



Is Christianity a Western Religion?

And other questions international students ask.



by Peter Teagle



QUESTION 5

Is Christianity a Western religion?

This question is quite closely linked to Question 6: *Is it possible to be a Christian and stay faithful to my culture? You may wish to read them together.*

This seems to be one of the most significant questions that international students ask, so it is worth taking some time to answer it carefully.

“Young people today...!”

Travelling through Singapore one day, my taxi driver told me many

of his concerns about life (as sometimes taxi drivers do). “*Young people in Singapore today,*” he said, “*Don’t understand Chinese ways **and so they become Christians.***”

I can understand why he said that, because Christianity tends to be quite popular among the section of Singapore society which is generally more comfortable with English as a first language and which often tends to be less concerned with traditional Chinese ways.¹⁶ I did not agree with the suggestion that people were becoming Christians because they did not sufficiently understand Chinese traditional religion. But whether he was correct or not, it is certainly true that many, many people associate Christianity with the English language, with Western culture, and consequently with neglecting or not understanding other cultural traditions.

Is Christianity essentially a Western export, like Starbucks or hotdogs, or is it directly and truly relevant to the countless different cultures and subcultures around the world?

When people say that ‘Christianity is a Western religion’, they often mean...

- that Christianity seems popular in the West compared to other parts of the world,
- that Western missionaries have brought Christianity to many parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America over the last 400 years, sometimes introducing many other aspects of their Western way of life, too.
- that being a Christian somehow requires a person to leave or compromise their own culture and values, adopting Western ones instead.

¹⁶ Some might say that this is ‘westernisation’ of the culture, but I strongly disagree with that. Just because superficially someone is adaptable and comfortable with *modern, global society*, does not mean they are ‘westernised’ in their heart values and approach to many aspects of life.

Let me be clear and say that, while I understand why people may think this way, *I believe all three of those ideas to be either misinformed or not wholly accurate*. However, **(c) deserves a question of its own** so I have dealt with it in the next section, Question 6: *Is it possible to be a Christian and stay faithful to my culture?* Let's look at (a) and (b) below.

a. Christianity's apparent popularity in the West compared to other parts of the world.

Although from the beginnings of Christianity 2000 years ago there have been Christian churches in Africa and Asia as well as Europe, for a long time there were indeed more Christians in the West than in other parts of the world. This is no longer the case. The world's population has increased massively over the last 150 years, and at the same time there are far more Christians¹⁷ in the 'Global South' than in the 'Global North', with 61% of people claiming the name 'Christian' in Africa, Asia and South America, even as Christianity in Europe has been in decline.¹⁸ Taking all of the last 2000 years into account, there have been more non-Western Christians than Western Christians in total.

Although statistics are always changing, some say that the five largest churches in the world by membership are all in Asia – South Korea, India and the Philippines.¹⁹ In Nigeria alone, it is estimated that over 80,000,000 people claim to be Christians.²⁰ It is impossible to know from statistics how many people who claim to be 'Christian' are truly followers of Jesus, but it seems certain that there are far more active Christians in Africa than there are in Europe – and this trend is growing.²¹

Although some may wonder why Christianity has lost

17 <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

18 Ibid.

19 <https://www.insidermonkey.com/blog/10-largest-churches-in-the-world-by-membership-565989/?singlepage=1>

20 *Operation World, 7th Edition*, Mandryk, J. (Ed.), Biblica (2010)

21 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/07/christianity-is-poised-to-continue-its-southward-march/>

popularity in the West, that is not the complete or accurate picture. Although the percentage of people calling themselves Christians was once much, much higher in the UK (it was around 80–90% in the 1950s and is now more like 30%²²), the actual proportion of those who really follow Jesus Christ is not much different to what it always was – around 8%.²³ Although it is almost impossible to really know how many people really follow Jesus from statistics, **the difference is now that there are far fewer people who are culturally or nominally Christian** (that is, they may be members of a church, but are less likely to be active in their faith or even have clear knowledge of the Bible's teaching).

The problem is one of perception: it really can no longer be assumed from population statistics that Christianity is 'more popular' in the West. Yet, the public image of Christianity is still culturally linked to the West in many people's thinking.

In writing this I have just been reading how Christianity in China was shaped by the fact that all foreign missionaries were forced to leave the country by 1953. Many of the missionaries were worried that, without foreign (Western) help, the Chinese Christians would struggle. In fact, the opposite happened. Without foreign support, the Chinese Church grew far beyond anyone's imagination and is now estimated in the tens of millions, becoming the fastest-growing national movement of Christianity in history. One reason for this was that Christians could now find Chinese patterns of following Jesus that did not look foreign in the way people dressed, spoke or sang.²⁴

22 It is almost impossible to get accurate statistics for these figures, as sources differ wildly. '80–90%' and '30%' are estimates to illustrate the change in culture.

23 Estimates vary from 5% to 12% regular church attendance in the UK; I would be inclined to agree with the lower estimate.

24 *Back to Jerusalem, Called to Complete the Great Commission*, P. Hattaway (ed), E. Wang, Brother Yun, Xue Y.Z., Piquant (2003)

b. Christianity's origins: is it a product of Western thinking and cultural values?

To be clear, Christianity did not originate in the West.

Since Christianity is founded on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, of course there had to be a point in time and a geographical location where Jesus was born and lived. I have always found it significant that Jesus was not born in Europe, but at the 'crossroads' of three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa, a place that feels Western to people from the East but feels Eastern to people from the West.

From this central point, Jesus commanded His followers to spread His message "...to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8 NLT) The famous 'Pax Romana' – the 'Peace of Rome' – described the relative political stability through powerful Roman domination, which meant that trade routes were quicker and safer than ever before. Jesus lived at the very eastern edge of the Roman empire, but the relative ease of travel through the Empire and across the Mediterranean Sea to the West, compared to deserts and mountains to the East, meant that Christianity spread more quickly West than East. The New Testament was written in Greek, which was a common language of commerce across a large part of the Mediterranean area. This also assisted the spread of Christianity towards the West.

When Jesus' teaching and Western values do not always easily mix

Of course, historically speaking, Christianity has been a major influence on Western culture, literature and thinking. Naturally, this influence will be more significant in places and cultures where Christianity has been a strong presence over a longer period. But if we look more closely at the teachings of Jesus Christ, they do not necessarily support or promote Western values and in some cases, Western Christians have shown a cultural bias in some practices.

For example, Christians are generally aware of the Bible's teaching that we should "honour [our] father and mother" (see especially Exodus

20:12, which was also highlighted by Jesus in Mark 7:9–13). However, as a young person I was taught in my (100%-white-English) church, that there was a distinction between **children** who should **obey** their parents and **adults** who only need to **honour** them (see Ephesians 6:1–3).

Although this distinction between adult and children would make sense to a lot of people and it is not necessarily wrong, it is likely that our cultural bias has caused us to interpret the Bible in a Western way. It is doubtful that such a clear line between children and adults really exists in this teaching in the Bible. Although *legally* most countries recognise adulthood as from 18, this does not always follow *culturally*, where in some cases people are seen as children up until they leave education or when they are married.

Also, in Britain, we have little understanding of what it means to 'honour' someone. I found this particularly confusing after we returned to the UK having spent four years living with my wife's parents in an extended Chinese family in Singapore. For those four years I spent time most days talking with my father-in-law over dinner. We have a good relationship and talking with him is my way of showing my love and respect.

When we came back to the UK, my own father found it curious – and then worrying – that I called him on the phone most days, just to chat. To my dad, this was not honouring him at all! Rather, it was *dishonouring* because it seemed to him that I was showing a *lack of independence*.

So, although we need to apply the Bible's teaching in a way that is relevant to our own culture – whatever culture we come from – this shows that we **must not assume that Western culture is in agreement with the Bible's teaching**.

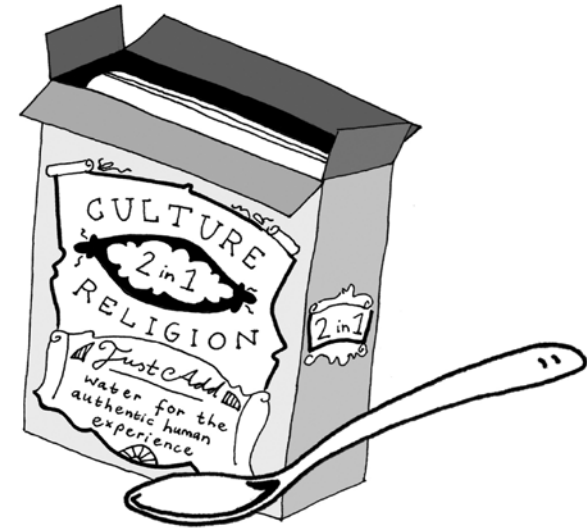
c. Does being a Christian require a person to leave or compromise their own culture and values, and adopt Western ones instead?

I hope you can see from what I have written that being a Christian certainly does not require adopting Western cultural practises.

However, how Christianity relates to any culture is not an easy question to answer in a few sentences. So, **follow me into the next question (6): “Is it possible to be a Christian and stay faithful to my culture?”**

Q SOMETHING TO TRY

We find that many people are unaware of the history, presence and influence of Christianity in their own country. Why not try to find out more? Of course, if the majority of the population (for religious, cultural or political reasons) is antagonistic towards Christianity, then popular knowledge may not show an accurate picture of the situation. But there are ways to discover how many Christians there really are in your country and what living as a Christian is like.



QUESTION 6

*Is it possible to be a
Christian and stay faithful
to my culture?*

This question is quite closely linked to Question 5: Is Christianity a Western religion? You may wish to read them together.

Easy in England?

When I became a Christian, I never needed to ask, “How can I be a Christian and still be English?” (I use the term ‘English’ to describe my cultural identity, whereas my *nationality* is British, in case you were

wondering!) I knew that being a follower of Jesus was in some ways very compatible with English culture, as it has many customs which have been shaped by the Christian faith such as celebrating Jesus' birth at Christmas and His death and resurrection at Easter. Both of these festivals became far more meaningful for me as a Christian when I understood their significance. Neither did I find it difficult to find a church; my nearest one met in my old primary school, just 250 metres from my front door!

Yet at the same time I knew that following Jesus would not be easy. It did not take me long to find out just how much I was considered an outsider because of the life I had chosen. My friends and classmates laughed at me, some despised me, while others relentlessly challenged my faith by asking questions designed to trap or even destroy my new-found faith. I learned how to deal with their questions, but within two years almost all of them were no longer interested in me as a friend.

Older people were less outspoken, but in some ways I found their disapproval far more difficult. They did not seem to mind me believing in God and going to church, but they intensely disliked me talking about my faith openly and were often very sharp in their criticism of my enthusiasm for Jesus.

One thing that both the older and younger people around me agreed on was the 'foolishness' (as they saw it) of my refusal to engage in sex before being married. Younger people saw it as a 'crazy waste of a good time', and older people thought it 'unhealthy' and 'repressive' (i.e. denying my natural feelings). I struggled to understand why even family members did not support me and my fiancée's decision not to live together before our wedding day and to keep sex for marriage only. In truth it is still *countercultural* to follow Jesus in Britain – even more so now than it was thirty years ago when I was a new Christian.

The point of all this is to say that whatever culture you are from, following Jesus will be countercultural (against what is normal for the culture).

Compared to some, what I experienced was very mild indeed. Some Christians endure much harsher discrimination or rejection from their family or community; others will face serious danger of physical

violence or even death for being a follower of Jesus.

There will be some things that will fit well with a culture, but many things that will not. Although Christianity has been in the British Isles for over 1500 years, I still had to learn how to stand up for my faith, to resist pressure from my peers and deal with disapproval from my elders. I needed to do all this in a respectful way which did not cause more problems than necessary. I did not always get it right.

Harder in Vietnam?

Our good friend, Ngoh²⁵, mentioned elsewhere in this book, was a student in the UK when she made the decision to follow Jesus. She was very attracted to the Person of Jesus and was keen to know God for herself. **At the same time, she was not attracted to Western culture.** In fact, she found many aspects of British life very hard. But she attended Bible studies with people from Southeast Asia, as well as from the West, which made things a bit easier.

Even so, when she met Jesus²⁶ for herself and decided to follow Him, she was immediately concerned with the question, "How can I be a Christian *and still be Vietnamese?*" Vietnam has been largely Buddhist for centuries, which has been mixed with many local beliefs about spirits and gods and it is common for people to worship the spirits of their ancestors. Although Christianity has had a small presence in Vietnam for some time, it has mostly been seen as foreign and there has not been a large enough Christian presence to make a significant change to the culture. Almost every festival, artform and cultural expression in Vietnam has some link to the traditional beliefs of Vietnam. Many would say, *to be Vietnamese is to be Buddhist*.

How is Ngoh able to worship Jesus only, and not the gods and spirits of her culture? Should she eat food which has been first offered to the gods? Should she celebrate *all* the Lunar New Year customs, *some* of

25 Not her real name.

26 I do not mean she physically met Jesus, but her experience of Jesus was nevertheless very real and life-changing.

them, or *none* of them? And how was she to know which customs were good? Ngoh became a Christian in the UK, so although she was guided by Asian friends who had faced similar questions, she did not know a single Vietnamese Christian at first.

Christianity and culture in conflict?

Clearly, **'culture' and 'religion' are not always easy to separate.** In Britain and other Western cultures, people tend to attempt to keep 'religion' separate from other aspects of life. Yet in many other cultures, this distinction between 'religious' and 'non-religious (secular)' life is utterly meaningless.

Many people in the past attempted to spread the Christian message to other cultures, but because they did not know how to deal with this question, they thought they also needed to make people wear Western clothes and adopt Western habits.

When missionaries arrived in the tiny islands of the South Pacific throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the tribes they encountered were often initially very hostile to these foreigners and killed some of them, while many others died of disease. But slowly the tribes began to see that these men and women were incredibly brave and were willing to die to bring the message of Jesus to these remote places. Eventually, the tribespeople were willing to listen. Many responded to Jesus and they turned away from their old gods.

However, in such small, remote islands, missionaries arrived with little communication and support from outside and no ability to see what other missionaries were doing elsewhere. The tribal cultures of the islands shocked and appalled them – they thought the local people were hopelessly immoral (many did not wear clothes), were violent, and even cannibalism (eating humans) was not uncommon. These Christian teachers knew that they, too, could be eaten by the local people who were sometimes hostile to them. The missionaries' response was to try to stop the local traditions completely and insist that those who believed in Jesus also follow a more European lifestyle.

This was a huge mistake because, while the gods they had previously

worshiped were truly evil, the local cultures were certainly not all bad and the people felt robbed of their sense of cultural identity.²⁷

Not all situations were as drastic as this. Yet many missionaries and Christian teachers instinctively encouraged people to adopt Western practices. This was partly because we all tend to easily assume that 'our' way of doing things is the 'right way' or the 'best way'. It was also because they had not yet found an easy alternative.

Imperialism or Christianity?

More than a hundred years ago, many countries were completely closed to foreigners of any kind. Christians worried about people in these places who had no opportunity to hear about the love of God and the message of Jesus Christ. At that time, imperial expansion of Western powers and forced trade agreements were the only ways *any* foreigner could enter some countries. Although Christian missionaries were often against the aggressive, greedy ways in which European powers tried to gain money and power from Africa, Asia²⁸ and South America, they saw an opportunity and used the situation to gain access to places that had been closed to Christians before. The advantage was that Christianity could finally reach the people who needed Jesus. The disadvantage was that Christianity became associated with European imperialism in many people's minds. Many could see that the Christians were different from the soldiers and traders who were exploiting their land; others could not or would not see the difference – *a foreigner is a foreigner and none of them are to be trusted.*

I am glad we have come a long way from there!

27 This is explained particularly well in: *The Man with a Bird on His Head, (International Adventures series),* Anderson, A., & Rush, J., YWAM Publishing (1997)

28 The British East India Company was strongly opposed to any Christian missionary activity in India and other parts of Asia because they did not want religious activity to interfere with exploiting India for money and power. For a long time, it was impossible for missionaries to gain access to areas where the company had influence. Only an act of the British parliament forced the Company to allow Christianity to be spread, and for missionaries to stay and work with local people.

Learning from our mistakes

Christians have learned many lessons from the mistakes of the past, and most modern missionaries work hard to understand and appreciate the culture of the people they are trying to introduce to Jesus. But in some places real damage was done in the past, and some people have rejected Christianity for this reason.

Thankfully, as Christianity has spread, Christians from non-Western cultures have been able to help Western Christians understand their customs and cultures better. In fact, many missionaries today are not from traditionally Western countries, but from Latin America, Asia and Africa (including Samoa, Nigeria, South Korea, India and Brazil). It was such an amazing privilege for me to train in a Christian college where I was the only Western student. This experience was not only helpful for me to understand other cultures better, it helped me understand the *Bible* better (after all, the Bible is not a Western book).

In places where Christianity has been established for longer, there will be more resources available: books, teaching, etc., to help Christians live faithfully to Jesus within that culture. Where Christianity is less well-known, or where Christians are a small minority, less information is generally available on how other people have dealt with the same issues. That is why it is important to speak to mature Christians from your culture to find out what choices they have had to make.

No such thing as a “Christian culture”

Although many Western cultures have been deeply influenced by Christianity, there is no such thing as ‘Christian culture’.

Although Jesus made it clear that His message is for the whole world, Jesus and His earliest followers were all Jewish. The earliest Christians struggled to understand how anyone could follow Jesus without becoming Jewish, as that was all they had ever known. Soon, however, Christians from other cultural backgrounds began to find ways of expressing their Christian faith that was true to what Jesus

taught but did not require them to adopt Jewish ways.

Christianity is about how God’s love transforms our lives, so we are able to love Him and to love other people. It is not a list of rules and rituals; the Bible gives us very few instructions about the outward expressions of the Christian faith. This means that how we express our faith may differ somewhat from one culture to another.

For example, Christians in Pakistan tend to strictly observe the separation of men and women in church (men sit on one side, the women on the other). This is because, in Pakistani society, it is seen as inappropriate for men and women to freely associate with each other in public. Since it would be wrong for people to think that Christians behave inappropriately, the way people sit in church reflects this. In Britain, of course, men and women associate freely all the time, and no-one would consider it inappropriate for men and women to sit together. **There are no instructions in the Bible about where men and women should sit in church**, but it does say there must not be “even a hint of sexual immorality,” (Ephesians 5:3 NIV). But what is considered as inappropriate in one culture is not so in another, so each culture follows the teaching in a culturally-relevant way.

Difficult choices

Even so, a follower of Jesus may often find themselves having to make difficult choices between what the Bible teaches and what their culture requires or accepts as normal. Many of the Christian students we have talked to have had to face difficult choices when they returned home. These are most commonly to do with either being expected to attend religious or cultural ceremonies (**see Question 19, Does being a Christian mean I cannot honour my ancestors?**), or concerning work patterns, hours and expectations.

One friend said that, as a Christian, she often had to explain to her colleagues why she was not interested in getting ‘lucky mobile phone numbers’ and special numbers of lottery tickets. Her husband found that, for him, the challenge was not to spend hours at work uselessly and just for ‘show’ (to look good in front of the boss) when he could

work hard and then go home to be with his wife and daughter, which he felt was more important. Even though he often left the office earlier than others, they were so pleased with his work they kept promoting him!

To refuse to join in **making offerings to gods or spirits**, even if “you don’t really believe in it”, is often seen as a great insult and makes people think you are being disrespectful to the group. But as a Christian, we cannot worship any spirits or gods, only Jesus. If you have an altar to your ancestors in your home, then you may face challenges about this every day if you are a Christian (see Question 19).

Money is not evil, but as Christians, **money is not what we live for** and must not control our lives. Yet if we live in a situation where everyone *expects* us to be earning a lot, it can be difficult to put God first in our lives.

Whatever your situation, please understand that you are not alone! Right from the very beginning, Christians in the Roman empire had to make very difficult decisions that could cost them their lives. They were expected to make sacrifices to the gods – especially the Roman emperor – in many parts of life. In some cases, they would be unable to do business if they refused to do so. But they could not honour other gods alongside Jesus. They were sometimes even thrown into prison, tortured or killed as a result.

Usually, it is not as serious as that and **we can often make things easier for everyone by explaining things gently and privately** before finding ourselves in embarrassing confrontations in public. But for 2000 years, Christians have found that the difficult choice is always worth it. When we honour God by obeying Him, He will honour us (1 Samuel 2:30) and will give us other opportunities to show respect to others in ways that do not go against the Bible’s teaching.

🔍 SOMETHING TO TRY

Read the Bible for yourself in your own language if possible, especially the stories of Jesus. This will help you understand about Jesus without Western ‘cultural clothing’. Also, I suggest you find mature Christians from your own country or culture who can tell you their story of how they follow Jesus in your home situation.

“I very much recommend this excellent book which will be immensely helpful to any international student who is seeking the truth, as well as a useful resource for those seeking to share their faith cross-culturally. May the Lord use it for His glory!”

Wendy Kasenene

PhD student, Queen Mary University of London

“Here is an excellent introduction to the Christian faith in clear, uncomplicated non-jargonized language written for anyone who is intrigued, curious or indeed searching for a faith which provides meaning, values, forgiveness, unconditional love, freedom and hope in a needy world. Read ...and enjoy!”

Lindsay Brown

Former IFES International General Secretary

“If you are curious and would like to find out what it is that Christians are excited about, this is a book for you. In this book, you will find answers to FAQs (frequently asked questions) about Jesus and His life-giving power. Some of these may be questions that you have but didn't know how best to articulate. You will enjoy Peter's conversational style and engaging real life encounters. No doubt, you will find yourself identifying with many of these stories.”

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