

29. G. Bernard Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion* (London: Constable, 1916; Penguin, 1969), pp. 49-50.

30. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana: 1955), pp. 52-53. In his original BBC broadcast, Lewis also added: "Of course you can take the line of saying he didn't say these things, but his followers invented them. But that's only shifting the difficulty. They were Jews too: the last people who would invent such a thing, the people who had never said anything of the sort about Moses or Elijah. That theory only saddles you with twelve inexplicable lunatics instead of one."

Further reading

C. Stephen Evans. *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*. (InterVarsity Press)

Peter Kreeft. *Between Heaven and Hell*. (InterVarsity Press)

C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. (Fontana)

Eugene Peterson. *The Message*. (NavPress) A fresh, contemporary translation of the source documents for the Christian faith: the New Testament.

James W. Sire. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog*. (InterVarsity Press)

Lee Strobel. *The Case for Christ*. (Zondervan)

John Stott. *Basic Christianity*. (InterVarsity Press)

N.T. Wright. *Who was Jesus?* (Eerdmans)



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What's so Special about Jesus?

Compared with
Buddha, Muhammad,
Socrates and Zoroaster

One hears conflicting estimates of Jesus. Christians believe he is incomparable, without a peer, but they are often quite ignorant of the lives of other great spiritual leaders. On the other hand, some people speak of Jesus, Buddha, Socrates and others without acknowledging any differences. Walter Lippmann, for example, remarks,

There is no doubt that in one form or another, Socrates and Buddha, Jesus and St. Paul, Plotinus and Spinoza, taught that the good life is impossible without asceticism...¹

Arnold Toynbee asks:

Now who are the individuals who are the greatest benefactors of the living generation of mankind? I should say: Confucius and Lao-tse; the Buddha; the Prophets of Israel and Judah; Zoroaster, Jesus, and Muhammad; and Socrates.²

One may cite many syncretistic movements in the United States, Japan and elsewhere, such as Baha'i, which attempt to combine the teachings of various religious leaders.

The purpose of this essay is to highlight Jesus' life, death and teachings by comparing and contrasting them with those of Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates and Muhammad. We have chosen these four because many people today, in their search for meaning, are looking to these men and the traditions they have generated. We will divide the investigation into five categories: (a) the sources available for reconstructing the lives of these teachers, (b) their birth and family, (c) their life and teachings, (d) their death and (e) their relation to deity. After the data become clear, we will be able to see where the uniqueness of Jesus lies.

Sources

From a historian's point of view there are serious disparities in the sources available for reconstructing the lives of Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates, Muhammad and Jesus. We need to distinguish sharply between first-hand or nearly contemporary sources and later apocryphal and legendary materials.

A. Zoroaster³ (around 1000 B.C.E.)

We have what appear to be the genuine sayings of Zoroaster in the *Gathas* of the *Avesta*. The mass of Zoroastrian texts,

however, are in late Pahlavi recensions (ninth century C.E.). Contemporary Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions betray at best only allusions to early Zoroastrianism. Some Greek and Arabic authors also allude to Zoroaster. The Persian national epic, the *Shah Namah* by Firdausi (c. 1000 C.E.), includes traditions of the prophet.

B. Buddha (563-483 B.C.E.)

Buddha's teachings, after many centuries of being passed on orally, were written down for the first time in the first century B.C.E. in Sri Lanka. The earliest written texts which have been preserved are in Pali, an Indo-Aryan dialect which may be the dialect Buddha himself used. The Pali canon of the Hinayana school (the southern branch of Buddhism, also called the Theravada school) is known as the *Tipitaka* (Sanskrit *Tripitaka*), meaning "Three Baskets." Portions of this collection, such as the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the *Majjhima Nikaya* and the *Anguttara Nikaya*, may have come into existence two centuries after Buddha's death, but other portions originated much later.

The Sanskrit canon of the Mahayana school, which spread northeastward to Tibet, China, Korea and Japan, dates, at the earliest, to the first and second centuries C.E. According to Buddhist scholar Christmas Humphreys,

the later Sutras of the Mahayana School, though put into Buddha's mouth, are clearly the work of minds which lived from five to fifteen hundred years after his passing.⁴

In the later sources one notes a conspicuous exaggeration of the supernatural elements in Buddha's life. But even the earliest traditions, separated as they are by a century or two from Buddha's time, are not free from amplification. As M. Winternitz observes,

Even what are generally considered to be our oldest documents, the texts of the Pali Tipitaka, speak of Buddha often enough as a superhuman being, and tell us more of the legendary man than of the historical Buddha.⁵

C. Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.)

We are fortunate in having the accounts of two of Socrates' own disciples, Plato and Xenophon, as well as notices collected by Diogenes Laertius (third century C.E.). We cannot accept these accounts uncritically, of course, because it is difficult to know how much of Plato's dialogues is really Socratic and how much Platonic. Another problem is that Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and other writings were composed to refute the Sophists' attacks against Socrates.⁶

D. Muhammad (570-632 C.E.)

In the Qur'an (Koran) we have the authentic sayings of Muhammad, which were at first written down on skins, palm leaves, pottery and even the shoulder blades of sheep. Within 23 years after the prophet's death, Uthman ibn 'Affan, a son-in-law of the prophet and later third caliph, had collected these sayings in an authoritative edition. Islamic scholar Kenneth Cragg (not himself a Muslim) comments:

There is no place for serious misgiving that what is here was substantially what the prophet said... Twenty-three years and sole authorship allowed no time or opportunity for confusion.⁷

The *Hadith*, or Tradition, is a collection of numerous oral traditions about the words and actions of Muhammad, involving even such details as his regularly brushing his teeth. Some two centuries after the prophet's death, Al-Bukhari undertook to sift through some 600,000 traditions to obtain 7,000 *Hadith* which he believed were authentic. The first life of Muhammad, based on the Qur'an and the *Hadith*, is the ninth-century *Sirat ar-Rasul* by Ibn Hisham.

E. Jesus (5 B.C.E.-30 or 33 C.E.⁸)

Our main sources of information about the life of Jesus are the earliest biographies known as the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There is dispute over the identity of the authors and the dates of their writing. However, one early tradition says that Mark's biography was based on the reminiscences of Peter, a close friend of Jesus. Another says that Luke was the medical doctor who accompanied Paul, the most famous of early Christian teachers, on his journeys. In introducing his book, Luke claims that his material comes from interviewing eyewitnesses, since he himself was not present at the events he describes.

As to when these were written, three Christian leaders between the years 96 and 100 C.E. (Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp) quote in their own writings from these biographies, and clearly consider them accurate and authoritative. This means that the biographies must already have been written, in circulation and gaining credibility for some time.⁹ Is it possible to be more precise? Many scholars believe that Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke used his work as the basis for their own. Mark has often been dated before 70 C.E., and by some as early as 50 C.E. Some think Matthew and Luke were written in the 80's or 90's C.E., while one scholar argues that all four must have been written before 70 C.E.¹⁰ However, as Tom Wright, a New Testament scholar, points out:

The argument for the substantial historicity and accuracy of the Gospels never depended on their dating...[but] on our putting together the whole jigsaw of the first century...[and] on the historical plausibility of the picture they describe.¹¹

Is there evidence for Jesus outside the New Testament? Certainly there are references to Jesus and his followers from the first century C.E. from the Jewish writer Josephus, and from

the second century writers Tacitus, Suetonius and Pliny the Younger.¹² However, in general these speak more of the spread of Christianity as it began to impinge on the Roman Empire, and less to the inconspicuous origins of the faith in an obscure corner of the empire.¹³

Birth and family

A. Zoroaster

Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) was born into the Spitama clan, evidently in northwestern Iran, though he ministered in north-eastern Iran. According to Arabic sources he lived from 628 to 551 B.C.E., which would accord with the tradition that he converted Hystaspes, the father of Darius who ruled the Persian Empire from 522-486 B.C.E. Scholars today, however, favour a date around 1000 B.C.E. or earlier.¹⁴ (Greek sources were greatly mistaken in placing Zoroaster 6000 years before Plato!) Zoroaster was married three times and had several sons and daughters.

B. Buddha

Buddha, who is also known as Siddhartha (his given name), Gautama (his family name) and Sakyamuni (sage of the Sakya), was born in Kapilavastu, now in southern Nepal. His father Suddhodana was a rajah of the Sakya clan. His mother Maya died a few days after his birth. At the age of nineteen Gautama was married to the beautiful princess Yasodhara, who bore him a son Rahula. After ten years Gautama ventured out of his cloistered estate and, according to the traditions, saw for the first time an old man, a sick man, a dead man and an ascetic. So struck was he by these sights that he abandoned his family to become a wandering monk.

C. Socrates

Socrates was born in Athens to Sophroniscus, an artisan-sculptor, and to Phenarete, a mid-wife. We know nothing about his youth. As someone has remarked, "You would think the Master was born an old man, with no childhood." His wife was Xanthippe. Socrates remarked that if he could master Xanthippe he could easily adapt himself to the rest of the world. But Socrates might well have paid more attention to the material needs of their three sons.

D. Muhammad

Muhammad was born in Mecca about 570 C.E. into the Quraish tribe. Because his father died before he was born and his mother passed away when he was six, the lad was raised by a grandmother and then by an uncle. As a young man he worked in the caravans of Khadija, a rich widow whom he later married, though she was twenty years his senior. Although Muslims may be married only to four wives, Muhammad himself did not abide by this limit, having ten wives and additional concubines. One of his favourites was A'isha, who came to Muhammad when she was but nine, bringing her toys with her. Muhammad received a special revelation (Qur'an 33:37) to justify his marriage to the beautiful Zainab, the wife of his adopted son Zaid. In spite of these many unions, the prophet never had a full-grown son, a fact which affected the struggles for the caliphate (or succession).

E. Jesus

The monk Dionysius Exiguus (533 C.E.), who devised our modern calendar with its reckoning B.C. (B.C.E.) and A.D. (C.E.), miscalculated the reign of Octavian-Augustus by at least four years. Since Herod the Great died just after an eclipse of the

moon which can be placed at 4 B.C.E. and since he was still alive at Jesus' birth, Jesus must have been born before this date.

According to Luke and Matthew, Jesus was conceived by a virgin named Mary while she was legally engaged but not yet married to Joseph of Nazareth. They were both Jews in the royal line of King David, from which the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament was to come. When she was about to have the child, Mary traveled with Joseph about seventy miles south to their ancestral home of Bethlehem because the emperor Augustus had ordered an Empire-wide census (Luke 2:1). Jesus was thus born in Bethlehem, fulfilling a prophecy written seven hundred years before (Micah 5:2). Joseph and Mary were quite poor, as evidenced by their offerings in the Temple (Luke 2:24; cf. Leviticus 12:8).

The canonical Gospels record that Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth and had other children. These brothers and sisters were not sympathetic to Jesus' mission (Mark 3:31-35; Matthew 13:55-56). Later, however, his brother James played a leading role in the church. James and another brother Jude wrote letters which are included in the New Testament.

The Gospels in the New Testament record only one incident in Jesus' childhood. When he was twelve he impressed the rabbis in Jerusalem with his questions and answers (Luke 2:41-52). In contrast, the apocryphal infancy Gospels (dating from the second century C.E. on) attribute all kinds of absurd miracles to the young Jesus, for example, portraying him making live pigeons out of clay and petulantly striking some of his playmates dead.¹⁵

Although marriage was considered a religious duty by most Jews (the Essenes were the exception), Jesus never married.

Life and teachings

A. Zoroaster

Zoroaster served as a priest of the polytheistic Iranian religion before he was converted at age thirty to the sole worship of Ahura Mazda. He succeeded in converting some of his kinsmen and also Hystaspes, a king in northeastern Iran. When his new teaching met strong opposition, he responded by pronouncing curses upon his opponents. Zoroaster also denounced the intoxicating cult of the *haoma* plant and exhibited great concern for the care of cattle. In Zoroaster's view material prosperity and godliness went hand in hand, a trait perhaps reflected today in the remarkable prosperity of the Parsees (modern Zoroastrians) in Bombay, India.

B. Buddha

After six years of searching for peace through asceticism, Gautama came to the town of Uruvela in northeastern India. There he sat under the Bodhi tree (a gigantic fig tree) and determined to stay until he received Enlightenment. Forty-nine days later he was illuminated, becoming the Buddha, which means "Enlightened One." Buddha preached his first sermons in Benares when he was thirty-five. He succeeded in converting his ascetic companions, then his parents and his wife, and eventually King Bimbisara.

Buddha's teachings may be summarized in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths are (1) suffering exists, (2) suffering has a cause, (3) suffering can be eliminated, (4) ways to eliminate suffering. Buddha taught that all that exists is impermanent and that lasting happiness cannot be found in *samsara*, the temporal world of change. The way to Nirvana is to eliminate desire, which is the cause of suffering. Desire is not eliminated by gratification nor by

mortification but by the Middle Way of the Eightfold Path, which involves (1) right views, (2) aspirations, (3) speech, (4) conduct, (5) livelihood, (6) effort, (7) mindfulness and (8) contemplation.

Legends ascribe all kinds of miracles to Buddha: By washing his hands over the seed of a ripe mango, he caused a tree to spring up fifty-hands high. Once he flew into the sky with fire and water streaming from various parts of his body. He performed these miracles, according to a *Jataka* account, to dispel the gods' doubts about his mission.

C. Socrates

A report of the Delphic Oracle proclaimed that Socrates was the wisest man in the world. Believing that this could not be true, Socrates was impelled into a life of constantly questioning people in order to find someone who was truly wise. As he interrogated citizens in the streets and gymnasiums of Athens, he attracted to himself a coterie of well-born young men. Unfortunately some of these disciples, such as Alcibiades and Critias, turned out to be such scoundrels that they unintentionally played a role in his condemnation.

Rather than teaching a set of doctrines, Socrates tried to get people to think for themselves. The philosophers who preceded him had focused on the nature of the universe, but Socrates turned his attention to human beings and their behavior. Aristotle and Cicero credited him with founding ethics. His main teaching, as best as we can determine from his interpreters, was that all values can be reduced to a single virtue, knowledge. Virtue, then, can be taught. Evil is blindness: no one does evil on purpose. Those who know the good will do it.

D. Muhammad

After Muhammad received his initial revelation when he was about forty years old, he began preaching an uncompromising monotheism, which so infuriated the pagan Meccans that they made him flee to Medina in the famous Hijra of 622 C.E. After the Jews of Medina rejected his overtures, he changed the *qibla*, or direction of prayer, to face Mecca rather than Jerusalem. Muhammad's forces battled various opponents and killed many, including hundreds of Jews. The Prophet, who did not fight in person, showed mercy to captives after the capture of Mecca.

The Qur'an does not claim that Muhammad performed any miracles. But traditions ascribe numerous wonders to him: "Butter, a part of which Muhammad had eaten, increased continually." "A tree moved from its place of its own accord and shaded Muhammad while he slept." "A wolf spoke and converted a Jew."

The five pillars of Islam are (1) the *Shahada*, or creed, which affirms, "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet," (2) *Salat*, prayer, five times a day facing Mecca, (3) *Zakat*, or alms, (4) fasting during *Ramadhan*, the ninth lunar month, which involves a strict abstinence from both food and drink during daylight, and (5) for those who can perform it, the *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca. When in Mecca the pilgrim must make a circuit around the Kaaba building, and walk to a certain site and back.

Since the followers of Muhammad do not worship him, they should not be called "Mohammadans." They should be called "Muslims," from the word "Islam," which connotes their submission to Allah.

E. Jesus

Until his thirtieth year, Jesus remained in Nazareth, presumably working as a carpenter (Luke 3:23). Then he began his ministry by submitting to the baptism of John the Baptist. Jesus, who had no formal training as a rabbi, did not speak like the rabbis of his day; they cited their predecessors as their authorities while Jesus spoke on his own authority (Matthew 5:27-28, 7:28-29).

Since we know Jesus appeared at three or four Passover festivals, his public ministry must have lasted three to three-and-a-half years. During this time he trained a band of twelve apostles and many other disciples. He went about teaching, healing the sick and raising the dead (for example, John 11). Jewish rabbinical sources do not deny these miracles but rather attribute them to demonic magic. Speaking of the miracles attributed to Christ in the canonical Gospels, F.F. Bruce comments:

In general, they are 'in character' – that is to say, they are the kind of works that might be expected from such a Person as the Gospels represent Jesus to be.¹⁶

Like his forerunner John the Baptist, Jesus preached that people must turn away from their wrongdoing and return to God (Luke 15:11-32). He taught that God was giving people an opportunity to leave their own ways and to join a new community, a community committed to God's norms of radical compassion and forgiveness, a community headed by Jesus himself. Jesus called this community "the kingdom of God."

This teaching provided a fundamental affront to the religious establishment. Jesus also flouted their regulations (for instance, that healing on the Sabbath broke God's law) and challenged their assumptions (for instance, that God was pleased with their religious ceremonies). As a result, they began to plot Jesus' death.

Death

A. Zoroaster

According to Al-Biruni (973-1048 C.E.), Zoroaster was killed by invading Turanians. The *Shah Namah* (c. 1000 C.E.) describes the event:

*And all before the Fire the Turkmans slew
And swept that cult away. The Fire, that erst
Zardusht [Zoroaster] had litten, of their blood did die;
Who slew that priest himself I know not.*

B. Buddha

In his eightieth year as he traveled near Benares, Buddha became mortally ill after a meal of pork, perhaps from dysentery. According to the *Mahaparanibbana Sutta* his last words to a disciple were these:

I have reached my sum of days... It is only, Ananda, when the Tathagata [a title of Buddha], ceasing to attend to any outward thing, or to experience any sensation, becomes plunged in that devout meditation of the heart which is concerned with no material object – it is only then that the body of the Tathagata is at ease.

Elsewhere in this sutta the Buddha is said to have added,

Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp.

After his death Buddha was cremated and his ashes distributed among eight cities. His alleged remains are venerated at various stupas, or shrines, throughout Asia.

C. Socrates

Socrates was brought to trial in 399 B.C.E. on charges of "atheism" and corrupting Athenian youth. This arraignment

had at least two immediate causes: a political reaction which occurred in Athens after a lengthy war with Sparta and the lampoons of the comic writer Aristophanes. Though Socrates eloquently defended himself (the defense is recorded in Plato's *Apology*), the jury voted 281 to 220 to put him to death.

Socrates could easily have fled from Athens after the trial, but he chose to remain. He said he did not fear dying because it would bring either annihilation or a welcome opportunity to fellowship with those already dead. At the appointed time Socrates calmly drank the poisonous hemlock. According to the *Phaedo*, his last words were: "I owe a cock to Asclepius [the god of healing]; do not forget to pay it."

D. Muhammad

In 632 Muhammad became ill with violent headaches and a fever. Before he died the prophet exhorted the Arabs to remain united, proclaimed the duties of married couples and abolished usury and the blood feud. When he announced that if he owed anything to anyone that person could claim it, a hush fell on the crowd. One man came forward to claim a few coins. Muhammad finally succumbed and was buried in the house of his wife A'isha, who had nursed him during his last days. The prophet's tomb at Medina is, after Mecca, the site most venerated by Muslims.

E. Jesus

The events surrounding the death of Jesus occupy almost one-third of his biographies, and provide us with far more details than exist for other subjects.

The priests and other Judaeen leaders paid one of Jesus' followers, Judas Iscariot, to give them information about where and when he could be arrested secretly. The arrest took

place late on a Thursday night, in a park ("the Garden of Gethsemane") where he was praying with his friends. After a highly irregular trial before the Judaeen leaders, Jesus was taken early on the Friday morning to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, for ratification of the sentence. Though he judged Jesus to be innocent, in order to avoid a riot, Pilate agreed to have him whipped and put to death by crucifixion. This was the first "Good Friday."

As he was being crucified, Jesus prayed and asked God to forgive his executioners. After hanging on the cross for three hours, Jesus died. Soldiers made sure he was really dead by thrusting a spear into his side. His body was taken by a secret disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, and put into an unused tomb carved into a rockface. A stone was rolled across the entrance to the tomb and soldiers were posted on guard. However, when some women of Jesus' group came to the tomb early on the Sunday morning, they found the stone rolled away and the body gone.

The empty tomb alone did not convince the disciples that Jesus was alive, but Jesus appeared to his disciples on at least ten occasions after that. All of these appearances are recorded in the New Testament; we will mention just four of them.

Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene on Sunday morning near the tomb. The other disciples did not believe her report (John 20:18; Mark 16:11). Then that evening in Jerusalem Jesus suddenly appeared in the midst of the disciples, who had barricaded themselves behind locked doors. After allowing the terrified men to touch him and examine his wounds to prove he was not an apparition, he ate a meal with them (John 20:19; Luke 24:39, 43). He also appeared to a multitude of his disciples on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-18) and in Jerusalem before his return to heaven (Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1).

Some time later Saul of Tarsus, on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute the Christians there, encountered the risen Jesus (Acts 9). This transformed Saul, a fanatical persecutor of Christianity, into Paul, a fervent propagator of Christianity.¹⁷

Relation to deity

A. Zoroaster

It seems that Zoroaster preached the monotheistic worship of Ahura Mazda, who was the creator of two other spirits – one good, the other evil.¹⁸ Classical dualistic Zoroastrianism, which pitted Ahura Mazda against the evil Ahriman, developed in the Sassanian period (226-652 C.E.). Later Zoroastrianism also developed a doctrine of a *Saoshyan* (Saviour) who would raise the dead. According to Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin:

*Zoroaster did not give himself out to be the redeemer. When his prayers call the redeemer who is to renew existence, he means the prince who shall accept his doctrine and realize the Dominion of Righteousness and Good Mind. He even allows the role of redeemer to any man, provided he practises righteousness.*¹⁹

B. Buddha

Although it is not correct to speak of Buddhism as an “atheistic” religion, it is a religion whose chief focus is on humankind rather than on any god. The *Buddhist Annual of Ceylon* defines Buddhism as,

that religion which without starting with a God leads man [sic] to a stage where God's help is not necessary.

Buddha himself, coming out of a background of polytheistic Hinduism, seems to have treated even Brahma, one of the highest of the gods, with a cool superciliousness. Junjiro Takakusu of Tokyo University explains that “the Buddha did not deny the existence of gods (Devas), but he considered them only as the higher grade of living beings, also to be taught by him.”²⁰

It is clear that over the centuries the original concept of Buddha as an enlightened man was radically changed so that “he was no longer that simple teacher of moral values but a *Mahapurisa* [a super-human being], greater than the gods themselves.”²¹ Transformations in Buddhist art reveal this evolution in doctrine. From the third to the first centuries B.C.E. Buddha was depicted in Indian art simply by a symbol, such as his footprint, umbrella or throne.²² Thereafter the Buddha himself is depicted. According to Mortimer Wheeler,

*It was no less fitting to represent the deified Buddha than to embody the traditional divinities of the Hindu pantheon.*²³

By the second and third centuries C.E. Mahayana Buddhism had produced a doctrine of *Boddhisatvas*, innumerable perfected Buddhas distributed through space and time who help humankind by their merits. According to the *Lotus of the True Law* the Buddha was an eternal sublime being, who appeared in human form as the saviour of humankind.

C. Socrates

Though Socrates did not fully subscribe to the anthropomorphic Homeric deities, he was deeply devout in his own way. He was scrupulously obedient to his *daimonion*, a personal guiding spirit. In Xenophon's *Apology*, Socrates says, “As for

introducing 'new divinities,' how can I be guilty of that merely in asserting that a voice of God is made manifest to me indicating my duty?" In his *Memorabilia* Xenophon asserts, "For myself, I have described him as he was: so religious that he did nothing without counsel from the gods..."

D. Muhammad

The Qur'an emphatically stresses the Oneness of the God-head, not only to deny polytheism but also to refute the Christian Trinity. Qur'an 112:1-4 reads:

*Say: He is Allah, the One!
Allah, the eternally Besought of all!
He begetteth not nor was begotten.
And there is none comparable unto Him.*

Muhammad himself did not claim to be anything other than a mortal messenger (Qur'an 7:188; 17:95). On one occasion he is said to have exclaimed:

*O, God! I am but a man. If I hurt anyone in any manner,
then forgive me and do not punish me.*

His fallibility is shown in the Qur'an, surah 80, where Allah rebukes him for turning away from a blind man.

Nor did Muhammad claim he had the power to save others. According to a tradition reported by Athar Husain, Muhammad said:

*O People of Quraish, be prepared for the Hereafter.
I cannot save you from the punishment of God, O Bani Abd Manaf... I cannot protect you either, O Safia, aunt of the Prophet,
I cannot be of help to you; O Fatima, daughter of Muhammad, even you I cannot save.²⁴*

When Muhammad died, Abu Bakr, who was to be one of the succeeding caliphs, announced:

O men, whosoever worshipped Muhammad, know that he is dead; whoever worshipped Muhammad's God, know that He is alive and immortal.

E. Jesus

Unlike the other spiritual leaders we are examining, Jesus came out of a monotheistic culture. The concept of "gods" in polytheistic religions is quite anthropomorphic; there is no sharp difference in kind between men and such gods.²⁵ In Jewish monotheism the distinction between God as transcendent and infinite and man as finite is almost absolute.

It is therefore altogether remarkable that Jesus' followers picked up on hints he dropped and concluded that he was "God come in the flesh." Such statements are clearest in the Gospel of John, where Jesus makes such amazing pronouncements as "Before Abraham was, I am." His hearers understood this to be a claim to deity (after all, "I am" was one of the traditional names of God), and tried to stone him to death (John 8:58-59). It forms a fitting climax to this theme that, at the end of this Gospel, the skeptical disciple Thomas is finally won over and makes the astounding declaration to Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

The other Gospel writers imply nothing less. Jesus forgives sins, and the religious leaders gasp: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). Jesus sees himself as the bridegroom at the marriage of God with God's people (Mark 2:19-20). Jesus tells a healed man to go home and "tell them how much the Lord [that is, God] has done for you." The man in fact tells "how much Jesus had done for him" (Mark 5:19-20).

These hints are made more explicit in the earliest Christian documents – letters from Christian leaders, which for the most

part were written even before the Gospels. One such writer, Paul, for instance, equates the “Day of the Lord,” the day on which the Jewish people believed God would come to vindicate them, with “the Day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). He believes Jesus to be the Creator: “the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:6). And perhaps most pointedly of all, he says: “In [Jesus] all the fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Colossians 2:9).

Conclusions

As we review the data, we see that these important men do share some characteristics. (1) They all preached against the corruption of contemporary religion. (2) They all perceived keenly the needs of their fellow human beings. (3) They all were so gripped by personal convictions that they tried to transmit to others what they believed to be true, even though attempting this often aroused opposition and caused them to suffer. (4) Each man’s deeds and words have attracted admirers and followers who have extended his impact over many continents and through many centuries.

To say there is exact parity between the leaders, however, is to argue not from tolerance but from ignorance. Each one had his own distinctive message and mission. And in comparing Jesus with Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates and Muhammad, we discover a number of unique features in Jesus’ life and ministry.

First, only Jesus came out of a culture which was already monotheistic.

Second, his death by crucifixion is unique. G. Bernard Shaw once remarked rather cynically:

These refined people worship Jesus and take comparatively no account of Socrates and Mahomet [sic], for no discoverable reason except that Jesus was horribly tortured, and Socrates humanely drugged, whilst Mahomet died unseasonably in his bed.²⁶

On the other hand, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote:

What prejudices, what blindness it takes to compare the son of Sophroniscus with the son of Mary! What distance between the two! Socrates, dying without pain, without disgrace, maintained his character easily to the end... The death of Socrates, philosophizing quietly with his friends, is the sweetest that one could desire; that of Jesus expiring under tortures, injured, ridiculed, cursed by his entire people, is the most horrible that one might dread... Indeed, if the life and death of Socrates are those of a sage, the life and death of Jesus are those of a god.²⁷

But Jesus’ death on the cross is unique not only in its manner but also in its alleged redemptive meaning. Neither Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates nor Muhammad claimed his death would save people from their sins.

Third, if we exclude later legendary and apologetic accounts, we find that early accounts attribute miracles only to Jesus.

Fourth, only Jesus spoke on his own unquestioned authority. Zoroaster and Muhammad acted as spokesmen for God, while Socrates and Buddha urged everyone to consult their own conscience.

Fifth, only Jesus predicted he would be resurrected after his death, and only his followers rest their faith on such an event.

Sixth, only Jesus claimed equality with a sole, supreme deity. According to E.O. James, an authority on comparative religions,

Nowhere else had it ever been claimed that a historical founder of any religion was the one and only supreme deity.²⁸

Now one may argue that Jesus was a deceiver, though few have made that charge. Or one may choose to believe with G. Bernard Shaw that Christ was sincere but deluded:

Whether you believe with the evangelists that Christ could have rescued himself by a miracle, or, as a modern Secularist, point out that he could have defended himself effectually, the fact remains that according to all the narratives he did not do so... The consensus on this point is important, because it proves the absolute sincerity of Jesus's declaration that he was a god. No impostor would have accepted such dreadful consequences without an effort to save himself. No impostor would have been nerved to endure them by the conviction that he would rise from the grave and live again after three days.²⁹

C.S. Lewis says Jesus' claim to be equal with deity leaves us only one other choice:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.³⁰

Notes

1. Walter Lippman, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1929), p. 155.
2. Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 156.
3. I have an extensive and detailed discussion of Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism in my book, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), chapter 12.
4. Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism* (Penguin: 1955), p. 14.
5. M. Winternitz, "Gotama the Buddha, What Do We Know of Him and His Teaching?" *Archiv Orientalni*, I (1929), 235.
6. Cf. Anton-Hermann Chroust, *Socrates, Man and Myth: the Two Socratic Apologies of Xenophon* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1957).
7. Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Oxford University Press, 1956; New York: Galaxy Books, 1964), pp. 96-97.
8. There are two equally plausible dates for the crucifixion of Jesus: the more familiar 30 C.E., and the equally plausible 33 C.E., which is argued by Paul L. Maier, "Sejanus, Pilate, and the Date of the Crucifixion," *Church History* 37, (1968), 3-13, and H.W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977).
9. Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable? A Look at the Historical Evidence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), pp. 38-39.
10. John A.T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1977).
11. Tom Wright, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 129-130.

12. I discuss these writers in detail in my "Jesus Outside the New Testament," in M.J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 207-229.

13. The Jesus Seminar has recently made a case for treating other early Christian documents, such as the Gospel of Thomas, as authentic sources for considering the historical origins of Christianity, but not all New Testament scholars agree. Tom Wright, for instance, comments: "To state baldly that [the earliest version of Thomas] was composed by the fifties C.E...is a remarkable piece of bravado." N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 48. A good critique of the Gospel of Thomas is the article by K.R. Snodgrass, "The Gospel of Thomas, A Secondary Gospel," *The Second Century* 7 (1989-90), 19-38. More thorough critiques of the Jesus Seminar and writers like Crossan, Mack, etc., may be found in: Gregory A. Boyd, *Cynic, Sage or Son of God?* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1995); Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), and Edith Humphrey, *A Solid Foundation? The Seven Pillars of the Jesus Seminar Re-examined* (another Dare booklet in this series).

14. I have a detailed discussion of the arguments in my *Persia and the Bible*, pp. 413-415.

15. Cf. M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1924).

16. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1960), p. 62. I discuss the miracles of Jesus in my "Magic or Miracle? Diseases, Demons and Exorcisms," in D. Wenham and C. Blomberg, eds., *Gospel Perspectives VI: The Miracles of Jesus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), pp. 89-183. See now G.H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

17. For a further discussion of the evidences, see Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (London: Faber and Faber,

1930); W.L. Craig, *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1985); idem, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989); idem, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?" in Wilkins and Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire*, pp. 141-176.

18. Cf. R.C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961).

19. Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *The Hymns of Zoroaster* (London: J. Murray, 1952), p. 19. Reprinted, Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1979.

20. Cited in F.H. Hilliard, *The Buddha, the Prophet and the Christ* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1956), p. 60.

21. B.G. Gokhale, "The Theravada-Buddhist View of History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXXXV (1965), 359-60.

22. Tamara T. Rice, *Ancient Arts of Central Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 150. I discuss the iconography of Buddhist art in my "Hellenistic Bactria and Buddhism," *Humanitas* 18.3 (1995), 5-10.

23. Mortimer Wheeler, *Flames over Persepolis* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), p. 163.

24. Athar Husain, *Prophet Muhammad and His Mission* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1967), p. 128.

25. Cf. Edwin Yamauchi, "Anthropomorphism in Ancient Religions," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, CXXV (1968), 29-44.

26. G. Bernard Shaw, *Everybody's Political What's What* (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1944), p. 129.

27. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1978), p. 46.

28. E.O. James, *Christianity and Other Religions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1968), p. 170.