethical teaching, then, was a response to spiritual transformation.<sup>18</sup> His followers are able to engage in his ethical teaching once they have been transformed.<sup>19</sup> In other words, his ethical teaching follows from his truth claims. This view is obviously problematic for those who might embrace his ethical teaching but who would reject his exclusive claims found in the New Testament.

*If we take Jesus' exclusive claims at his word, he is divisive.*

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9:24-25, *For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will save it. For what does it benefit someone if he gains the whole world, and yet loses or forfeits himself?*

<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:27, *Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified.*

<sup>16</sup> John 10:30, *I and the Father are one.*

<sup>17</sup> John 14:6-7, *Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him."*

<sup>18</sup> Romans 12:1-2, *Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.*

<sup>19</sup> Galatians 5:19-25, *Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.*

Jesus made claims that his teaching would cause division. This does not mean that Jesus intended to divide, but rather it is a recognition that his truth claims were exclusive, and whether one agrees with those exclusive claims or not would lead to some people being on one side of the answer, and some people being on the other side.<sup>20</sup> Division is always a product of any element of exclusivity.

## **Does the life and ministry of Jesus help us cultivate a vision for how to live faithfully in a religiously pluralistic America?**

*Jesus frames for us how to engage those we disagree with.*

Jesus was gracious to his opponents who did not share his theological convictions<sup>21</sup> and hard on his own faith community's moral, ethical, and spiritual failures<sup>22</sup>. This is often the reverse of how we engage today. We are often permissive when we see our own tribe misbehaving, and then we attack those who are outside of our community but are acting differently than we believe should be. Beyond that, Jesus was known as a friend to those who were not his followers, building authentic relationships with those outside of his immediate theological community.<sup>23</sup> In other words, we ought to love and befriend those we disagree with, showing grace when we disagree, while holding our own tribe; our own community, accountable.

*Jesus' call was to risk personal injury in an attempt to love our enemies.*

Jesus also taught that his followers were to sacrifice, personally, in an effort to love those who were often viewed as his enemies.<sup>24</sup> This is certainly counter to what we see today. Real love is love that persists in the face of disagreement or even bad behavior. Jesus calls us to love everyone, and particularly those who would do us harm. This means that we have to open ourselves up to risk as we attempt to love those who disagree with us.<sup>25</sup>

*Jesus was a patient responder to the questions of those who disagreed with him.*

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 10:34-39, *Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. The one who loves a father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life because of me will find it.*

<sup>21</sup> Luke 19:1-10, *He entered Jericho and was passing through. There was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but he was not able because of the crowd, since he was a short man. So running ahead, he climbed up a sycamore tree to see Jesus, since he was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down because today it is necessary for me to stay at your house." So he quickly came down and welcomed him joyfully. All who saw it began to complain, "He's gone to stay with a sinful man." But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, I'll give half of my possessions to the poor, Lord. And if I have extorted anything from anyone, I'll pay back four times as much." "Today salvation has come to this house," Jesus told him, "because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost."*

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 23:25-28, *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside of it may also become clean. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of impurity. In the same way, on the outside you seem righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

<sup>23</sup> Luke 7:34, *The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'*

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 5:43-45, *"You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 5:38-42, *"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer. On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. As for the one who wants to sue you and take away your shirt, let him have your coat as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to the one who asks you, and don't turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

One of the most significant followers of Jesus in the New Testament is the Apostle Paul. Paul teaches that he is to be patient with those who disagree with him, because God was patient with him.<sup>26</sup> God's grace and mercy in our lives is to be a pattern for how we engage with those who may disagree with us.

*Jesus taught faithful obedience to governing authorities.*

Both Jesus and Paul, speaking as a follower of Jesus, indicate to us clearly that authorities are there because God has ordained that they should be, and that we should adhere to the governing authorities as faithful citizens<sup>27</sup>. It should be added that this does not mean that the law of whatever country we live in can supersede God's law. There are plenty of examples in both the Old and New Testament of followers of God disobeying the law of the land if it meant that they would have to disobey God. However, as a general rule, followers of God are supposed to be faithful citizens who honor their governing authorities.<sup>28</sup>

*Jesus was kind but insistent on his particular truth claims.*

Finally, as we think about Jesus as a model for how we engage people we disagree with in a pluralistic society, it is important to note that, even as Jesus was kind, gracious, friends with those who did not follow him, and more, he never once sacrificed his theological integrity. Jesus claimed to be Messiah, and the Son of God<sup>29,30</sup>, not to mention referring to himself as the King of the Jews<sup>31</sup>. None of this would be popular with those who disagreed with him, and in fact he was putting himself at great risk to make those claims. Jesus was a model of fidelity to what he believed. We ought to be the same. We should engage one another with love, kindness, and grace but also with conviction. We should not have to sacrifice theological fidelity in order to relate to and be friends with those who may disagree with us.

## Conclusion

Is Jesus unifying for Christians and non-Christians alike? The answer that I have provided is nuanced. There are elements of his life and teaching which can be unifying, but there are other elements that are clearly not. If we are going to consider Jesus, we have to consider all of who he was and what he taught. In the end, Jesus calls his followers to engage with those around them, particularly in a pluralistic environment, in a particular way. As a follower of Jesus, I find

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<sup>26</sup> 1 Timothy 1:13, 16, *even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an arrogant man. But I received mercy because I acted out of ignorance in unbelief...But I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of them, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his extraordinary patience as an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life.*

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 22:19-21, *Show me the coin used for the tax.* "They brought him a denarius. "Whose image and inscription is this?" he asked them. "Caesar's," they said to him. Then he said to them, "Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

<sup>28</sup> Romans 13:1, 4, *Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God...For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong...*

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 16:13-17, *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But you," he asked them, "who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.*

<sup>30</sup> Luke 22:66-70, *When daylight came, the elders of the people, both the chief priests and the scribes, convened and brought him before their Sanhedrin. They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." But he said to them, "If I do tell you, you will not believe. And if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." They all asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" And he said to them, "You say that I am."*

<sup>31</sup> Luke 23:4, *So Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so."*



this incredibly encouraging. I not only believe in and follow Jesus, but I also want to become more and more like him.