

## World Religions

Intro “ The most important thing about a man or woman is what they think about God.”

Today we will be learning about how to engage with people from some of the world’s largest religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.

If you group together Roman Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox under one umbrella of “Christianity,” the next three largest religions are Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam

CIA, 2007

- ☞ Christians 33% (of which Roman Catholics 16.99%, Protestants 5.78%, Orthodox 3.53%, Anglicans 1.25%),
- ☞ Muslims 21%,
- ☞ Hindus 13%,
- ☞ Buddhists 6%,

According to these statistics, protestant Christians compose only about 6 percent of the world population.

There are three categories for each world religion, and each of ours for today falls into one category.

### I. Categories of Religions

**(1) Monotheism – Teaches There Is One God.** Monotheistic religions include Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam share a world view: There is One God, God Reveals Himself, and Man is Sinful. They may reach similar conclusions about morality and ethics.

But they differ dramatically on the Authority of the Bible and the Person of Jesus Christ, and the way of salvation.

**(2) Polytheistic – Teaches There Are Many gods (Hinduism, Eastern Religions, New Age, Greeks & Egyptians, Platonists).**

Christians do and polytheists agree there is a God – and we are not him. We would also agree that humankind’s , thoughts and actions affect their standing with god.

But polytheists’ view of authority and history are radically different, morality and ethics are somewhat all over the board, and they certainly do not recognize Jesus and the Bible.

**(3) Pantheism – All is god, god is in all** (Buddhism, Classical & Zen, Animism).

Christians hold few beliefs in common with pantheistic religions. Even our understanding and conception of God is not even really the same idea as theirs. The idea of Man being

close to or reconciled to God is not even a category of their thought, for they effectively believe we are already god.

Pantheists do generally have a concept of truth, but it is never finally knowable. They might recognize the Bible and Jesus are guides, but would say only use them if they are of pragmatic help to you.

Let's unpack one world religion in each a category with examining it from four angles:

1. Facts
2. Beliefs.
3. Agreements, Disagreements.
4. Questions.

## II. Islam -- Means "Submission to God", and Followers are "Muslims"

### **Facts**

Islam is more than a system of belief. The faith provides a social and legal system and governs things like family life, law and order, ethics, dress, and cleanliness, as well as religious ritual and observance.

There are over one billion Muslims globally, largely in the Middle East, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.

The religion was founded around 622 AD by Mohammad, who believed he was final messenger through whom Allah revealed the faith to the world. There had been earlier messengers, among them Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

Mohammad began to teach in Mecca and later settled in Medina. By 632 AD – Mohammad and his followers had taken control of Mecca and most of the Arabian peninsula by jihad – or Holy War – a proselytizing religion from the beginning.

### **Beliefs**

God is called "Allah" but the idea of an incarnate, personal God is blasphemous and absurd. God is all powerful, he created all things & is merciful and compassionate. God is Judge, but there is no mediator.

Man is capable of sin, but he is innately capable of pleasing God perfectly – or at least sufficiently. "Salvation" is works-based. The pleasure of Allah – are achieved by religious observance. (Five Pillars):

1. Confession "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is the apostle of God."
2. Prayer Ritual 5 times a day
3. Fasting during Ramadan (the 9<sup>th</sup> month)
4. Almsgiving to the poor (2.5% of savings)
5. Pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in life, a rigid moral code.

Converting to Islam requires *external* actions – specifically, that you repeat the confession, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet." And submit to all other teachings in Islam.

### **Agreements, Disagreements.**

- ☞ **Is the Bible God's Word?** The Muslims believe it was necessary for God to give another book, the Koran.
- ☞ **What is the purpose of God's revelation?** Muslims believe that Islam includes both Judaism and Christianity and say that even Abraham was a Muslim. They trace their lineage back to Abraham through Ishmael, the "son of promise" not Isaac. In their mind, everything is Islam. What we need to explain to the Muslim, and it is not an easy task, is that God desired to establish a personal relationship between Himself and man.
- ☞ **Did Jesus really die on the cross?** Islam does not teach Jesus died on the cross. There is a verse in the Koran which says, "They killed Him not, they crucified Him not, but it was likened unto them. They killed Him not knowingly, but God raised Him and God is the most merciful of merciful." In the Muslim's mind, this verse is saying that God was so merciful He could never allow a wonderful prophet such as Jesus to be crucified by His enemies the Jews.
- ☞ **What About the Trinity?** Muslims often say, "You Christians believe in three different gods -- God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. That is blasphemy' One cannot believe in three different gods. "

### Questions

1. How do you know if you are doing enough good deeds to receive salvation on the Day of Judgment?
2. If what Jesus said is true how can Christianity be part of Islam when its teachings are so different?

Key opening: *grace*

### III. Hinduism (POLYTHEISTIC)

#### Facts

There are about 1 billion Hindus worldwide, most of whom are in India, UK or the US. Hinduism arose 3500 years ago (1500 B.C.) after the conquering of the Indian subcontinent, but there is no clear specific founder or starting point.

Hinduism does not offer the same insistence on being the only "truth" as other religions do and there is no eternally dominant or "correct" form of Hinduism. Nor do Hindus separate religion from other aspects of life. For Hindus, Hinduism is an inextricable part of their existence, a complete approach to life that involves social class, earning a living, family, politics, diet, etc. The culture of India is largely Hindu because of this.

Hinduism is not a set of static beliefs but it continues to develop. It also explains history in circular, non-linear terms, with no starting and end point.

## Beliefs

There is no single Hindu idea of God. There is Brahman: “The Absolute,” the impersonal, all-embracing spirit, many lesser deities. You could say there is “One god, Among Many gods.”

Hinduism is works-based, because behind Hindu practice is the belief all souls are eternal and accountable for their own actions. *Karma* is the debt of one’s bad actions for which one must atone, so that every soul is trapped in a cycle of birth and then death and then rebirth. Karma is not the same thing as judgment in Christianity. It is automatic and impersonal and reoccurring.

Every Hindu wants to escape from this cycle. The quality of the next life depends on the soul's Karma-the goodness or badness of their deeds in this life. Hindus aim to live in a way that will cause each of their lives to be better than the life before.

Their ultimate aim is escape from the cycle altogether by attaining Moksha (liberation). So when someone dies, their soul is reborn into a new body (although not necessarily a human body) – this is called Reincarnation (Heb.9:27)

## Agreements, Disagreements

- **Does History Matter?** The Christian view of history is extremely different –linear vs.cycle. For Christians, History has a purpose, because it has a Beginning and End. Hinduism teaches a cycle of meaninglessness
- **What Is God Like?** For Hindus, humankind is the manifestation of impersonal Brahman force, but has no individual worth. Yet Christians believe humankind is created in God's image and thus has immeasurable value to God, personally – so personally, that he would give himself to save us. Furthermore, Christians believe God is unique and apart from Creation: not simply a part of it
- **What are the consequences of our actions?** We agree with Hindus that there are lasting consequences for our actions. They do not believe in the idea of sin against a Holy God; only wrong acts of ignorance that can be overcome. In our apologetics, we should be clear that Christians actually believe in a “deeper” vision of sin and consequences.
- **How Does One Become a Hindu or Christian?** Christians actually agree with Hindus – that no one can be coerced to faith, and that “toleration and acceptance” are important values. But Hinduism replaces resurrection with reincarnation and both grace and faith with human works. For them, Salvation" is cycle of birth, death, rebirth. For Christian apologists, the challenge is to help them see salvation actually is eternity in heaven with a good personal God because of what Christ has done for us.

- **Who is Jesus?** Hindus believe Jesus is a divine manifestation, but not more special than others. Christians believe Jesus was God Himself and we were made to have a relationship with him.

## Questions

1. Do you really believe all religions are equally true, even when they teach different things?
2. How do you explain human nature in a way that accounts for Mother Theresa and Adolph Hitler?
3. How do you know when you are good enough to be liberated?

Key opening: *grace*

## V. Buddhism (PANTHEISTIC)

### Facts

There are about 500 million Buddhists worldwide, predominately in China, Tibet, and East Asia.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to talk sensibly about Buddhism because Buddhists are dogmatic that one cannot be linguistically dogmatic about anything. But over the last 30 years Buddhism has seen growth in the West as its non-dogmatic nature, rationality, possibility of a spiritual guide, and opportunity for personal transformation have all made it attractive to post-modern society

### Beliefs

As a Pantheistic religion, Buddhism teaches we are all God – God is in all of us. Heard this before in pop culture? Yoda to Luke Skywalker: “Use the Force Luke, the Force is all around you, in the tree, the rock, me, and you.”

Buddhism has no omnipotent, creator God who exists apart from this or any other universe. In fact, belief in a God of that kind is not part of Buddhism.

Buddhists also believe in Karma – the cause and effect that traps souls in a endless cycle of birth and rebirth. But Buddhism teaches that the illusions with which human beings comfort and delude themselves, include the illusion of *material* and *consistency* and the *reliability of the senses* as a means of apprehending the outside world.

Buddhism teaches “Four Noble Truths”

1. To live is to suffer
2. Suffering is caused by desire (we allow ourselves to get attached to things)
3. One can eliminate suffering by eliminating desire (to accept)
4. Desire is eliminated by following the eight-fold path<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The religion was founded by Gautama - a rich prince who later became Buddha. He believed freedom happens through a release from the worldly entrapments of anxiety. And it is meditation that brings a sense of freedom from anxiety, yielding the ability to live in the present moment and achieve oneness with the rest of Creation. Called Bodhi or 'awakening', came to his understanding of the nature of suffering, its cause and a way of stopping it. Buddha then devoted the rest of his life to teaching the way to cease suffering.

The eight-fold Path brings us to the state known as *nirvana*, where all action and interaction ceases. Nirvana is a state of enlightenment and the place where personality is extinguished.

## Agreements, Disagreements

- **Who is Jesus?** Buddhists would say Jesus is another teacher, leading people to Enlightenment – at best another Buddha.
- **What is the Problem of Man?** Buddhists get the description of the problem half right. Christians agree that in this world there is suffering. We disagree with the second half of their description of the problem. We don't need to eliminate desire, but to desire the right things. The problem is we desire to rule our own lives, not submit to God's rule. They say that Desire must be eliminated. Christians say it must be transformed, so that we hunger and thirst for righteousness.
- **Who Really Is God?** We need to speak with Buddhists about the fact that the God of the Bible is all-powerful, immanent and knowable, and wants to be in relationship with His people. He is not a God of only of magical powers but has a personal name and personal powers he uses for our good.

## Questions

1. Buddhism is right that there is nothing on earth that permanently exists. But what if I told you there was a world with God that would exist forever?
2. On his death bed, Buddha said: "I remind you that all things are impermanent. I advise you to take refuge in yourselves and the teachings. Everything that is born is subject to decay. There is no external Savior, it is up to each of you to work out your own liberation." How can a Buddhist be saved from meaninglessness?
3. Denying desire denies the desire to enjoy friendship and family, work and play, recreation and exploration. Does a Buddhist not desire these things? Why is it so hard not to desire?
4. Buddhism teaches that desire is the problem. Yet all humans desire things, from early childhood. Could this desire point to something, Someone we were created to desire?

ANY QUESTIONS?

## V. Don't All Religions Teach the Same Thing?

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<sup>2</sup> : 1) right view, 2) the right intention, 3) the right speech, 4) the right action, 5) the right livelihood, 6) the right effort, 7) the right mindfulness, 8) the right concentration- Meditation.

After spending a few minutes contrasting Christianity with Islam and Hinduism and Buddhism you may find it hard to believe people still assert the major world religions teach the same thing – yet some do. This is nonsense.

**First, as a matter of simple observation, different religions make very different claims, and it is impossible to see how they can all be true.** (the law of non-contradiction)

In fact, the nature of a truth-claim is to say one thing is true and real and valid, while another is false. Christianity teaches Jesus is the one way and that no human gets to God but through him. Hindus and Buddhists would say all religions are equal, but deny the exclusivity of Christianity's most fundamental claim. It's nonsense to pretend they teach the same thing. There is a world of difference between the smiling Buddha and the crucified Christ.

Second, however, world religions do have some similarities on the level of morality and ethics – what it means to be good and live the good life. Yet even here you can see there is serious variance.

Buddhists understand their efforts to be the most “good” when they deny pain exists, because it is a mere illusion.

Yet Christians follow Jesus, a real Man, who has borne very real pain and judgment for them. Similarities in morality also dissolve upon examination. Jesus made it clear: he did not come to make bad men good, but to make dead men alive in God.

Do all religions *really* teach the same thing? Nobody wants to give the same respect to a religion based on human sacrifice, fear of evil spirits or mass suicide as they do to, say, Zen Buddhism. Nobody seriously suggests that Hitler's claims to divine revelation should be given equal treatment with those of Mohammed or Jesus. We are only tolerant up to a point, and rightly so. Differences make a difference.

So we have seen that the different religions of the world do not teach the same thing. Therefore, you must decide which one you believe is true. They can't all be true since they contradict each other. We talked last week about “Jesus being the only way to God”.

## Conclusion

So if someone asked you what is the biggest difference between Christianity and these other religions what would you say?

## Watch- video “A Man Fell in a Hole”

<sup>3</sup> If asked about the story of the three blind men and the elephant, here are a few points.

- ☰ First, let's imagine that the parable was somewhat right. Well, it would still confirm there is an elephant. And, if all religions are blind men, doesn't that say something about the state of humankind?
- ☰ But in reality, the problem with the analogy, however, is simple: how could one prove the basic premise that God is like the elephant? How could one prove that different religions are like blind men? Proof is impossible. The parable simply asserts dogmatically: this is the way reality is.
- ☰ Interestingly, in the Buddhist tradition from which this story comes, the story works perfectly—because it illustrates a Buddhist understanding of Ultimate Reality—all expressions and understandings of God are valid, even if they appear incompatible. The story appears to be objective and fair to all religions, but is actually a stacked metaphor designed to favor a certain conclusion.

See if you can identify some of the world religions that are represented in this video.

### Small group

1. Why would you say that your beliefs in Christianity are superior (other than we would say that we believe they are true) to the other world religions beliefs?

(we worship a personal God that we can have a relationship with, Even though we are unable to save ourselves He personally paid the price so we could be saved.)

2. Sharing your testimony of salvation can be a powerful thing but also sharing a testimony of how Christianity has helped you live to this past week may be an even more powerful thing for someone who isn't sure they believe in the truths about Christianity.

What are some ways that your beliefs in Christ have helped you this past week?  
(forgiveness, identity, acceptance, guilt)

3. What should be our attitude to people who believe other religions than you?  
What should that practically look like in your life?

4. What unsaved people in your life are you seeking to share the love of Jesus?  
What will you do this week to demonstrate to them God's love?  
What steps will you take to point the toward Jesus?