A Short Look at Six World Religions – Understand the Beliefs of Non-Christians

An overview of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses from a conservative Christian perspective.

Islam

There are three monotheistic religions in the world, religions that teach that there is only one God: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The term "Islam" means "submission" to the will of God, and the person who submits is called a "Muslim."

The founder of Islam is Muhammad, who was born in 570 A.D. At age 40 he claimed to begin receiving revelations from a spirit being he believed was the angel Gabriel. These later were recorded and became the Qur'an, Islam's holy book.

There are Six Articles of Faith that all Muslims hold to. The first is that "there is no God but Allah." The second Article of Faith is belief in a hierarchy of angels, of which the archangel Gabriel is the highest. Each Muslim is assigned two angels, one to record his good deeds and the other to record the bad deeds. At the bottom of the angelic hierarchy are the jinn, from which we get the word "genie." They are a Muslim version of demons.

The third Article of Faith is belief in 104 holy books, with the Koran as the final revelation. The fourth is belief in the prophets. According to the Qur'an, God has sent a prophet to every nation to preach the message that there is only one God. 124,000 prophets have been sent, most of them unknown but some

of them biblical characters, including Jesus. Muhammed, though, is the prophet for all times, the "Seal of the Prophets."

The fifth Article of Faith is belief in predestination. All things, both good and evil, are the direct result of the will of Allah. Islam is a very fatalistic religion.

The sixth Article of Faith is the day of judgment. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad will be rewarded with Paradise; those whose bad deeds outweigh their good will be judged to hell. Islam is a religion of human works. The Bible tells us, though, that we can never earn God's acceptance on the basis of our deeds.

There are Five Pillars of Islam, obligations every Muslim must keep. The first is reciting the creed, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his messenger." The second is prayer: 17 cycles of prayer, spread out over five times of prayer each day. They must wash in a prescribed manner before they kneel down and face toward Mecca.

The third pillar is almsgiving, 2.5% of one's income for the poor. The fourth pillar is fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan. Muslims must forego food, water and sex during daylight hours. The fifth pillar is making the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives.

Sometimes you will hear people say that Allah is another name for the God of the Bible. Is it the same? "Allah" is the Arabic name for God, and Arab Christians use the name Allah to describe the God of the Bible. Mohammed taught that there is one true God who is the same God that Jews and Christians ("the People of the Book") worship. He began Islam on the foundation of the God of the Bible. We can say that in principle, we worship the same God. Islam began on the foundation of belief in the one true God to combat the pagan polytheism of the area. However, Mohammed departed from this

foundation, and we differ in our understanding of how God has fully revealed Himself. In the Qur'an, Allah is a distant spiritual being, but Yahweh is a Father to His children. Allah does not love wrongdoers, but God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Allah has predetermined everything about life; the God of the Bible invites us to share our hearts with Him.

Hinduism

Hinduism may seem like an alien religion of people on the other side of the world, but it has infiltrated our culture in all sorts of ways. You're probably familiar with most of the basic Hindu concepts without even realizing it. Have you seen the *Star Wars* movies? They are filled with Hindu ideas. Ever watch *Dharma and Greg* on TV? "Dharma" is an important Hindu term for moral duty. 30% of Americans believe in reincarnation, which is a Hindu concept. Transcendental Meditation is thinly disguised Hinduism. George Harrison's song "My Sweet Lord" invokes a Hindu chant. New Age philosophy is Hinduism wrapped in Western garb.

Hinduism is tremendously diverse. It encompasses those who believe in one reality, Brahman, as well as those who believe in many gods—as many as 330 million! Some Hindus believe the universe is real; most believe it is illusion, or *maya.* (This world view isn't consistent with reality. You won't find Hindus meditating on railroad tracks, for instance.) Some believe Brahman and the universe are one; others see them as two distinct realities.

Despite the diversity within Hinduism, there are five major beliefs of this religion. The first is that ultimate reality, called Brahman, is an impersonal oneness. In *The Empire Strikes Back,* Yoda tells Luke that everything—the tree, the rock, etc.—is all part of "The Force." This is monism: the belief that all is one. Nothing is distinct and separate from anything else.

Another Hindu belief is that just as the air in an open jar is identical to the air around the jar, we extend from and are one with Brahman. All is one, all is god—and that means that we are god. In her book and movie "Out on a Limb," Shirley MacLaine relates a time when she stood on a beach, embracing this concept and declaring, "I am god! I am god!" It's a very Hindu concept.

Humanity's primary problem, according to Hinduism, is that we have forgotten we are divine. The consequence is that we are subject to the Law of Karma, another important Hindu belief. This is the moral equivalent to the natural law of cause and effect. You always reap what you sow. There is no grace, there is no forgiveness, there is never any escape from consequences. It's a very heavy burden to carry. Not only that, but Hinduism says that the consequences of our choices, both bad karma and good karma, follow us from lifetime to lifetime. This is another Hindu concept: samsara, the ever-revolving wheel of life, death, and rebirth, also known as reincarnation. A person's karma determines the kind of body—whether human, animal, or insect—into which he or she is incarnated in the next lifetime.

The final major Hindu concept is liberation from the wheel of birth, death, and rebirth. One can only get off the reincarnation merry-go-round by realizing that the idea of the individual self is an illusion, and only the oneness of Brahman is real. There is no heaven, though—only losing one's identity in the universal oneness.

Praise God that through the Lord Jesus, Christianity offers hope, forgiveness, grace, and a personal relationship with a personal God in heaven. Jesus means there's a point to life.

Buddhism

Buddhism does not believe in a personal God. It does not have worship, prayer, or praise of a divine being. It offers no

redemption, no forgiveness, no hope of heaven, and no final judgment. Buddhism is more of a moral philosophy, an ethical way of life.

In his essay “De Futilitate,” C.S. Lewis called Buddhism “a heresy of Hinduism.” Buddhism was founded by a Hindu, Siddhartha Gautama, during the sixth century B.C. After being profoundly impacted by seeing four kinds of suffering in one day, Siddhartha committed himself to finding the source of suffering and how to eliminate it. One day he sat down under a fig tree and vowed not to rise again until he had attained enlightenment. After some time, he did so and became the Buddha, which means “enlightened one.” He started teaching the “The Four Noble Truths,” the most basic of Buddhist teachings.

The First Noble Truth is that life consists of suffering. The Second Noble Truth is that we suffer because we desire those things that are impermanent. This is absolutely central to Buddhism: the belief that desire is the cause of all suffering.

The Third Noble Truth is that the way to liberate oneself from suffering is by eliminating all desire. (Unfortunately, it’s a self-defeating premise: if you set a goal to eliminate desire, then you desire to eliminate desire.) The Fourth Noble Truth is that desire can be eliminated by following the Eight-Fold path.

In the Eight-Fold Path, the first two steps are foundational to all the others. Step one is Right Understanding, where one sees the universe as impermanent and illusory and believes that the individual does not actually exist. If you ever hear someone say, “The world is an illusion, and so am I. I don’t really exist,” they’re probably exploring Buddhism. (You might want to pinch them and see what they do.) Right Thought means renouncing all attachment to the desires and thoughts of oneself, even as he recognizes that the self doesn’t exist.

Other parts of the Eight-Fold path are Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Awareness, and Right Meditation. Ethical conduct is very important in Buddhism. There are commands to refrain from the taking of any life (that includes ants and roaches in your house), stealing, immorality, lying, and drinking.

The Eight-Fold Path is a set of steps that describe not only a good life but one which will move the follower toward Nirvana, the goal of Buddhism. Nirvana is not heaven; it is a state of extinction, where one's essence—which does not actually exist in the first place—is extinguished like a candle flame, marking the end of desire and thus the end of suffering.

One of the important concepts in Buddhism is samsara, a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. It differs from the Hindu concept of reincarnation in that Buddhism teaches there is no self to continue from one life to the next. Another important concept is karma, the belief that you reap what you sow, and your karma follows you through the cycles of samsara. Note the inherent inconsistency here: there is no self to continue from one life to the next, but one's karma does?!

Buddhism says there are many paths to the top of the mountain, so there are many ways to God. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me."

Judaism

Both Christianity and Judaism have their roots in Old Testament faith. But Christianity is really a sister, rather than a daughter, to Judaism, which is the religion developed by rabbis from 200 B.C. on.

When the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., that spelled the end of sacrifices and the priesthood. Instead of being guided by prophets, priests and kings, the Jewish people turned to

rabbis as their authorities on matters of laws and practice.

There was basically one kind of Judaism until the eighteenth century when the Age of Enlightenment swept through Europe. That's when the three major branches of Judaism arose.

That one basic kind of Judaism is what is now called "Orthodox Judaism." It has a strong emphasis on tradition and strict observance of the Law of Moses.

Reform Judaism began in Germany at the time of the Enlightenment. Reform Judaism is the humanistic branch. In fact, there are many Reform Jews who don't believe in God at all. For them, Judaism is a way of life and culture with a connection to one's ancestors that is about legacy, not faith.

The middle-ground branch, seeking to find moderate ground between the two extremes of the Orthodox and Reform branches, is Conservative Judaism.

If there is any religious principle that Judaism explicitly affirms and teaches, it is the unity of God. You may have heard of the *Shema*, found in Deuteronomy 6:4¾"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." This one all-important principle is the reason so many Jewish people have a hard time understanding Christianity, which they see as a religion of three gods, not one God in three Persons.

The Old Testament is the Scripture of Judaism. Many Jews, though, do not consider the Old Testament to be the Word of God or inspired, although they do give it respect as a part of Jewish tradition and history.

There are some lifestyle practices that set people apart as distinctively Jewish. Traditional Jews, usually Orthodox but including some from other branches, observe the Sabbath. This means abstaining from work, driving, and lighting a fire from Friday night to Saturday night. Orthodox Jews also keep kosher, which means keeping the Old Testament dietary laws.

The most well known is the prohibition against mixing meat and milk at the same meal, although many people are also aware that most Jewish people do not eat pork or shellfish.

It is difficult for Jewish people to place their faith in Jesus as Messiah because it is not considered a Jewish thing to do. In fact, they see “Jewish Christian” as an oxymoron. For many, being Jewish equals “Not Christian.” But there’s another big reason it is so hard for Jewish people to come to faith in Christ. They don’t see a need for “salvation,” because there is nothing to be saved from. If there is a God, then Jewish people already have a special relationship with Him as His chosen people. Jesus is superfluous for Jews.

If you know someone who is Jewish, pray that God will cause the scales to fall from the eyes of their heart and they will see the truth: that there’s nothing more Jewish or more godly than submitting in faith to one who was, and is, the very Son of God, and who proved His love for them by dying in their place on the cross.

Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses

Have you ever answered your door to find a couple of nicely-dressed people asking to talk to you about spiritual things? Chances are they were either Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses. Since both groups send many missionaries not only into American homes but to foreign countries, it makes sense to cover them in a discussion of world religions.

Many people think of Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses as Christians in slightly different denominations, but this is not the case. To put it bluntly, both religions teach another gospel and another Jesus. They are cults, not Christian denominations.

Mormonism was founded by Joseph Smith, a teenage boy in New York. He claimed that he was visited by first God the Father

and the Son, and then by the angel Moroni, who gave him golden plates, which he translated into the Book of Mormon. He said that Christianity had been corrupted since the death of the last apostle, and God appointed him to restore the truth. But Joseph Smith provided nine different versions of these events, which set the tone for the rest of his teachings.

Deuteronomy 18:22 gives God's standards for His prophets: 100% accuracy. Joseph Smith wrote a lot of prophecies, many of which never came true. He was a false prophet, and the religion he founded is not from God.

Mormonism is not Christian because it denies some of the essential doctrines of Christianity, including the deity of Christ and salvation by grace. Furthermore, Mormon doctrine contradicts the Christian teaching that there is only one God, and it undermines the authority and reliability of the Bible.

Jehovah's Witnesses was founded by Charles Taze Russell, another false prophet. His Watchtower Bible and Tract Society has produced a prodigious amount of literature. It has prophesied the return of Christ in 1914, 1925, and 1975. Again, by God's standards, the representatives of the Watchtower Society are false prophets.

Jehovah's Witnesses deny the basics of the Christian faith. They deny the Trinity. They believe there is one singular God, Jehovah. Jesus is actually the created being Michael the Archangel, and who became flesh at the incarnation. The Holy Spirit is not God but an active force much like electricity or fire. They deny the bodily resurrection of Christ. Like Mormons, they deny the existence of hell and eternal punishment.

Both of these religions teach salvation by works, not God's grace. And they teach that salvation is only found in their organizations.

What do you do if they come to your door? First, don't do

anything without sending up a prayer of dependence on God. If you are not well-grounded in your own beliefs, unless you know not only what you believe but why it’s true, then you should probably politely refuse to talk to them, and work on your own understanding of your faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are very successful at drawing in church-goers who can’t recognize false teaching because they don’t know what’s true.

If you do know the Bible and what you believe, then prayerfully and humbly answer their questions and comments by showing them what the Bible says. And pray that God’s Spirit will show them the truth. He is grieved that people for whom Jesus died are so deceived.

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