

# The Purpose of Life

*Paul Rutherford looks at the purpose of life from his Christian perspective as well as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Hollywood.*

On a warm day recently I visited my alma mater. And between the hallowed halls of old, a chance encounter reconnected me with an old friend. Eager for news, she asked me what I'd done since graduating, and my easy reply included mission work and how much I enjoy it. She smiled and said, "That's great, as long as you're happy." Have you had this type of conversation before?



If you have, then perhaps you also understand my consternation at my friend's response. I don't do mission work to be happy. I do it to honor and please the Lord Jesus Christ. On some level I felt misunderstood. Yet, her response indicates, I think, a prominent view held in our culture that happiness is what really matters. As far as her response is concerned, I could just as well have taken a job at a coffee shop, so long as I was happy.

Her response, while not uncommon, demonstrates a prevailing value in our culture today—pluralism. Mankind's ultimate purpose can be attained through multiple acceptable means, be they religion, economics, or otherwise.

You might be saying to yourself, "How did you get from your friend's comment about your happiness to mankind's ultimate purpose?" Good question. I skipped a few steps. When my friend bases her approval of what others do on their happiness, that means that what they *do* to be happy matters less than the fact that they *are* happy. Being happy then becomes the primary

purpose or aim in life. You see? Happiness becomes a sort of general unit of measure for life's success. Since I am happy in life, I received my friend's stamp of approval.

But what is our ultimate purpose? Isn't that the million dollar question! And it's precisely the question I want to explore in this article. The answer you give will depend on your perspective. So I'll consider several different perspectives, or worldviews, including my own, Christianity. Contrary to current thinking, the fact that there are different perspectives which result in differing meanings to life does not mean that all perspectives are equally true or even valid. Truth is found in Scripture so that's where we look to discover the true meaning of life.

As a Christian, I believe the ultimate purpose in life is salvation; that is, after I die I want to be with God for eternity.

"Being with God for eternity is great," you might say. "But how does one do that?" That's a great question. Certainly not all Christians will state it the same way, but the answer is believing in Jesus Christ of Nazareth as God who died for your sins and rose again to new life (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4). A Christian living out this principle patterns his life and relationships after Jesus Christ—serving, loving, and teaching.

Christianity is unmistakably present in America, but obviously this isn't the case in every culture. Next we'll consider mankind's purpose according to a very different worldview closer to home than you might think: Buddhism.

## **Buddhism**

I was at a diner last week grabbing a late night burger with my friend from Bible study, and I mentioned a desire to start a new workout regimen. He handed me a business card for a

place doing some new form of [yoga](#), apparently really good for you.

Is it me, or does yoga seem to be increasing in currency among Christians as just one more way to work out?

It's totally fine for Christians to practice yoga as physical exercise, isn't it? The answer is too complex to say here, but the sheer fact that we pose the question underscores the unmistakable impression yoga has made on American culture.

What if I did practice yoga? What if I were a practicing Buddhist? Would that make a difference anyway? I think so.

To ask a larger question, what is our ultimate purpose? Once again, the answer depends upon your perspective. For the yoga-practicing Buddhist, the answer is nothing. Literally. The ultimate purpose for life is to cease to exist, or what is called *nirvana*.

Traditionally understood to be from India, yoga is a discipline of the mind and the body, and is actively practiced today by both Buddhists and Hindus.<sup>{1}</sup> But increasingly, Americans have jettisoned the spiritual disciplines of yoga, ignoring its spiritual aspects, in favor of the sheerly physical, often in lieu of the morning jog.

Now, ceasing to exist, or *nirvana*, may seem more like an anti-purpose for life because it is defined by not living rather than that for which one lives. Nevertheless, much thought and action is involved in this monumental goal of *nirvana*.

One such step in attaining *nirvana* is realizing the second of the Four Noble Truths: all frustration in life arises from desire. Did that make your head spin? It makes mine spin. Simply put, frustration is an unmet expectation or desire, so frustration's origin then, is desire.

Life is filled with desires—food, shelter, or clothing may be

the first to come to mind—but there are a myriad of others from cars, to jewelry, technology, even relationships.

Follow me here. Since desire leads to frustration, the best way to eliminate frustration is to eliminate desire. This is precisely the path to *nirvana*, the elimination of desire. Therefore, we must cease to exist in order to free ourselves from this frustration or suffering.

Do you see the difference in life's purpose? The ultimate purpose in life for the Christian is to be with God for eternity, but for a Buddhist it's to cease to exist. Very different indeed.

## Hinduism

Fifty singers gather on a Sunday morning in Queens. The director groups them together and gives them one final word of instruction before they begin. Listeners don't entirely fall silent. Priests in the background continue to laugh among themselves, as the choir begins, "Om! Ganesha Sharanam!"

Notice something different about this picture? It may not fit your expectations. That's because this choir isn't singing praise to Jesus Christ; they aren't even in a church. Rather they're Hindus worshipping in their New York temple.

Surprised? So were many of the devotees gathered that Sunday morning in late August 2009, the New York Times reported.[\[2\]](#) Most of the faithful Hindus worshipping there for years had never before heard a Hindu choir. It is a mix of both Hindu and Christian traditions.

This story testifies to the strange and wonderful effects of very different religions meeting in a single culture, and undoubtedly demonstrates the pervasiveness of Hinduism in American culture today.

Choirs seem so commonplace in America. How can a Hindu, like

those mentioned earlier, have never heard one in his own religion before? The answer lies in the difference between Hindu and Christian worship.

Hindu worship tends to be much more individualistic. And while predominantly occurring at a temple rather than at one's home, Hindu worship is more focused on prayers and rituals rather than on an assembly or gathering as a Christian understands a church service.

Take a step back. Ask a larger question. Why does the Hindu go to temple? What's his motivation? The answer? To appease a myriad of gods in hopes of being reincarnated in the next life as a higher life form. If you're a human being listening to this right now, then you've already had thousands of good lifetimes prior, combined to bring you to your current form.

To be fair, Hinduism is a huge religion with over one billion practitioners, spanning thousands of years, and existing in multiple different cultures. Some scholars believe it is the oldest recorded religion. So to ascribe the Hindu's motivation as wanting to please the gods is a drastic oversimplification, but is nonetheless true for many if not most Hindus.

You see, for the Hindu the world exists eternally. People die and are reborn all the time in a never-ending cycle. The ultimate purpose for life, then, is to be freed from the never-ending cycle of rebirth and become one with Brahma, or the ultimate singularity of the universe. This release is called *moksha*. It's achieved by offering sacrifices to the gods, including prayers, and right living.

Does this sound like your life? If not, you're probably not Hindu. This further underscores the fact that all religions at their core may not all be the same.

# Islam

“Boycott Facebook” reads the placard of an Islamist protestor in Karachi.

Late spring 2010 in Pakistan, a Facebook page declares, “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” A Pakistani high court deems the material highly offensive, and the entire Facebook website was shut down within its borders as a result, the *Wall Street Journal* reports.[\[3\]](#)

Ban Facebook! You may find yourself asking, why would anyone ever do that? What about rights to free speech, or exercise of religion? Doesn’t a Facebook ban deny people just such rights? Well, under a government far less liberal in doling out these liberties, claiming rights quickly makes a sticky situation.

But the short answer to the motivation for banning Facebook is because they’re Muslim, and as such they regard as sacred Mohammed, their most famed prophet. He’s so sacred, in fact, that to depict him in a portrait is a kind of blasphemy. Hence art from Muslim cultures is either calligraphy or geometric (think mosaics).

There is more going on here beneath the surface, leading an entire country to ban Facebook. It’s not just reverence for a significant religio-cultural phenomenon, or even devotion to their faith. No, it goes deeper than that. Muslims have a different perspective from most Westerners on how this world operates at its most fundamental level.

For the Muslim there is one God, Allah. He is the supreme unquestioned creator and Lord of the universe who revealed his intentions for mankind through his prophet Mohammed. Reverence for Allah is paramount, even above the value of the individual. This leads Muslims to value obedience to Allah over freedoms of the individual. In this case obedience is not portraying Mohammed.

You may respond by posing once again the previous question: what about a man's right to speech or religion? But for the Muslim, you're simply asking the wrong question. A better question the Muslim would ask is, what about putting Mohammed in his proper place, and by extension obeying Allah?

The ultimate purpose in life for a Muslim is to obey Allah and to be rewarded after life by entering paradise. Unlike Christians, Muslims do not believe mankind is sinful and in need of a savior, but only needs to perform the right actions, of which we are certainly capable. While Muslims hope for the mercy of Allah, the right to enter paradise is a result of obedience, not his grace. So central is this unmitigated obedience to Muslims, that many give their lives to defend Allah and their way of life.

Rights to free speech aside, when given the choice between a Facebook ban and martyrdom, suddenly Facebook deprivation doesn't seem so bad.

## Hollywood

An honest working man returns home from a rough day at the office. He's a struggling ad specialist for a sports magazine. He's in his mid-thirties, single, and completely eligible. But the right woman just hasn't come along. He's a handsome, brown-haired man with kind blue eyes and a knack for making you want to trust him when he flashes you his easy smile. We long for him to find satisfaction in someone as we trace the story of his search.

One night he meets a dashing young lady. Our hearts jump for him. A relationship ensues and they grow closer. One night in desperation to express his deepest and truest feelings for the gal, he confesses, "You complete me." Perhaps now you realize I'm describing the story from Hollywood's hit 1996 film, *Jerry Maguire*.

We've been considering the ultimate purpose of man from different perspectives, and, with an ever-increasing number of Americans considering themselves not religious, I've gone to a secular source for consideration: Hollywood.

Jerry Maguire's famous confession, "You complete me," is a wonderful illustration of mankind's ultimate purpose being himself, or what is called humanism. Maguire realizes something is missing in his life. He longs for satisfaction, for joy, for love, but his seeming inability to find it causes him pain. We realize that the world in which we live is broken and imperfect, and who would disagree?

Maguire finds in this woman, in this relationship, the completion of himself. He looks to her to be what he cannot be himself. In so doing, he creates out of her a savior. He looks to her to save him from his misery of singleness and heartache. He needs her in order to be whole himself.

This story is a clear demonstration of mankind looking to himself to be his ultimate purpose. I am generalizing a bit to choose words from a single film, but many messages from Hollywood films don't contradict this theme. We want to be able to save ourselves. Isn't that the American ideal: pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps?

Beware what Hollywood would have us believe, that our ultimate purpose is ourselves, and only we can save ourselves. Hollywood would have us believe that life can be found in relationships, people, or even ourselves. It's a lie. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Only Jesus can save mankind. Serving Him is the only purpose that will bring satisfaction and joy in life, only in Him alone.

"What is my ultimate purpose?" That's the question. The answers we've considered from different perspectives range from happiness to appeasing the gods. Why does it matter?



Because your ultimate purpose determines how you live, and while we may all be alike, since we are all human, when it comes to what really matters in life, we are very different indeed.

## Notes

1. "Yoga," Wikipedia, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga) (accessed May 6, 2010).
2. Jonathan Allen, The New York Times online, [nyti.ms/hJUJ8b](http://nyti.ms/hJUJ8b) (accessed May 20, 2010).
3. Tom Wright, "Pakistan Maintains Facebook Ban," The Wall Street Journal online, [on.wsj.com/dJiwI6](http://on.wsj.com/dJiwI6) (accessed May 20, 2010).

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# The World of Animism – A Biblical Worldview Perspective

*The belief in spirits and their effect on our world appears in just about every culture. Christianity should replace this anti-Christian worldview, but instead many Christians just incorporate it into their own belief system. Dr. Pat Zukeran contrasts these two belief systems.*



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

## Worldview of Animism

From Genesis to the present, the biblical worldview has clashed with the worldview of animism. Animism (or folk

religion) is a religion that sees a spirit or spiritual force behind every event, and many objects of the physical world carry some spiritual significance.

In most parts of the world, animism blends in with formal religions. Among followers of the major religions lie many animistic beliefs and practices. Animistic beliefs actually dominate the world. Most Taiwanese believe in the Chinese folk religions. Most Hindus and Muslims in Central and Southeast Asia, and most Buddhists in China and Japan combine their religion with various animistic beliefs and practices. In many parts of the world, Christianity has not displaced the local folk religion but coexists beside it in an uneasy tension.

The animistic worldview contains both the observed or physical world and the unseen or spirit world. There is no sharp distinction between the two realities; what happens in one affects the other. The seen or physical world consists of what we can see, feel, and experience. It includes forces of nature and physical beings. In the seen world the earth plays a prominent role because it is viewed as a living entity and is often worshiped as Mother Earth. Nature is believed to be alive. Hills, caves, mountains, and lakes are often revered as sacred places. Animals may be embodiments of spirits. Many are worshiped as sacred, such as the cow and monkey in India.

Plants can also contain spirits and some are worshiped. Forests are seen as places where the spirits dwell. Trees like oaks, cedars, and ash are worshiped in Europe. In many parts of the world, there exist numerous subhuman beings that are supposed to live in lakes, forests, and caves. For example, in Europe they include mythical beings like trolls, gnomes, and fairies.

The unseen world of animism begins with the understanding of "mana," or the life force that permeates the entire universe. This power is impersonal and not worshiped. This sacred power concentrates more heavily in the deities, sacred people,

places, or objects. This mana rules over all creation and is not controlled by the gods or man.

Also part of the unseen world is the Supreme God. Following him are a host of lesser gods who dwell in particular regions. Following the gods are the spirits, who often dwell in nature and are confined to a specific area. Then there are the spirits of the ancestors who continue to play a role with the living.

There also exist unseen forces that include supernatural powers like fate, cosmic moral order, the evil eye, magic, and witchcraft. There are also impersonal energy forces in objects that give the objects power. These objects are believed to give a person power to do good or evil.

In the Bible, God transforms the animistic views of Israel into a biblical view. He teaches them that the other gods are not gods at all (Isaiah 43:10). He condemns the use of magic, witchcraft, and divination. He shows that suffering is not the result of the spirits or the gods but His sovereign act of bringing people back to Himself.

## **Themes in Animism**

Do you ever wonder why some Christians worship their ancestors? It derives from the first of several themes within the ancient religion of animism. The first of the themes is a community-centered life. The ancestors, the living, and the unborn are the center of existence. The clan life is the most important entity because an individual has meaning only in the context of a community.

The second theme is the role of the spirit world. Humans live in a world surrounded by supernatural beings and forces, most of which are hostile to humans. The worlds of the seen and the unseen are interconnected. For this reason, people spend their time seeking to appease the gods, the spirits, and the

ancestors with offerings or bribes. Extreme care is taken to maintain the harmony between the two worlds. Since all created things are connected, a simple act like eating a fruit from the wrong tree may bring disaster.

Third is the focus on the present. The primary concern is with the here and now. People seek to deal with success and failure, power and knowledge needed to control life.

Fourth is the focus on power. People view themselves as constantly struggling against spirits, other humans, and supernatural forces. Everything that happens can be explained by powers at war. The goal is to attain power to control the forces around them.

Fifth is pragmatism. Animists are not interested in academic understanding of spiritual and scientific truth but in securing good, meaningful life and protection from evil. The test of a folk religion is, "does it work?" To achieve their goals, most people will turn to several methods that may be contradictory in hopes that one will work. I was once speaking to a Chinese woman who was suffering from lung cancer. Although she attended church and prayed to the Lord for healing, she also visited the Chinese Buddhist temple seeking prayers for healing from the priests. For those in animistic cultures, in times of need people will beseech aid from various religions or gods to find a method that works.

Sixth is transformation and transportation. Things may not be what they appear to be. Spirits can take the form of animals or plants. Shamans in a trance believe they can travel to distant places and bring harm to an enemy. They also believe they can travel to the spirit world, find information, or retrieve lost souls.

Seventh, animism takes a holistic view of life. The obsession with invoking good luck and avoiding bad luck involves every aspect of life—from what you eat, to where you place furniture

(such the current feng shui fad), to how you sleep. In Al Hambra, Los Angeles where there is a large population of Chinese, houses with the number "4" in the address do not sell. The number four, pronounced "shee" in Chinese, is the first letter in the word for death, so the number is considered very unlucky.[\[1\]](#)

Eighth is particularism. People are tied to their land. Each community has its own set of gods and spirits. The gods gave the people their land, and that is where the ancestors reside. In battles, victories and defeats are attributed to the power of the territorial gods.

Finally, fear plays a major role. In a world full of spirits, omens, and spells, life is rarely secure. Many see the world as a hostile and dangerous place filled with spirits and forces antagonistic to people. Seemingly mundane activities such as moving the wrong rock can bring potential disaster. People turn to their ancestors, gods and spirits for protection.

The focus of the Christian life, in contrast, is the relationship believers have with God. God's relationship with mankind is based on grace and love. Since God is gracious, He does not need to be constantly appeased by believers. His laws are clearly revealed to us in the Bible. When we disobey, we may suffer the consequences of our sin or experience His discipline, which is always motivated by His love and intended to bring us to a right relationship with Him. In times of difficulty, we do not fear His wrath but He invites us to draw even closer to Him. 1 John 4:16-18 says, "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment because in this world we are like Him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear . . . ." Although believers encounter tragedy and suffering, we do not live in fear but in faith, trusting in the character of God.

# Gods in Animism

It may surprise you that most animistic religions teach that there exists one Supreme Being. He is often described as omniscient, eternal, beneficent, omnipotent and righteous. He is the creator, the moral lawgiver, punishes those who do evil, and blesses those who do good.

However, this being has distanced himself from man and cannot be known personally. Legends abound that he was once near but was angered with man and removed himself. He left men to their own devices and used lesser gods and spirits to do His will and serve as His ambassadors.

Therefore, most of the worship goes to the lesser gods and spirits who are in direct contact with humans. Anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt studied numerous cultures and concluded that man's first religion was monotheism, which then corrupted into polytheism.[\[2\]](#) This would concur with Paul's timeline of man's rejection of God that he lays out in Romans 1.

An example comes from the folk religion of China. Long before Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism, the Chinese worshiped Shang Ti, the Lord of heaven. He alone was worshiped until the Zhou dynasty, which began in 1000 B.C. From then on, only the emperor was allowed to pay homage to Shang Ti, and the knowledge of Shang Ti among the common people was lost. The worship-starved Chinese eventually embraced the religions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that provided spiritual knowledge and worship.[\[3\]](#) Numerous stories like these abound throughout the world. In Korea, the supreme God is called Hananim. The Gedeo people of Ethiopia call Him Magano. Missionaries use this belief of a high God to point people to the God of the Bible.

Following the Supreme God is a host of lesser gods. These beings mediate between man and the Supreme Being, but must first be paid homage. Gods possess specific powers and are

localized to a geographical area. The gods inhabit places such as rivers, mountains, forests, oceans, etc. Some gods exercise power over human affairs (business, marriage, death, etc.) other gods exercise powers over nature (storms, rain, etc.) Among the Hawaiians, Lono is the god of the oceans and controls the clouds and storms. Pele, the fire goddess, dwells in the volcanoes. Many still honor these gods in Hawaii today.

The biblical worldview teaches that a personal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God governs the universe (Colossians 1:16-17). He alone rules creation and there are no other gods besides him (Isaiah 43:10). The God of the Bible is not distant from man, but mankind has distanced ourselves from God. God remains involved in the affairs of this world, constantly pursuing men and women to receive His gift of grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

## **Spirits and Ancestors**

Do you ever wonder if there are spirits in forests or other dark places? Can the dead communicate with the living? Animism holds to a belief that numerous spirits exercise their power over places where they dwell, such as mountains, streams, and rivers. Spirits have never inhabited human bodies, and since they can be either good or evil they must constantly be appeased. For example, the South Sea islanders ask forgiveness of the trees they cut down for canoes so that the spirits of the trees will not harm them.[\[4\]](#)

There also exist legendary half-divine beings. Some are humans who became gods. Some gods are thought to have become human. For example, the pharaoh of Egypt and the emperor of Japan were believed to be descendants of the sun god. Many teach these beings had supernatural birth and did not die, but vanished into the sky. Many are believed to have taught humans valuable skills like making fire, canoes, houses, planting fruits, etc.

Important in animism is the remembrance of the ancestors. Animism teaches that people possess immortal souls. At death the soul is free to wander near the grave, travel the earth, or enter the world of the spirits. The spirits of the ancestors participate in the daily lives of family members. Neglecting to honor them has severe consequences. Souls of the departed who did not live fulfilled lives or died tragic deaths become ghosts. Ghosts search for bodies to inhabit and often bring harm.

At death, one enters the realm of the ancestors who maintain a relationship with the family. Ancestors remain deeply interested in the family they began. They care for, protect, and punish those who seek to do harm.

Ancestors are revered for several reasons. First, as the founders of the family, they remain interested in the care of the family. Second, they have answered the question of what follows death, so they can help the living through dreams, necromancers, and visions. Third, some have accomplished great achievements, which must be celebrated. Fourth, animists believe they protect the family. Fifth, they function as mediators between God and the family.

One's happiness in the afterlife depends on the care given by one's descendants. Anyone banished from a family or tribe in essence becomes extinct with no one to remember or care for them.

As Christians, we agree with the animists that there is an immaterial soul that exists beyond the grave. We also place the family as a high priority. One of the Ten Commandments is for children to honor their father and mother. However, no departed souls remain on earth. According to Hebrews 9:27 upon death, one is immediately in heaven or hell. Secondly, the dead do not have contact with the living. In Luke 16, the rich man who was suffering in hell sought a way to communicate with his living family to warn them of their fate. However, he was



not able to communicate in any way nor could the living communicate with him. Christians celebrate and honor the memory of our loved ones, but we do not worship them nor seek to appease their spirits. We wait with joy and anticipation in knowing we will be united again in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Basic Practices in Animism**

In animism there are numerous taboos or prohibitions. Prohibitions are made to preserve the harmony between the spiritual world and physical world. Places or people where the life force is concentrated are protected. Myriads of taboos exist and violation of them can result in cursing of a community and must be atoned for by sacrifices.

Second, there are sacred places. Sacred places of worship exist to commune with the spiritual world. These are places where sacred power is concentrated. In Haiti there is a sacred tree where a pact with the devil was signed over 200 years ago by the animistic witch doctors. These witch doctors were most displeased when Christian pastors recently prayed over the tree and successfully commanded the spirits to leave it.

Third, there are sacred things. A whole host of objects possess power and are potentially dangerous. Stones are often believed to possess sacred power. This is one reason you can easily find crystal jewelry and other semi-precious stones for sale in catalogs and stores. Certain plants and insects are believed to be sacred and taboo. Carved images are believed to possess the spirit of divinities.

Fourth, there are sacred actions. Worship includes sacrifices of animals or plants to the deities. The priests or shamans perform the sacred rites. Omens play an essential role; this is the origin of saying "God bless you" after someone sneezes, to protect the spirits from jumping into the suddenly vulnerable person. Signs in the heavens and certain reptiles

or animals encountered in a day (such as a black cat crossing one's path portending bad luck) may predict one's future.

Fifth, there are sacred words. There are many oaths, curses, and blessings. The spells of both white and black witchcraft are sacred words. Words are charged with sacred power if uttered by a priest. Such words possess the sacred power, mana.

Sixth, there are sacred persons. Witches use their powers for good and evil. They can use their powers to protect communities from enemies. They can use their power to communicate with the gods and spirits. In most societies, witchcraft and sorcery are most feared. Witches are believed to travel great distances in short periods, kill at a distance, and master demons. Witches have supernatural powers to inflict harm on others. They can cast spells on others. They can inject foreign bodies into a victim, causing illness. Witches have the ability to communicate with dead spirits. Many societies believe they can transform themselves into animals.

Then there is the shaman or the medicine man. He can cure sicknesses. He directs sacrificial rites and escorts souls to the other world. At times he can leave his body and observe events from a distance. He is born into the family or earns the job by passing tests and rituals. There is also the sacred king. Then there are sub-humans such as trolls and water spirits. Finally there are "little people," such as leprechauns.

Seventh, there are sacred rituals that must be performed regularly. The head of the family performs some; others require the expertise of the priests.

Eighth, there is the practice of magic and divination. The art of casting spells and communicating with the spirit world are reserved for the priests.

The Christian must be aware when his practices are influenced by animism. Often many feel that saying "amen" or wearing a cross brings protection. Others use sacred stones or believe performing a ritual will bring them fortune. A Christian has direct access to God through Christ and does not need to rely on another person or a sacred office. Also, Christians have all we need in Christ and do not need powers from the spiritual realm. Christ has given us all we need to overcome.

## **Overcoming Animism**

As our study has revealed, fear is the overriding disposition among those in animistic religions. There are several reasons for this. First, one is never really sure if a taboo has been broken and the gods, the spirits, or the ancestors have been angered. Should one of these beings become angered, they may inflict horrific punishments. In Hawaii, there are several frightening stories about the night marchers, the spirits of ancient warriors who march along a sacred path each night. It is believed that some people have been killed because they were in the path of the night marchers.

A second reason for the prevalence of fear is that animism includes some of the most feared practices known to man. Sorcery, magic and voodoo are some of the ancient arts that strike terror in the hearts of people. It is a frightening thing to know that a priest or witch has placed a curse upon you.

Throughout the Bible and even today, believers continually encounter animistic practices and thinking. In times of crisis, many young Christians will pray to God, but also seek help from their animistic religion.

Among Christians, animistic beliefs will be displaced only when Christians transform their minds with God's word and free themselves from the life of fear in animism. Transformation takes place when Christians understand the Bible explains the

true nature of the universe. First, in contrast to the many temperamental gods in animism, the Bible teaches that there is only one God. Isaiah 43:10 states, “‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the Lord, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.’” There is no pantheon of gods—only the one true God, and all others are false gods.

Second, in the Bible God forbids the animistic practices of witchcraft, necromancy, magic, and worship of foreign spirits. Deuteronomy 18:10 commands, “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination, sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who consults the dead.” Those who practice these arts are entertaining spirits who are opposed to God and seek the destruction of all people.

Third, Christians do not need to live in fear of hostile spirit beings and spells. Christ, who loves His people, has triumphed over all. Colossians 2:15 says that He “disarmed the powers and authorities, [making] a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

Christ has brought into submission all authorities under His rule. Not only that, nothing enters into our life until it first filters through His loving hand. God’s hand of protection shelters His people. David wrote in the Psalms, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God whom I trust’” (Ps. 91:1). When tragedy strikes, Christians understand that its purpose is not to punish believers, but to teach us new things about God and ourselves, refining our character to make us more like Him. Christians can be freed from a life of fear and find joy in a life of faith in Christ.

## Notes

1. Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1999), 157.
2. Norman Anderson. *The World's Religion*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's Publishing, 1991), 38.
3. Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts*. (Ventura, CA.: Regal Press, 1984), 62-70.
4. Hiebert, 55-56.

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## **Turn to Jesus, Tiger**

Yesterday (Jan. 5, 2010), Fox News commentator and analyst Brit Hume *became* the news with his delightfully provocative comments about and to scandalized über-golfer Tiger Woods,

which instantly showed up in places like an entertainment “news” show and in several YouTube videos.

“Tiger Woods will recover as a golfer. Whether he can recover as a person, I think, is a very open question, and it’s a tragic situation. He’s lost his family; it’s not clear to me whether he’ll be able to have a relationship with his children, but the Tiger Woods that emerges, once the news value dies out of this scandal, the extent to which he can recover, it seems to me, depends on his faith. He’s said to be a Buddhist; I don’t think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. So my message to Tiger would be, ‘Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world.’”

I love it that someone spoke the plain, un-PC truth that Buddhism offers no solution to the weight of grief and shame that Tiger is carrying.

But Jesus does.

Our culture has become voracious in its appetite for celebrity and celebrity news, which is why a man’s unfortunate and self-indulgent choices to engage in numerous extramarital affairs gets much more attention that it deserves. This isn’t just about news that sells newspapers and magazines; this is a real life train wreck, with real life trauma and pain to a man and his family. And that’s why what we believe matters, because real life in a fallen world involves pain and suffering—some because of our own sinful choices, some because of others’ sinful choices, and some because pain and suffering is inextricably linked with a world hostile to God and intent on operating independently from Him.

Pain and suffering is not optional, but we have choices in how we interpret our experiences and how we respond. Brit Hume, himself a Christ-follower, knows that God can bring hope and

change and redemption out of the most painful parts of life. He knows, because he is a man forgiven by God and others for his own sins, that there is freedom and relief in the forgiveness made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Tiger needs to know.

Would you join me in praying for the man, every time you hear or see him mentioned in the media? Pray for grace to repent and not merely grieve that he got caught. Pray that he turns to Jesus.

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/engage/sue\\_bohlin/turn\\_to\\_jesus\\_tiger](https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/turn_to_jesus_tiger)

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## **“You Should Improve Your Article ‘A Short Look at Six World Religions’”**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a born again Christian. I have a BA in Pastoral Theology and a MA in Philosophical Theology. I believe that there could be improvements to your article [A Short Look at Six World Religions](#).

I do believe that “snapshot” looks at our neighbors’ faiths are valuable but they do have limitations. It can be difficult to convey the rich diversity of their sects, denominations, and teachings. This being the case, and given that adherents of any faith often do not align strictly to orthodox doctrine, it may be worth noting in your piece in the sections that deal with “relating with folks from these faiths” that on top of

prayer and Biblical knowledge they should listen closely to the others' perspectives. Listening at first will give more clarity to the type or specific tradition the person is a part of.

Islam has been called a religion of works, but I have found this to not be true upon both study and speaking to Muslims. They are fully dependent on Allah's mercy and the grace of God. They will often say that even if they were perfect and without sin, God could cast them into hell if he wanted because God owes no one anything—it is His grace and mercy alone that allows salvation. This is an important facet of Islam that I feel should be included. The six tenets of faith are of course much more flexible in many Muslims' eyes than the five pillars and this could be emphasized. I also would say that Islam is no more fatalistic than many expressions of Christian faith. As many Christians would say, God is sovereign and everything that happens is in His purview and is because He allows it. Even Satan's and hell's existence is only because of His allowing it to be so. I do not think of Christianity is fatalistic because of this teaching. One Christian tradition that may deviate from this is Process Theologies of Christianity, which in my reading give more a 'participant' role to God than 'sovereign'. You write that Allah is a distant spiritual being, but again this is not how I have heard Muslims describe God. They will often as Christians do also balance transcendence and immanence. I have read of Allah being the center of all things, not 'out there'. It is we who may feel like we're 'out there' when we are distanced by sin.

I appreciate that you note Hinduism's diversity. *Star Wars*, however, I would argue is closer to Taoism.

There are some forms of Buddhism that pray, and worship divine beings. I would disagree with C.S. Lewis—Buddhism may be said more properly to be a 'reformation' of Hinduism, not a heresy. Buddha wanted to bring a more 'democratic' and less austere



faith. The 'I don't exist' is the ego. A Buddhist would recognize a pinch hurts and that a pinch hurts any living creature. Buddhists would say that Nirvana is not a goal, and is not something that is sought. There is no inconsistency of no-self and karma continuing the ripple effects. Karma is just cause-effect. A Buddhist would seek to absolve all action, cause-effect. Though a person dies, the consequences of their actions will still effect the next generation and their environment.

It may be worth noting the Messianic Jewish movement—I worshipped alongside these folks in a St. Paul Minnesota Temple and they are really Jews for Jesus!

It may be more appropriate to refer to Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses as 'sects' rather than cults as this is the trend in writing, commentary, and popular usage.

I hope that some of this may be useful to you, even if to a small degree. I do thank you for your ministry at Probe and am grateful that you write on these other religions with great love in your writing voice. My best wishes to you!

Thank you, \_\_\_\_\_.

It may be helpful for you to understand that the article on our website is the radio transcript of a week of programs I was asked to do for Moody Radio some years ago, giving a 35,000-foot overview of major religions to their radio audience in a very restricted time parameter. And that's why it's called a "Short" look at world religions.

Your excellent observations are about fine-tuning the details of an article that was intentionally written with broad brush strokes. So I'm going to add it to our website from a link at the bottom of the article, highlighted in a "See Also" box.

Thank you, thank you for "hearing" the love in my heart and in my fingertips as I wrote this article! You have greatly

blessed me today!

Warmly,  
Sue

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# Advocacy Apologetics: Finding Common Ground as a Way to the Gospel

As you examine your life, can you think of any lessons you wish you had learned earlier than you did?

I'm really glad I learned *this* lesson very early in my career as a Christian communicator. It's made a world of difference.

God has graciously sent me presenting Christ and biblical truth on six continents before university students and professors, on mainstream TV and radio talk shows, with executives, diplomats and professional athletes.

He's put me speaking in university classrooms and auditoriums, in embassies, boardrooms, and locker rooms. He's had me writing for mainstream newspapers, magazines, and on the Internet about controversial subjects like sex, abortion, the afterlife, and reasons for faith.

As you might imagine, I've encountered many skeptics and objections to faith. I've learned much from my critics, the unpaid guardians of my soul.

But if I hadn't learned this crucial lesson at the outset,

would all those outreach doors have opened?

## The Lesson

I learned it on an island in a river in Seoul, Korea. Over a million believers were gathered for Explo 74. One speaker that day was a prominent church leader from India who discussed how to best communicate the message of Jesus to the types of Buddhists in India. Here's my paraphrase of his advice.

We could use two methods, he said. One was to begin by stressing the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. But that often gets people mad and turns them off.

A second way involved agreeing with the Buddhist where we could. We could say something like this: "I know that you as a Buddhist believe in Four Noble Truths." (This is foundational to many strains of Buddhism.) "First you believe suffering is universal. As a follower of Jesus, I also believe suffering is everywhere. It needs a solution.

Second, you believe that suffering is caused by evil desire or craving. I believe something very similar; I call this evil desire sin."

Third, you believe that the way to eliminate suffering is to eliminate craving. I feel selfishness needs to be eliminated, too. And fourth, you feel we eliminate craving by following the Eightfold Path: right understanding, right aspiration, right behavior, etc.

Here's where I would suggest an alternative. For many years I, too, tried to eliminate my selfishness by seeking to think and do the right thing. But you know what happened? I became very frustrated because I lacked the power to do it. I realized that if I relied on God, He could give me the inner power I needed."

Do you see the contrast between those two methods of

approaching someone who differs with you? The first emphasizes differences and has the emotional effect of holding up your hands as if to say “Stop!” or “Go away!” The second begins by agreeing where you can. Your emotional hands are extended as if to welcome your listeners. If you were the listener, which approach would you prefer?

## Start by Agreeing where You Can

In communicating with skeptics, start by agreeing where you can. You’ll get many more to listen.

I call this approach Advocacy Apologetics. You’re approaching the person as an advocate rather than an adversary. You believe in some of the same things they do. Expressing agreement can penetrate emotional barriers and communicate that you are *for* that person rather than *against* them. It can make them more willing to consider areas of disagreement.

Don’t compromise biblical truth; but agree at the start where you can.

Paul used this approach. He wrote ([1 Corinthians. 9:19-23 NLT](#), emphasis mine):

*I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can.*

*Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ. I do all this to spread the Good News.*

Here’s an experiment: The next time you encounter someone who differs with you, take a deep breath. Pray. Ask God to help

you identify three areas of agreement. Can't find three? How about one? Discuss that first. Become an advocate for them. Maybe you'll oil some stuck emotional and intellectual gears and nudge someone in His direction.

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## **“The Real Problem in This World is People Like YOU!”**

I just wanted to let you know I found it offensive how you describe satanism, buddhism, witchcraft or other religions as a “problem.” The real problem in this world are the people who believe their religion possesses the right to rule the entire planet and they are right and everyone else is wrong...do we try to change the world to reject christianity? In most cases (except the nutballs) no. But the tyranny of christianity finds it to be necessary to try to change everyone to its ways. So much for tolerance...is it any wonder I converted?

Thank you for writing.

I find it interesting that you call our information “offensive” when you had to search it out and come to our server to find it and read it. There's a big difference between something being *different* from what you believe, and being *offensive*. If someone deliberately hurls obscenities or causes nauseating odors within a few feet of you, that's being offensive. But stating what we believe, especially when there is very good evidence that it is true, isn't offensive—even though you have the right to *take offense* at it. But that is your choice, one you have the right to make.

That said, let me address the content of your letter. I get the sense from the hostility of your e-mail that, quite apart

from what you read on our website, you have been on the receiving end of some very unloving, disrespectful, manipulative messages on behalf of Christianity. If that is the case, let me say I'm sorry, and let me try to assure you that people who truly understand the person and message of Jesus Christ understand that no one can be coerced into being a Christian; it has to be a freely made choice. We understand that any attempts to "rule the entire planet" are foolish and completely misguided, because God doesn't work that way—He honors the dignity and choice of the people He made and loves very much.

I will admit, though, that yes, we do believe Christianity is right and all other religions are wrong, but it's not because we're so smart or so prideful or so arrogant. We believe it because there's strong evidence that it is true, it's our personal experience that it is true, and it is the world view that is most consistent with reality. We also believe it because of revelation: the belief that God has spoken to mankind and has shown us what is ultimately and eternally true, and we're just agreeing with what God said. If Christianity were a man-made religion, as all other religions and faith systems are, then it WOULD be arrogant and self-serving to believe we are right and all others are wrong. But true Christianity is about relationship, not religion, about a love affair between the one true God, who loves us and courts us.

Because we do believe in absolute truth, and we believe that God has pierced the space-time continuum to show these truths to man, then it makes sense that other religions which deny these truths would be a true, cosmic-grade "problem," because those who trust in them are misguided, deceived, and headed for an eternity separated from the only One who can give them—give you!!—life.

Were you around when Jim Jones caused a holocaust at his cult compound in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978? He had hundreds of

disciples drink Kool-Aid laced with cyanide. If one person had gone around warning the people not to drink the Kool-Aid because it was poisoned, that person would have been labeled a “problem,” when actually the problem was the Kool-Aid (as well as the mind of the cult leader). I think there is a legitimate parallel between the Jonestown tragedy and what we are saying about other religions. I pray you will be intellectually honest and investigate whether the “spiritual Kool-Aid” you’ve been drinking is pure, or poisoned. And I pray you will be able to get past the hurtful, unfortunate experiences you’ve had with people who claim Christianity and check out the true Person of Jesus Christ. See if He’s the real thing. You may find that what you converted FROM isn’t true Christianity at all, but a sad, sad parody of it, that deeply grieves the heart of God.

Sue Bohlin  
Probe Ministries

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## “Can Christians Practice Buddhism?”

Dear Mr. Zukeran,

As I was searching the net for local Buddhist temples I came across Probe’s website and came to [your explanation of the differences between Jesus and Gautama](#). It was very eye opening, and I’ve never heard it explained that way before. I was raised in a Christian home but am also interested in Buddhism. Do you think there is a way for Christians to also practice Buddhism? Or is that not possible?

Generally speaking, Christianity and Buddhism are built on two

different worldviews. So at their foundations they teach contradictory positions. Northern Buddhism usually adheres to a pantheistic worldview while Southern Buddhism and schools like Zen Buddhism teach atheism. Buddhism may have some teachings that agree with Christianity such as some of the ethical teachings, but at the basic level the two have contradictory teachings.

For example, what happens after death? Most Buddhist schools teach reincarnation while the Bible teaches “It is appointed for each person to die once, and then comes the judgment” (Hebrews 9:7). Jesus taught His disciples to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Buddha taught to relinquish all desires. The Bible teaches that life is found in a relationship with God through Christ. Buddha taught life is about the emptying of the self. Buddhism teaches that man is basically good and the answer to man's problem is enlightenment. The Bible teaches that man is sinful and the answer to his problem is not within him but in a perfect savior who died for his sins, Jesus Christ. So at the foundational issues, the two systems are contradictory.

Can a Christian study about Buddhism? Sure, but as in all things, one must be discerning and measure all teachings with God's word, the Bible.

Thanks for your question.

Patrick Zukeran

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## **“I Would Become A Christian**



# Except that It's Based on Lies and Deception"

Mr. Zukeran:

I read your comparative essay on [Buddhism](#) and Christianity. It was very interesting. However, it is quite obvious to me that you are bias toward Christianity. You raised an interesting point that the Buddha's writings were written hundreds of years after his death, therefore, are not accurate and somewhat vague. You go on to say that Christianity has a more solid foundation being that there is a recorded history of Jesus during his ministry. There is one important fallacy in your logic that you failed to mention and/or consider that the Jesus you speak of actually existed. And many historians would agree with me that the Gospels were not written until hundreds of years after the so called death of Jesus. I do not write this criticism to offend, but to develop dialogue. My family and my community have deep roots in Christianity and I myself want to be a Christian, but I cannot lie to myself and deny the knowledge that I have. Unfortunately, I have yet to meet someone who can present Christianity to me in a way that will allow me to embrace it. The reason being it is based on lies and deception.

Thanks for reading my article and your response. I appreciate your honesty regarding the writings of Buddha. I was raised in the Japanese Buddhist tradition and many members of my family are still active members of the Buddhist community. In my studies of Buddhism, that was a question I often wrestled with and would ask the priests at the temple. I came to believe in Christ because of the compelling evidence for Christ. I came to learn He was unique and indeed the divine Son of God.

The four Gospels present an accurate historical record of Christ. Your assertion that the Gospels were written hundreds

of years after the death of Christ is incorrect. I believed that claim for many years until I studied the evidence. Presently, due to the evidence we have found, I do not think you will find many historians today agreeing with your assertion. There is strong internal and external evidence that the gospels were written by eye-witnesses in the lifetime of the eye-witnesses.

Here are just a few evidences. We have numerous ancient manuscripts that uphold a first century date. The Chester Beatty Papyri is a group of manuscripts that contains most of the New Testament and is dated 250 A.D. Since it is a copy of almost the entire New Testament, we can safely conclude the original books of the New Testament were written well before, probably in the late first or early second century A.D. The Bodmer Papyri date to 200 A.D. and contain most of the book of John, the last gospel written. Since this is a copy, the original was probably written earlier and since Matthew, Mark and Luke precede John, they are written even earlier. Finally, we have the Rylands Papyri which is a fragment of the book of John which dates 120 A.D. and this fragment was found in Egypt. We can conclude that John was written within the first century since he wrote from Asia Minor and this copy had made its way from there down to Egypt where it was found. Since Matthew, Mark, and Luke precede John, we can conclude these books were written within the first century A.D. The manuscript evidence alone silences the assertion that the gospels were written centuries after Christ's death.

Then we have quotes from the early Church Fathers. Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the church in Corinth in 90 AD and quotes from all four Gospels. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch writes a letter from Rome in 115 A.D. and quotes all four Gospels. Polycarp writes to the Philippians in 120 A.D. and quotes from all the Gospels. I could go on but I will stop here. The fact is, the Church Fathers from the first three centuries were already familiar with the writings of the

Apostles and were already quoting them as inspired scripture.

So the assertion that the gospels are written hundreds of years after the death of Christ is a false assertion. For more information, please read my article titled "[The Historical Reliability of the Gospels](#)."

Sincerely,

Patrick Zukeran

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**“I want to know more about  
Buddhism, but your  
Christianity is garbage!”**

While I was interested in your article on [Buddhism](#), one small statement disturbed me: “The resurrection of Christ is a proven historical fact.” What (excuse my French) a load of bollocks. It is not a true historical fact. It is a story perpetuated by weak minds and altered over the ages to suit the ruling organizations’ needs, wants and sick individual agendas. Christianity is not about the care of people, it is living your life caring about little other than a false god, doing wrongs against others and expecting some sort of forgiveness at the end ... what ever that may be. That in essence is why the teachings of Buddha like you say it is a way of life and can never be compared to any religion.

Thank you for your time.

Yes, I will excuse your French. I do not think that represents the spirit of Buddha's teachings very well. On the resurrection, please go to the Probe Ministries web site, [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org). Look for two articles, [Resurrection: Fact or Fiction](#) and [Cruci-Fiction and Resuscitation](#). I hope these articles help. The resurrection is indeed an historical event.

I would caution you on calling the people of Greek, Roman and Jewish times, people of weak minds. The foundation of our philosophy, our language, foundation for medicine and science were given to us by the Greeks. The Romans gave us the foundation for our great government here in the U.S., and the Jewish people gave the world a foundation for moral laws. They have given human civilization a tremendous contribution; I would be very careful in calling them people of weak minds. I do not think Buddha would approve of such statements, which reflect an arrogant spirit. Humility was a virtue of Buddha's teachings.

The story was not altered to fit the ruling organizations' needs. When the gospel was first preached, the Christians were not in power. The Romans and the Jewish authorities sought to destroy this new faith, not twist it to meet their needs. The New Testament has not changed in 2000 years. We have over 24,000 ancient manuscripts dating back to the first century. They remain consistent in their message. Please reveal the evidence that shows where the textual evidence reveals a change in the message of the New Testament. Scholars have not found any evidence. It seems you have—please reveal the specific changes made and where.

Chrisitanity has done tremendous good over the centuries. More hospitals, orphanages, schools, homeless shelters, colleges, and rescue centers have been built in the name of Jesus than any other person who ever lived. In fact, soon I am going to the Philippines for a medical mission and aid mission to the orphanages there.

I perceive you may have a personal reason for hating Christianity. Obviously it is not for these that you listed. Let us maintain a cordial spirit governed by integrity and friendly discussion. If this is not possible, this will be my final response. Thank you.

Patrick Zukeran

**Dear Mr. Zukeran,**

**Thank you for your E Mail. Between the time that I wrote that letter and the time that I received your letter I met a man that let me see that what a person says and what a person does and thinks are two different things. He sounded to me like I probably looked to you in my initial letter.**

**Thank you for responding and if you have any attachments on Buddhism I would be most appreciative as many of my personal beliefs are similar to Buddhism and I have a growing interest and would like to know more about a variety of subjects related to and including Buddhism.**

**See Also Probe Answers Our E-mail:**

- [I Would Become A Christian Except that It's Based on Lies and Deception](#)
  - [You Don't Really Understand Buddhism](#)
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# Buddhism: A Christian Perspective

*Dr. Patrick Zukeran gives a brief overview of the basic beliefs of Buddhism, covering the doctrine of salvation, eternal state, the founder, and a comparison to Christianity.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

For centuries, Buddhism has been the dominant religion of the Eastern world. With the rise of the Asian population in the United States, Buddhism has had a tremendous impact on this country as well. Presently, there are an estimated 300 million Buddhists in the world and 500 thousand in the United States.<sup>[1]</sup> It remains the dominant religion in the state of Hawaii, and many prominent Americans have accepted this religion, including the former governor of California, Jerry Brown,<sup>[2]</sup> Tina Turner, Phil Jackson (coach of the Los Angeles Lakers), Richard Gere, and Steven Seagal. The Dalai Lama has become a prominent spiritual figure for many throughout the world.

## The Origin of Buddhism

Buddhism began as an offspring of Hinduism in the country of India. The founder was Siddhartha Gautama. It is not easy to give an accurate historical account of the life of Gautama since no biography was recorded until five hundred years after his death. Today, much of his life story is clouded in myths and legends which arose after his death. Even the best historians of our day have several different—and even contradictory—accounts of Gautama's life.

Siddhartha Gautama was born in approximately 560 B.C. in northern India. His father, Suddhodana, was the ruler over a district near the Himalayas which is today the country of

Nepal. Suddhodana sheltered his son from the outside world and confined him to the palace where he surrounded Gautama with pleasures and wealth.

Despite his father's efforts, however, Gautama one day saw the darker side of life on a trip he took outside the palace walls. He saw four things that forever changed his life: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and an ascetic. Deeply distressed by the suffering he saw, he decided to leave the luxury of palace life and begin a quest to find the answer to the problem of pain and human suffering.

Gautama left his family and traveled the country seeking wisdom. He studied the Hindu scriptures under Brahmin priests, but became disillusioned with the teachings of Hinduism. He then devoted himself to a life of extreme asceticism in the jungle. He soon concluded, however, that asceticism did not lead to peace and self-realization but merely weakened the mind and body.

Gautama eventually turned to a life of meditation. While deep in meditation under a fig tree known as the *Bohdi* tree (meaning, "tree of wisdom"), Gautama experienced the highest degree of God-consciousness called *nirvana*. Gautama then became known as *Buddha*, the "enlightened one." He believed he had found the answers to the questions of pain and suffering. His message now needed to be proclaimed to the whole world.

As he began his teaching ministry, he gained a quick audience with the people of India since many had become disillusioned with Hinduism. By the time of his death at age 80, Buddhism had become a major force in India.

## **Expansion and Development of Buddhism**

Buddhism remained mostly in India for three centuries until King Ashoka, who ruled India from 274-232 B.C., converted to Buddhism. Ashoka sent missionaries throughout the world, and

Buddhism spread to all of Asia.

Even before its expansion, two distinct branches developed, a conservative and a liberal school of thought. The conservative school is labeled Theravada, and it became the dominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Thus, it is also called Southern Buddhism. Southern Buddhism has remained closer to the original form of Buddhism. This school follows the Pali Canon of scripture, which, although written centuries after Gautama's death, contains the most accurate recording of his teachings.

The liberal school is Mahayana Buddhism, which traveled to the north into China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet, and is also called Northern Buddhism. As it spread north, it adopted and incorporated beliefs and practices from the local religions of the land. The two branches of Buddhism are so different they appear to be two different religions rather than two branches of the same tree. Here are a few differences.

Theravada Buddhism sees Buddha as a man. Gautama never claimed to be deity, but rather a "way shower." Mahayana Buddhism, however, worships Buddha as a manifestation of the divine Buddha essence. Since Gautama, many other manifestations or *bodhisattvas* have appeared. An example is Tibetan Buddhism, which worships the spiritual leader the Dalai Lama as a bodhisattva.

Theravada adheres to the Pali Canon and Buddha's earliest teachings. Since Mahayana believes there have been many manifestations, this branch incorporates many other texts written by the bodhisattvas as part of their canon.

Theravada teaches that each person must attain salvation through their own effort, and this requires one to relinquish earthly desires and live a monastic life. Therefore, only those few who have chosen this lifestyle will attain nirvana. Mahayana teaches that salvation comes through the grace of the



bodhisattvas and so many may attain salvation.

Divine beings do not have a place in Theravada. The primary focus is on the individual attaining enlightenment, and a divine being, or speculations of such, only hinders the process. Therefore, several sects of this branch are atheistic. Mahayana, on the other hand, has many diverse views of God since this branch is inclusive, and has adopted the beliefs and practices of various religions. Many schools are pantheistic in their worldview while others are animistic. Buddha is worshipped as a divine being. Some schools pay homage to a particular bodhisattva sent to their people. Other schools have a mixture of gods whom they worship. For example, Japanese Buddhism blended with Shintoism and includes worship of the Shinto gods with the teachings and worship of Buddha.

When speaking with a Buddhist, it is important to understand what branch of Buddhism they are talking about. The two branches are dramatically different. Even within Mahayana Buddhism, the sects can be as different as Theravada is to Mahayana.

## **The Way of Salvation**

The main question Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, sought to answer was, "Why is there pain and suffering?" His belief in reincarnation (the belief that after death one returns to earthly life in a higher or lower form of life according to his good or bad deeds) prompted a second question that also needed to be answered: "How does one break this rebirth cycle?" The basic teachings of Buddhism, therefore, focus on what Gautama believed to be the answer to these questions. These basic tenets are found in the Four Noble Truths and in the Eight-fold Path. Let us begin with the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth is that there is pain and suffering in the world. Gautama realized that pain and suffering are omnipresent in all of nature and human life. To exist means to

encounter suffering. Birth is painful and so is death. Sickness and old age are painful. Throughout life, all living things encounter suffering.

The Second Noble Truth relates to the cause of suffering. Gautama believed the root cause of suffering is desire. It is the craving for wealth, happiness, and other forms of selfish enjoyment which cause suffering. These cravings can never be satisfied for they are rooted in ignorance.

The Third Noble Truth is the end of all suffering. Suffering will cease when a person can rid himself of all desires.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the extinguishing of all desire by following the Eight-fold path. "The Eight-fold path is a system of therapy designed to develop habits which will release people from the restrictions caused by ignorance and craving."[\[3\]](#)

Here are the eight steps in following the Eight-fold path. The first is the Right View. One must accept the Four Noble Truths. Step two is the Right Resolve. One must renounce all desires and any thoughts like lust, bitterness, and cruelty, and must harm no living creature. Step three is the Right Speech. One must speak only truth. There can be no lying, slander, or vain talk. Step four is the Right Behavior. One must abstain from sexual immorality, stealing, and all killing.

Step five is the Right Occupation. One must work in an occupation that benefits others and harms no one. Step six is the Right Effort. One must seek to eliminate any evil qualities within and prevent any new ones from arising. One should seek to attain good and moral qualities and develop those already possessed. Seek to grow in maturity and perfection until universal love is attained. Step seven is the Right Contemplation. One must be observant, contemplative, and free of desire and sorrow. The eighth is the Right Meditation.

After freeing oneself of all desires and evil, a person must concentrate his efforts in meditation so that he can overcome any sensation of pleasure or pain and enter a state of transcending consciousness and attain a state of perfection. Buddhists believe that through self-effort one can attain the eternal state of nirvana.

In Buddhism, one's path to nirvana relies on the effort and discipline of the individual. By contrast, Jesus taught our goal is not a state of non-conscious being, but an eternal relationship with God. There is nothing one can do to earn a right relationship with God. Instead, we must receive His gift of grace, the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus Christ and this restores our relationship with our creator.

## **Karma, *Samsara*, and *Nirvana***

Three important concepts in understanding Buddhism are *karma*, *samsara*, and *nirvana*.

*Karma* refers to the law of cause and effect in a person's life, reaping what one has sown. Buddhists believe that every person must go through a process of birth and rebirth until he reaches the state of *nirvana* in which he breaks this cycle. According to the law of karma, "You are what you are and do what you do, as a result of what you were and did in a previous incarnation, which in turn was the inevitable outcome of what you were and did in still earlier incarnations."[\[4\]](#) For a Buddhist, what one will be in the next life depends on one's actions in this present life. Unlike Hindus, Buddha believed that a person can break the rebirth cycle no matter what class he is born into.

The second key concept is the law of *samsara* or *transmigration*. This is one of the most perplexing and difficult concepts in Buddhism to understand. The law of

Samsara holds that everything is in a birth and rebirth cycle. Buddha taught that people do not have individual souls. The existence of an individual self or ego is an illusion. There is no eternal substance of a person, which goes through the rebirth cycle. What is it then that goes through the cycle if not the individual soul? What goes through the rebirth cycle is only a set of feelings, impressions, present moments, and the karma that is passed on. "In other words, as one process leads to another, ... so one's human personality in one existence is the direct cause of the type of individuality which appears in the next." {5} The new individual in the next life will not be exactly the same person, but there will be several similarities. Just how close in identity they will be is not known.

The third key concept is *nirvana*. The term means "the blowing out" of existence. Nirvana is very different from the Christian concept of heaven. Nirvana is not a place like heaven, but rather an eternal state of being. It is the state in which the law of karma and the rebirth cycle come to an end. It is the end of suffering; a state where there are no desires and the individual consciousness comes to an end. Although to our Western minds this may sound like annihilation, Buddhists would object to such a notion. Gautama never gave an exact description of nirvana, but his closest reply was this. "There is disciples, a condition, where there is neither earth nor water, neither air nor light, neither limitless space, nor limitless time, neither any kind of being, neither ideation nor non-ideation, neither this world nor that world. There is neither arising nor passing-away, nor dying, neither cause nor effect, neither change nor standstill." {6}

In contrast to the idea of reincarnation, the Bible teaches in Hebrews 9:27 that "man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment." A major diverging point between Buddhism and Christianity is that the Bible refutes the idea of

reincarnation. The Bible also teaches that in the eternal state, we are fully conscious and glorified individuals whose relationship with God comes to its perfect maturity.

## Jesus and Gautama

There is much I admire in the life and teachings of Gautama. Being raised in the Japanese Buddhist culture, I appreciate the ethical teachings, the arts, and architecture influenced by Buddhism. As I studied the life and teachings of Gautama and of Jesus, I discovered some dramatic differences.

First, Buddha did not claim to be divine. Theravada remains true to his teaching that he was just a man. The idea that he was divine was developed in Mahayana Buddhism 700 years after his death. Furthermore, Northern Buddhism teaches that there have been other manifestations of the Buddha or bodhisattvas and some believe Jesus to be one as well. However, Jesus did not claim to be one of many manifestations of God; He claimed to be the one and only Son of God. This teaching was not the creation of his followers but a principle He taught from the beginning of His ministry. In fact, the salvation He preached was dependent on understanding His divine nature.

Second, Buddha claimed to be a way shower. He showed the way to nirvana, but it was up to each follower to find his or her own path. Christ did not come to show the way; He claimed to be the way. While Buddhism teaches that salvation comes through Buddhas teachings, Christ taught salvation is found in *Him*. When Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and the life" (John 14:6), He was saying He alone is the one who can give eternal life, for He is the source of truth and life. Not only did He make the way possible, He promises to forever be with and empower all who follow Him to live the life that pleases God.

Third, Buddha taught that the way to eliminate suffering and attain enlightenment was to eliminate all desire. Christ

taught that one should not eliminate all desire but that one must have the right desire. He stated, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied." Christ taught that we should desire to know Him above all other wants.

Fourth, Buddha performed no miracles in his lifetime. Christ affirmed His claims to be divine through the miracles He performed. He demonstrated authority over every realm of creation: the spiritual realm, nature, sickness, and death. These miracles confirmed the claims that He was more than a good teacher, but God incarnate.

Finally, Buddha is buried in a grave in Kusinara at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains. Christ, however, is alive. He alone conquered sin and the grave. His death paid the price for sin, and His resurrection makes it possible for all people to enter into a personal and eternal relationship with God.

After a comparative study, I came to realize Buddha was a great teacher who lived a noble life, but Christ is the unique revelation of God who is to be worshipped as our eternal Lord and Savior.

## Notes

1. Isamu Yamamoto, *Buddhism, Taoism and Other Eastern Religions*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1998), p. 23.
2. Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House 1985), p. 261.
3. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions, and the Occult* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, (1977) p. 35
4. Davis Taylor and Clark Offner, *The World's Religions*, Norman Anderson, ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1975), p. 174.
5. John Noss, *Man's Religions* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 182.

6. Taylor and Offner, *The World's Religions*, p. 177.

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