

# **MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS**

**by Robert C. Walton**



# MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS I

## The Uniqueness of Christianity

Why should a Christian be familiar with the major religions of the world? After all, we have the truth and all other religions represent manmade forms of rebellion against God. Why, then, should we take the time to study them?

### REASONS FOR STUDYING WORLD RELIGIONS

Regions of the world that were at one time almost exclusively broadly Christian in their religious profession are becoming increasingly pluralistic. This is true of Europe as well as the United States. Large numbers of immigrants from Asia and the Middle East are streaming into Western countries, bringing with them Hinduism, Buddhism, and especially Islam. In order to function in this rapidly-changing world, Christians must be prepared to relate to ideas and practices that are very different from what they are used to. How do you begin to carry on a conversation with your Indian co-worker or the African-American Muslim who lives down the street? Understanding something of their beliefs is a good place to start.

Knowledge of world religions can also have an evangelistic function. People who know only the faith in which they have been raised are often curious about what others believe, especially if they have recently moved into a new country with practices with which they are unfamiliar. This can open the door for the presentation of the Gospel, and that presentation can be more effective if you know something about what the other person believes, can ask intelligent questions, understand what they are saying about themselves, and particularly if you clearly comprehend the differences between Christianity and what the other person believes and does.

Finally, knowledge of world religions can have apologetic value. The secular worldview that has increasingly come to dominate the previously-Christian Western world tends to lump all religions together, seeing no difference between “fundamentalists” of any stripe, whether Bible-believing Christians or Islamic terrorists. The more Christians know about other religions, the more they will be able to draw clear distinctions for those in the secular world who see all religions as essentially the same and readily dismiss them all with little serious consideration.

### THE APPROACH TO STUDYING WORLD RELIGIONS

For more than a generation now, colleges and universities have offered courses in Comparative Religion. On the surface, these courses appear to cover much of the same ground we will be covering together. The basic approach, however, is very different, and that difference must be understood if we are to gain maximum benefit from our study.

Comparative Religion courses in secular schools may cover the history, teachings, and practices of different religions, but they do so in a way that implies that all religions are essentially the same. Christianity, rather than being the standard of truth against which other religions are compared and by which they are evaluated, is lumped in with all the other religions and studied on the same basis. Supposedly, all religions are given equal status and presented without value judgments. What does this imply?

- Firstly, all religions are presented as equally true. Though this may be the stance of the professor, it is patently absurd because of the massive contradictions that exist among the major religions of the world. Such illogic is grounded in the postmodern idea that something can be true for you without being true for others.
- This leads to the conclusion that all religions are equally false; if they lack absolute truth value, no one can use them as the basis for any actual truth claims.
- This leads to the conclusion that what one believes ultimately doesn't matter; religion is essentially insignificant. Again, such an assertion is absurd, as the acts carried out today in the name of various religions clearly indicate. As one speaker put it, you would care very much whether the person who moves in next door believes in a religion that advocates loving one's neighbor or one that sees merit in eating one's neighbor.
- Comparative Religion courses thus lead to the conclusion that religion is something to be held and practiced in private, but under no circumstances should one try to impose those beliefs or practices on others; this would consist of bigotry, and no one should have the temerity to suggest that his ideas are true and others are false.
- The assumption underlying this entire approach is that religion - all religion - is a manmade phenomenon that has no relationship to any supernatural reality. It is thus commonly subsumed under broader humanistic disciplines like history, psychology, sociology, or philosophy, which are thought to explain all one needs to know about religious beliefs and practices.

Needless to say, we will not be approaching the study of world religions in this way. Instead, we will begin by recognizing that the God of the Bible is the only true and living God, that the Bible is His revelation to man, that His Son is the only way of salvation, and that all ideas and practices devised by man must be evaluated in the context of who God is and what He has revealed to us.

## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

Aldous Huxley, in his introduction to an edition of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, argues that all religions are essentially the same because they share in common four fundamental doctrines of what he calls the Perennial Philosophy. These four doctrines are:

- The world of matter and individual consciousness is the manifestation of a Divine Ground apart from which it would be nonexistent.
- Human beings are capable of knowing the Divine directly in a way that unites the knower with what is known.
- Man possesses a temporal body and an eternal Self, which is one with the Divine.
- The purpose of life is to identify with one's eternal Self, and thus with the Divine.

Huxley, in making these assertions, may understand Hinduism, but he clearly does not understand Christianity. The same is true of all who assert that all religions are basically the same.

James Sire, in his book *The Universe Next Door*, argued that any worldview of any significance must answer five basic questions:

- “What is prime reality?” What he means by this is what has always existed - God, gods, matter, energy?
- “Who is man?” A machine, an animal, a god, or a creature made in God’s image and fallen in sin?
- “What happens to man at death?” Non-existence, reincarnation, some higher state of being, heaven, hell?
- “What is the basis of morality?” The need for survival, social constructs, personal desires, or God’s character and Word?
- “What is the meaning of human history?” Nothing at all, individual or racial perfection, or “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever”?

We will also be looking at basic questions as we study the major religions of the world, some of which overlap with those cited by Sire, and seek to distinguish the truth of Christianity from the errors stemming from man’s rebellion against God. Scripture is very clear in labeling all religions except for Christianity as idolatry - worshiping the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25) - and tracing their source to man’s lack of gratitude toward the true God who has revealed Himself in Creation. The uniqueness of Christianity can most clearly be seen in the answers it gives to three basic questions:

- Who is God? All religions profess belief in some sort of deity (though, as we will see, Buddhism in its purest form is atheistic), but none, despite the claims of some that “all religions worship the same God under different names,” believes in the Trinitarian God of the Bible. Incorporated with the doctrine of the Trinity is belief in the deity of Christ, which is professed by no other major religion and is essential for salvation (Romans 10:9).
- What is man? The fact that man is made in the image of God but is innately sinful since the Fall is a belief unique to Christianity. All other religions believe that man is essentially good. This has obvious consequences for our third major question.
- What must I do to be saved? Man-made religions uniformly answer this question by some form of human works. Only by man’s effort can he attain to bliss in the afterlife. Salvation by works is the logical conclusion of any belief in the goodness of man. Only in Christianity does one find salvation by the grace of God through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The Christian answers to these questions will be the touchstones by which the major religions of the world will be evaluated. They are equally important when seeking to communicate the Gospel to those who practice non-Christian religions.

## THE DESIGN OF THE COURSE

In this course we will be examining the four major non-Christian religions in the world today: Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. We will look at them in the chronological sequence of their founding. We will spend three weeks on each religion, examining its history, major teachings

and practices, and cultural impact (one thing that separates the major religions from secondary belief systems or cults is that the major religions are dominant in certain regions of the world, thus have a clear impact on the culture in those regions). In so doing, we hope to equip the members of the class to be faithful witnesses in a world where, according to some missionaries, the mission field is now coming to us.

## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS II

### Judaism - History

The early history of Judaism is familiar to Christians because it is a history we share. Judaism today, however, differs considerably from the religion described in our Old Testament, and today's lesson will seek to trace the changes that led from the call of Abraham and the giving of the law on Mount Sinai to the various forms of Judaism practiced in the world today.

#### THE DUALISTIC CHARACTER OF JUDAISM

The troublesome question, "What is a Jew?" that causes controversy even today in the state of Israel has its roots in the dual nature of Judaism. The problem is that Judaism is both an ethnic identity involving descent from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob and a set of religious beliefs and practices grounded in the Law of Moses, the *Torah*. Viewed from an ethnic perspective, one may be a Jew without espousing any particular set of religious beliefs or practices; if you have a Jewish mother, you are Jewish even if you are an atheist (though according to Orthodox rabbis in Israel, you may *not* be a Christian and retain your Jewish identity). On the other hand, the second definition leads to the possibility of conversion to Judaism by one born a Gentile. Though relatively rare throughout Jewish history, this indeed may qualify someone as a Jew.

#### THE ORIGINS OF THE JEWISH RELIGION

Abraham, called by God from Ur in the pagan society of the Old Babylonian Empire, is the father of the Jewish nation, but not all of the children of Abraham are Jews. The line of promise went through Isaac and Jacob, so the descendants of Ishmael and Esau - the various Arab peoples - view Abraham as their father (as we will see when we study Islam), but are not Jewish, and indeed have historically been the enemies of the Jews.

God made a covenant with Abraham that included a seed, a blessing, and a land. The promised seed came in the form of Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob, the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. The blessing was a promise that all who blessed Abraham would be blessed and all who cursed him would be cursed, and that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The land, of course, was the land of Canaan, which Abraham never possessed but was eventually inherited by his descendants.

#### FROM THE EXODUS TO THE CAPTIVITY

During the time of Joseph, the family of Jacob settled in Egypt in order to escape a famine in Canaan, where they were eventually enslaved for more than four hundred years. During this time, they grew from an extended family numbering seventy people to a small nation of tens of thousands. In the seminal event of Israel's early national history, God delivered them from Egypt by means of the ten plagues that showed His power over the non-existent gods of the Egyptians. In the Sinai peninsula, God gave to Moses, their leader, the laws that would serve as the foundation for the Jewish religion. These included not only moral principles (the Ten Commandments), but also civil law for governing the nation that Israel was to become and ceremonial laws stipulating the practices associated with Israelite worship. Thus the covenant that God had made with Abraham was

expanded by the enunciation of laws and practices that defined the righteous response to God's grace in their midst.

After a period of forty years wandering in the wilderness because of unbelief, the Israelites entered and conquered the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. The conquest of the Canaanites was incomplete, leading to the transitional period of the judges, one of political and religious chaos. After an abortive attempt at having a king "like all the other nations" in the person of Saul, God chose David, "a man after God's own heart," as the covenant ruler, with the promise that his seed would sit on the throne of Israel forever. He was succeeded by his son Solomon, during which time the territory controlled by Israel reached its maximum extent.

After Solomon's death, civil war broke out and the kingdom was divided between Solomon's son Rehoboam, who ruled the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and one of his officials, Jeroboam, who ruled the ten northern tribes (Israel). All of the northern kings were idolaters who took Israel farther and farther from God, and as a result the Northern Kingdom was conquered and the people dispersed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Some of the southern kings were godly, but that nation, too, fell into idolatry and was conquered and taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar's Neo-Babylonian Empire in 586 B.C.

During this period of nationhood, the Jewish religion, when it was faithfully followed (which sadly was not often), was led by three groups of theocratic officers - the kings, who ruled, not as absolute monarchs, but on behalf of God, the real King; the prophets, who spoke God's word to the people and their rulers and thus were the source of divine revelation; and the priests, who interceded with God on behalf of the people by offering sacrifices in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple.

## INTERTESTAMENTAL JUDAISM

None of the theocratic offices exists today. How, then, did the Judaism of the Old Testament become the Judaism that we see around us now? To begin with, important changes occurred in the Intertestamental Period.

### THE SYNAGOGUE

The destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar finished Judah as an independent nation, and the demolition of the Temple left the Jews with no focal point for their worship. During the Babylonian Captivity, Jews in exile began gathering for worship, prayer, and study of the Scriptures. These gatherings came to be called synagogues. While no sacrifices were offered in the synagogues, the prayers of the faithful were thought to take their place. When the Captivity ended and Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, few took him up on the offer. Thus the synagogues continued to function even when the Temple was rebuilt. Eventually, synagogues were established in Palestine itself, functioning as places of instruction and worship.

### THE SCRIBES

The synagogue was not the only means for preserving Jewish religion and culture that arose after the Captivity. According to tradition, Ezra, who was a scribe, founded an order of scribes to



copy and teach the Torah, thus preserving it for future generations. The scribes were so careful in their work that the text of the Torah was faithfully transmitted for centuries with few deviations, as the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrated.

## THE INFLUENCE OF HELLENISM

With the fall of the Persian Empire at the hands of Alexander the Great, Judaism was no longer left to carry on its worship unhindered. Alexander aggressively sought to spread Greek culture and language wherever he went. When his empire broke up after his death, his successors in Palestine, the Seleucids, were even more zealous. This led to a division among the Jews, some of whom gladly adopted Hellenistic culture and some of whom fought hard to maintain the traditions of the faith. Antiochus IV Epiphanes sought to force Greek ways on the Jews and eradicate the Jewish religion, which led to the Maccabean Revolt. The Maccabees were traditionalists (Hasidim), but once they defeated the Seleucids (a victory celebrated by the feast of Hanukkah) and gained power, they set up the Hasmonean monarchy, a kingdom ruled by the priestly family, which promoted the very Hellenistic values against which the family had originally fought.

## THE PHARISEES AND THE SADDUCEES

During the hundred-year reign of the Hasmonean dynasty, the Hasidim and the Hellenizers developed into political parties of sorts, known respectively as the Pharisees and the Sadducees. While the New Testament may leave the impression that the two were allies, they were in reality bitter opponents who could agree on nothing except that the threat posed by Jesus had to be eliminated. The theologically conservative Pharisees came to control the synagogues, while the liberal Sadducees controlled the high priesthood and the Temple bureaucracy. The Pharisees also produced the *Targums*, translating the Torah into Aramaic along with commentary.

## RABBINICAL INFLUENCE

Another important development during the Intertestamental Period was the rise of rabbinical schools. Rabbis were teachers of the Torah, and they debated extensively the proper interpretation and application of God's law. Their deliberations and comments were recorded in the *Mishnah* around A.D. 200. Jews came to believe that the oral law taught by the rabbis had been given by Moses at the same time as the Torah, but had never been written down. Thus the *Mishnah* came to have the same authority as God's written Word despite contradictory opinions among the rabbis, and in fact superseded it, as Jesus so frequently commented in His criticisms of the traditions of man followed by the scribes and Pharisees.

## JUDAISM AFTER THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

When the Jews revolted against Roman rule in A.D. 66, Titus and the Roman legions besieged the city of Jerusalem and destroyed it, and the Temple along with it, in A.D. 70. The Zealot rebels made their last stand in the fortress of Masada, but could not withstand another Roman siege and committed mass suicide in A.D. 73. The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple cost the Sadducees their power base, meaning that the Pharisees were victorious in the struggle for control of Judaism. Rabbinical tradition thus became the defining characteristic of the Jewish

religion, burying the Torah in multiple layers of commentary and laws and traditions intended to “fence the law.” These traditions were recorded in the *Mishnah*, which later was incorporated, along with rabbinical commentaries on the *Mishnah* called the *Gemara*, into an enormous body of work known as the *Talmud*. Two versions of the *Talmud* exist, one having its source in Palestine and the other in Babylon, though the two overlap considerably. These layers of rabbinical traditions and commentaries, because many were produced after the rise of Christianity, openly reject Christian interpretations of the Torah, teaching, for example, that Isaiah 53 is a picture of the suffering of the Jewish nation on behalf of the nations of the world.

The post-Christian era also saw the rise of the Massorettes, who, recognizing that Hebrew was rapidly becoming a dead language, devised means of preserving the ability of Jewish men to read the Torah in the synagogues. This was accomplished by inserting vowel points into the consonantal Hebrew text, indicating how the Hebrew words, which often were not understood by the reader, were to be pronounced. Their work preserved Hebrew until it was revived as a spoken language with the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.

## JUDAISM IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Judaism had been a legal religion under the Roman Empire, but with the emergence and eventual dominance of Christianity after the conversion of Constantine, Jews faced an increasing amount of persecution. As a result, when the Muslim Conquest swept through Palestine in the early seventh century, life became better for the Jews despite the fact that they faced the same restrictions as Christians did under Muslim rule. The bans on proselytism and public religious displays had little effect on them, so the only real drawback was the requirement of additional taxation. Jews and Arabs largely lived together in harmony, though not as harmonious as some Muslim apologists would have us believe, and Jews took part in the blossoming of learning experienced by the medieval Islamic world. At this time Judaism was divided between Sephardic Jews (centered in Spain) and Ashkenazi Jews, in Germany and Eastern Europe. Each group had its own synagogue practices, traditions, and even unique Jewish languages (Ladino in Spain and Yiddish in Eastern Europe).

Two great teachers emerged during the latter part of the Middle Ages - Rabbi Solomon ben Ezra (Rashi) and Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides). The former wrote extensive commentaries on the Torah and the Talmud, while the latter codified Jewish law, both biblical and traditional. Maimonides' Thirteen Principles are the closest Judaism has ever gotten to producing a creed. The late Middle Ages also saw the rise of Jewish mysticism, most notably the *Kabbalah*, which seeks to understand the Torah by finding hidden meanings by assigning numerical values to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (*Gematria*); for example, the mysterious reference to Shiloh in Genesis 49:10 was thought to be a reference to the Messiah because the two Hebrew words have the same numerical value.

The latter part of the Middle Ages was also a time of great persecution of Jews. Jewish ghettos were often burned by the Crusaders on their way to the Holy Land, and the First Crusade led to the massacre of Jews in Jerusalem, who were burned alive inside the Great Synagogue. They were expelled from England in 1290, France in 1306, and Spain in 1391. These expulsions, associated with charges of being “Christ-killers” and accusations of bringing on the Black Death, were accompanied by wholesale massacres and forced conversions. Where Jews were not expelled,

they were often subject to restrictions regarding what they could wear, where they could live, and what occupations they could pursue. Jews became notorious as moneylenders because Christians were not permitted to lend money at interest (usury), but the demand for ready money increasingly necessitated the practice.

The rise of the Ottoman Turks in the Middle East brought increased persecution to Jews, while in Europe the Spanish Inquisition was used against the Marranos (literally “pigs,” a pejorative term used for Jews who had converted to Christianity in order to keep their homes and businesses). Ferdinand and Isabella entrusted Tomas de Torquemada with the task of ferreting out conversions of convenience, leading to the loss of property, imprisonment, and execution of many Jews. Muslim converts (Moriscos) were treated to the same tender mercies.

## FROM THE REFORMATION TO THE PRESENT

Jewish life in Europe improved somewhat with the coming of the Reformation. With the exception of Luther, Protestants generally favored toleration of Jews, though occasional massacres still occurred. Most of these, however, were carried out on political rather than religious grounds, since the Jews were often perceived as supporting the ruling powers to whom they lent money. In the face of these persecutions, the Hasidic movement arose in Poland under the leadership of Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), a supposed miracle-worker. Hasidism borrowed extensively from the Kabbalah and emphasized the devotional life and emotional, ecstatic prayer, singing and dancing as opposed to the careful study that characterized rabbinic Judaism. Hasidic Jews were often excommunicated from Jewish synagogues because of their unorthodox practices.

The Enlightenment brought increased toleration to Jews in Europe. Voltaire, among others, argued in favor of religious toleration because he did not believe religion important enough to persecute anyone over. This increased acceptance had its downside, however, as toleration led to assimilation, and many feared that Judaism was losing its distinctive character. Some even feared that Jews would disappear from the face of the earth through intermarriage with the Gentile world. Jews responded to this in various ways. The post-Enlightenment era saw the rise of Reform Judaism, with reactions against this liberal variant appearing in the forms of Orthodox and Conservative Judaism.

Too often, however, the toleration experienced by Jews was on the surface only. The Dreyfus Affair in France (1894-1906) showed how deeply anti-Semitism was ingrained in the European mind. Meanwhile, the aftermath of Romanticism in Germany led to teachings about the importance of racial purity that were to bear evil fruit in the twentieth century. Pogroms continued in Russia and Poland as well. These led to the rise of Zionism, led by Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), an Austrian journalist who covered the Dreyfus Affair, leading him to become an advocate for a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. This movement was assisted by the Balfour Declaration during World War I, which lent British support to the Zionist dream; unfortunately, the British at the same time were encouraging Arab nationalism in order to undermine the Ottoman Empire, which aligned with the Central Powers.

After World War I, Palestine became a League of Nations mandate under the control of the British. Jews moved to the land in relatively small numbers, often depending on the amount of

persecution they were experiencing at home. As the number of Jews increased, the Arabs became more and more concerned, especially when the British began talking about partitioning the land between Jews and Arabs. The trickle of Jewish settlers became a flood during and after World War II; ironically Hitler did more than almost anyone else to bolster the Zionist cause. The state of Israel was established in 1948 by the partition of the Palestine Mandate, leading immediately to war between Israel and her neighbors, which has continued periodically to the present.

## BRANCHES OF JUDAISM

### ORTHODOX JUDAISM

Orthodox Jews are the true successors of the New Testament Pharisees. They observe strictly the laws and traditions, including Sabbath observance, dress, family life, dietary laws, and the Jewish feasts. They reject the mystical forms of Judaism and gained a separate identity with the rise of Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century.

### REFORM JUDAISM

This is the liberal branch of Judaism, which has much in common with liberal Protestantism. They believe that adaptation to modern science, culture, and life in general is essential if Judaism is to survive and hang onto future generations. Reform Jews reject dietary laws, interpret the Torah loosely, and worship in the vernacular. Key figures in Reform Judaism include Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) in Germany and Isaac Wise (1819-1900), the founder of Hebrew Union Seminary, in the United States.

### CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Conservative Judaism was established by those who believed Judaism needed to adapt, but that the Reform Jews had gone too far. Rising in both Europe and America, where it was led by Solomon Schechter (1850-1915), Conservative Judaism retains some of the traditions while rejecting others.

### HASIDIM

This mystical sect continues to exist on the boundaries of Judaism today. It has various branches associated with different leaders, including the Lubavitchers, by far the largest and most widespread Hasidic group, who believe that their most recent leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), is the Messiah.

### RECONSTRUCTIONISM

This most radical branch of Judaism was founded by Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), who rejected all forms of theism in favor of social utility. He was one of the signers of *Humanist Manifesto II*.

## MESSIANIC JUDAISM

In the twentieth century, groups of Jews who had become Christians sought to retain their Jewish roots by combining the worship of *Yeshua* with traditional Jewish practices. They met in Messianic synagogues, observed Jewish feasts, and to some extent followed Jewish practices of dress and diet. This blend of Christianity and Judaism was used by some as a means of evangelizing Jewish people. Messianic Judaism also tends to have close ties to Zionism, supporting the state of Israel, and to Dispensationalism, expecting the restoration of a godly people in the Promised Land, and in some cases even the rebuilding of the Temple. This form of Jewish Christianity was heavily critiqued by Israeli pastor Baruch Maoz in his book, *Judaism is Not Jewish*, where he argued that any attempt to undermine the unity of the body of Christ by separating Jews and Gentiles is contrary to the teachings of the New Testament.



## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS III

### Judaism - Doctrine and Practice

For obvious reasons, Judaism and Christianity share much of the same foundational belief system. This includes belief that Yahweh is the only true God, that He is the Creator of all things (though liberal Jews have moved away from this conviction as much as liberal Protestants have), that man is made in God's image, that human history is the outworking of His plan, that He has revealed Himself in His Word, and that He is the standard by which morality should be judged. While this shared foundation is an important one, the differences in the ways these ideas are understood are equally significant.

#### JEWISH DOCTRINE

Any attempt to enunciate a doctrinal basis for Judaism is bound to fail because Judaism is not a creedal religion. Jews have always been more concerned with how to live than with what to believe. As noted last week, one can believe anything (except Christianity, of course) or nothing and still be considered a Jew. Nonetheless, one attempt to list the basic beliefs of Judaism was the Thirteen Articles promulgated by Moses Maimonides in the twelfth century:

1. Belief in the existence of a Creator and Providence - As with Christians, Jews believe that God made the world and everything in it and is active in the affairs of men.
2. Belief in His unity - Christians believe in the unity of God as well, but for Jews this belief eliminates the doctrine of the Trinity, and along with it the deity of Christ. However, the "angel of the Lord" passages and verses like Psalm 110:1 were so troublesome to rabbinical commentators that some scholars actually argued for the existence of two Yahwehs.
3. Belief in His incorporeality - God is not a material being. While Jews deny the incarnation of God in Christ, they recognize the existence of theophanies in the Old Testament.
4. Belief in His eternity - God always was and always will be.
5. Belief that to Him alone is worship due - "You shall have no other gods before me."
6. Belief in the words of the prophets - The prophetic writings are considered to be God's revelation to mankind. The potency of this belief, however, is largely lost because of the teaching concerning the Oral Law, which is the basis for the huge body of rabbinical traditions that define Jewish belief and practice far more than the written Torah that they are supposedly intended to supplement. In reality, the Talmud, with its many anti-Christian interpretations of Old Testament passages, defines contemporary Judaism to a much greater extent than does the Torah.
7. Belief that Moses was the greatest prophet - The Old Testament teaches this, but the New Testament affirms that John the Baptist superseded the ministries of all the Old Testament prophets, and of course that Jesus was the fulfillment of the entire scope of prophetic ministry.
8. Belief in the revelation of the Mosaic Law at Sinai - The Torah may be the Word of God, but the conclusions about the extent to which it is to be followed vary considerably among different segments of Judaism.
9. Belief in the immutability of the revealed Law - Rabbinical traditions have, as Jesus taught, so distorted the Law that it is hardly recognizable in the form in which it is practiced by Jews today. On the other hand, Orthodox Jews continue to practice those aspects of the Law

- (excluding the sacrifices, of course) that were never intended to be permanent because they pointed to the coming of the Messiah, who fulfilled them.
10. Belief that God is omniscient - Here Christians and Jews agree.
  11. Belief in retribution in this world and hereafter - The Retributive Principle - that those who do good are blessed and those who do evil will suffer for it - lay behind the attitudes of Job's comforters, Asaph's complaint in Psalm 73, the crowd's question to Jesus in Luke 13, and the amazement of the disciples about Jesus' response to the Rich Young Ruler. Declining belief in the afterlife among Jews has made this teaching increasingly problematic, especially in light of the suffering Jews have experienced for centuries, culminating in the Holocaust.
  12. Belief in the coming of the Messiah - Jews in Maimonides' day may have looked for the coming of the Promised Messiah, but most Jews today do not. Even in Jesus' day, Jews were looking for a political and military deliverer, but the failures of rebellions led by Theudas and Simon bar Kochba disillusioned many. Some today have concluded that the Jewish nation itself is the Messiah, chosen by God to suffer in order to bring all mankind to the knowledge of the truth and an earthly kingdom of peace and prosperity, denominated by some the Messianic Age. Some have even found in Darwinism support for the eventual perfectability of the human race.
  13. Belief in the resurrection of the dead - As noted before, so little attention is given to the afterlife among most Jews that few even give lipservice to this doctrine. Those who do believe in an afterlife tend to be universalists, arguing that all eventually go to Abraham's Bosom, though the wicked must spend a year in Gehenna first.

While Maimonides' thirteen principles demonstrate the uniqueness of Christianity in contrast to Judaism in many ways, several important doctrines are omitted from the list. The first of these is the doctrine of man. While Jews believe that man was made in God's image and fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, they do not believe in total depravity. Sin is a weakness rather than a disability. In fact, human nature is essentially good. After all, God would not command man to be holy if man lacked the capacity to do so. No sin can mar the relationship between God and man irreparably.

The second flows naturally from the first, and that is the doctrine of salvation. If man is able to live a holy life of obedience to God, then that is what God requires. Repentance, prayer, acts of kindness, and carrying out the appropriate rituals satisfy God, who in turn grants pardon and forgiveness. The way in which salvation is pictured goes far to explain why practice looms so much larger than belief in the Jewish religion. Note, too, that absent a belief in the afterlife, God's favor is understood in terms of the Retributive Principle described above.

Thirdly, we need to understand what Jews mean when they describe themselves as the Chosen People. From a biblical perspective, the Jews were chosen by God for at least four reasons - to demonstrate His power before the unbelieving world, to be the recipients of His revelation, both oral and written, to be the vehicle through whom the Messiah would come, and thus the ones through whom God would ultimately bless all nations. The Jewish exclusivism portrayed in the Gospels is relatively rare among Jews today. While a separate Jewish identity is valued highly, its purpose is to bring blessing to the world, whether through suffering (this is how Isaiah 53 is interpreted; see also Tevye's plaintive cry in *Fiddler on the Roof*: "I know, I know, we are the chosen people. But once in a while can't you choose somebody else?"), example, or leadership, finally leading the entire human race into an age of peace and prosperity.



## JEWISH PRACTICE

While Judaism is far more a religion of doing than of believing, the extent to which the practices that characterize Judaism are actually followed varies greatly depending on the variety of Judaism of which one is speaking. Thus the generalizations that follow are simply that - generalizations, and shouldn't be thought to apply to all Jewish people.

### SYNAGOGUE WORSHIP

Jews gather to worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Saturday), though some Reform congregations worship on Sundays to conform to the calendar of the broader culture; many congregations also have instructional periods for children, often on Sundays. A cantor leads the worship, which includes songs, prayers, and the reading of the Torah, all carried out in the context of familiar rituals. The primary function of the rabbi is teaching the Law. The worship service of the synagogue, in fact, provided the pattern for much of early Christian worship, so we should not be surprised that many of the components are the same.

### THE SABBATH

By the first century, the practice of fencing the Law had deeply affected Jewish observance of the Sabbath. The traditions that had been incorporated into Sabbath observance led to the many conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders of His day - picking grain, healing the sick, carrying one's bed, none of which was prohibited in the Old Testament Law. The extent of Sabbath observance among Jews today again varies from one branch to another. Orthodox Jews follow the traditions very carefully, avoiding all kinds of work on the Sabbath, even to the extent of hiring Gentile custodians so someone is available to turn on the lights and heat in the synagogue. They also live within walking distance of the synagogue in order to avoid using any form of transportation or exceeding a "Sabbath day's journey." The Friday night family meal is also part of Sabbath observance.

### JEWISH FEASTS

Jews observe the feasts outlined in Leviticus 23 - Passover (Pesach), Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost (Shavuot), Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah), the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and the Feast of Booths (Sukkoth), though some of these have acquired additional meanings since they were instituted in the time of Moses. Along with these, Jews also observe Purim (instituted at the time of Esther), Hanukkah (also called the Festival of Lights, a celebration of the victory of the Maccabees and the purification of the Temple), Simchat Torah (a celebration of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai), and the Ninth of Av (mourning in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70).

### FAMILY LIFE

Family life is also governed by a series of rituals, from the circumcision of Jewish boys on the eighth day to *bar mitzvahs* for boys and *bat mitzvahs* for girls, wedding ceremonies, and the saying of *Kaddish* after the death of a Jewish person. Regular rituals include daily prayers, Sabbath

meals and observances, and following dress and dietary regulations. Kosher rules have become quite extensive and are a good example of how far the rabbis took the practice of fencing the Law. Deuteronomy 14:21 says, “do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.” The command has no context, so we really have no idea what it means; one might guess that it forbids some pagan practice engaged in by the surrounding Canaanite tribes. But this law is the root of kosher practice. Note the following:

- This practice is easy to avoid in a rural setting where you raise your own goats.
- As society becomes more complex, especially in an urban setting where you buy your milk and goats from those who raise them, who can tell where the products you buy really come from?
- Therefore to be safe, you should never make any dishes that contain both milk and meat - beef stroganoff is out of the question. Who knows whether the milk you are using came from the mother of the calf whose meat is part of the meal?
- Because people don’t always clean their dishes thoroughly, a careful kosher household will have separate sets of dishes for meat products and dairy products, so no possibility exists of mixing the two.
- In fact, because food sometimes spills in the process of cooking, you really need two different ovens . . . .

#### DOING GOOD

Part of what it means to be the Chosen People is to be a redemptive presence in the world. Jews therefore see doing good for others as an important part of righteous living. The extension of this belief has led to the enormous impact Jews have had on the history of the world, far beyond their numbers, in all fields of endeavor.

## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS IV

### Judaism - Cultural Impact

The question of cultural impact only applies to the world's major religions, because only they boast a sufficient number of followers to impact the cultures in which they exist. As far as Judaism is concerned, cultural dominance must be viewed somewhat differently from that of other major religions. While Christianity has shaped much of the Western world, Islam dominates the Middle East and North Africa, Hinduism is a major influence in India, and Buddhism in the Far East, Judaism is a significant cultural factor in only one place - a state smaller than New Jersey, located in the midst of hostile Islamic nations on all sides. When we look at the cultural influence of Judaism, therefore, we must consider it under three headings.

#### THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

As noted several times already, Judaism and Christianity share a common foundation. That common foundation has played a major role in shaping the character of Western civilization. What are some of the key aspects of that foundation?

- There is only one God (Islam, the other major monotheistic religion, borrowed this idea from Judaism and Christianity). This implies the unity of truth and the fact that truth has its source in God, not man.
- The universe is created by God and is sustained by Him. We therefore do not live in a chance universe, but one with a purpose. Furthermore, God is active in his world; man is not the final authority or "the measure of all things."
- Man is created in God's image, therefore human life has meaning and value. The weak and poor are to be cared for, not discarded as of no worth. The meaning of man's life is to be found outside himself, in obedience to the God who made him.
- History has a beginning, a direction, and an end, therefore a purpose. God's plan for mankind is to be sought and followed.
- God's character and God's law are the standards for morality. Right and wrong are not determined by man according to his whims or changes in society, but according to God's Word. These standards do not change (many Jews, along with many professing Christians, have long ago deviated from this important principle, with dire consequences).

When considering these basic principles, one can easily see how they have influenced Western civilization, but also how the decline of Western civilization has been caused by deviation from the Judeo-Christian worldview.

#### JEWS IN THE DIASPORA

Perhaps the most amazing fact about Judaism is its continued existence. Societies of the past have risen, flourished for a time, declined, and finally disappeared from the scene of world history,

taking their religions with them. Even the religions of the great empires of the past - Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome - are no more, providing nothing more today than a basis for scholarly research. Yet Judaism, originating in an obscure tribe in the Ancient Near East, never large in numbers, a nation that for a few hundred years was no more than a minor player in the political world of the great empires listed above, often conquered and finally destroyed, leaving no national identity, continues to exist, and in doing so continues to have a major impact on our modern world in which Jews represent no more than a tiny minority. How can this be?

- Jewish identity and self-consciousness have remained strong for four thousand years. God emphasized the importance of Israel retaining its identity, not mixing with the nations around them, largely as a matter of avoiding false worship and idolatry. Intermarriage was explicitly condemned for this reason. The disastrous consequences of ignoring this prohibition can be seen often, from the cohabitation with the Moabites (Number 25) to the pagan wives of Solomon (I Kings 11:1-13) to the marriage of Ahab and Jezebel (I Kings 16:29-33) to the mixed marriages undone by Ezra (Ezra 9-11) to the loss of identity of the Jews of the Northern Kingdom through intermarriage - the origin of the Samaritans.

After the return from the Captivity, however, the Jews again began to emphasize their distinctiveness. The refusal to intermarry with Gentiles and the perpetuation of distinctive practices both played a role in this. Furthermore, this distinctiveness tended to be self-perpetuating. Because Jews were “different,” they were often persecuted and forced to live in ghettos, and that persecution drove them to find comfort in their Jewish identity; this (sometimes vicious) cycle kept the Jews from being assimilated as so many other conquered peoples over the years have been. Thus the Jews have not only preserved their religion, in a sense they have been preserved *by* their religion. Ultimately, of course, they have been preserved by God.

- The idea that religion is relevant to all of life was common in the ancient world, but has been largely discarded in favor of secularism in “advanced” societies since the eighteenth century. For the observant Jew, however (as for the true Christian), all of life is sacred and under the control of God. Home and family life, the business world, and interaction with society in all its functions take part in the realm of the sacred.
- Unlike the Jews of Jesus’ day, Judaism through most of history has shown concern for the welfare of the Gentile world. Unlike Christians and the Jews of Jesus’ day, Jews today do not believe that the Gentiles need to be evangelized (the view of the afterlife described last week contributes to this). Instead, the task of the Chosen People is to lead all nations to morality, prosperity, and peace by the example they set, especially in the way that they respond to the suffering that is often their lot. Thus Jews are motivated to prosper and to lead, which helps to explain the disproportionate influence they have had on the societies in which they have lived for the last two thousand years. After all, how many great philosophers, scientists, inventors, businessmen, artists, and writers have been Jewish? One might begin with names like Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Baruch Spinoza, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Marc Chagall, Felix Mendelssohn, Jonas Salk, the Fuggers and the Rothschilds, Franz Kafka, J.D. Salinger - the list goes on and on.

## JUDAISM IN ISRAEL

Israel is the world's only Jewish state. Founded in 1948 as a result of the United Nations partition of the British Mandate of Palestine, it is secular and democratic, unlike its neighbors, which are almost all explicitly Muslim and authoritarian. Yet Judaism influences the culture of Israel in a number of ways.

- The importance of Jewish ritual - For many years the mechanisms of state and society came to a grinding halt on the Jewish holy days, including the Sabbath. This was modified after the surprise attack by the surrounding Arab nations on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, in 1973.
- The influence of the Orthodox minority - Orthodox Jews make up only a small portion (about 10%) of Israel's population, yet their influence is far out of proportion to their numbers. Because Israel is a multi-party democracy, minority parties often hold the balance in forming governing coalitions, thus the Orthodox parties have been able to pass legislation favorable to their understanding of Judaism by throwing their weight behind one party or another in order to gain a parliamentary majority. Consequences have included restrictions on public transportation (for a while including flights by El Al, the national airline) on the Sabbath and the exemption of many Orthodox Jewish men from universal mandatory military service on the ground that they are rabbinical students. The Orthodox have also been at the forefront of local and national opposition to the growth of Christian churches in the country.
- The Law of Return - Israel has a very unusual immigration policy. In most countries, immigrants must wait many years before obtaining full citizenship, but in Israel, a Jewish immigrant can gain citizenship immediately under the Law of Return. The law has made Israel a refuge for persecuted Jews everywhere, especially in Russia and Eastern Europe, and a large percentage of Israeli immigrants are Russian speakers. The Law of Return has no religious requirements; one simply must be the child of a Jewish mother. Immigrants who apply for immediate citizenship may be Orthodox, Conservative, Reform Jews, or atheists. The role played by Orthodox rabbis in determining whether an applicant meets the qualifications, however, means that ethnic Jews who are Christians have been routinely excluded from the benefits of the law.
- American support - Since its founding, the United States has been Israel's closest friend and greatest supporter (at least until the Obama administration) for two major reasons. One of these is the size, wealth, and influence of the U.S. Jewish population, and the other is the history of strong evangelical Christian support for Israel, despite the fact that the Jewish state has not always been friendly to Christians (though it has been much friendlier than its neighbors). One of the main causes of this evangelical support is the prevalence of Dispensational eschatology, which teaches that a revived state of Israel will play a key role in the fulfillment of end-times prophecies in Scripture.



## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS V

### Hinduism - History

Hinduism is a religion without a founder and lacking a clear beginning, though it is closely tied to India as its place of origin. It also has no creed and no organizational structure; in fact, Hindus differ widely among themselves with regard to the vital questions at the center of our study - the nature of God, man, and salvation. Hinduism evolved gradually over time; that development may be divided into three stages.

#### VEDIC PERIOD (c.1500 - 500 B.C.)

The vast Indian subcontinent, with its enormous population, hundreds of languages, hundreds of thousands of small agricultural villages, and dependence on the rivers as a source of life (especially the Ganges) provides the foundation for the character and diversity of Hinduism. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence that before the rise of the Hindu religion, India practiced a religion emphasizing nature and fertility gods and goddesses and considered the major rivers sacred. The most coherent of these ancient civilizations appeared among the Dravidians in the southern part of the subcontinent.

In about 1500 B.C., Aryans from the north invaded India and conquered the native Dravidian population. They brought with them their own language, which evolved into Sanskrit, the language in which the Hindu holy texts are written, and their own gods and goddesses, similar in many ways to those of the Greeks and Romans. They offered animal sacrifices to their nature deities, and these practices were added to the asceticism, purification rites, and belief in reincarnation common among the Dravidians.

The Aryans also brought with them a book of nature hymns known as the Rig Veda. These were sung to honor the gods as sacrifices were offered to elicit their cooperation. Later other Vedas were added, largely for the purpose of assuring that rituals were performed correctly in order to produce the desired results. Knowledge of these rituals was restricted to the priests, the Brahmins, who as a result gained great power. The caste system developed as a way for the Aryans to maintain their distinctiveness from the Dravidians. Aryans alone were “twice-born,” giving them the right to wear the sacred thread, conferred when a man came of age (similar to a Jewish bar mitzvah). Aryans themselves were divided according to their place in society into three castes - the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriyas (warriors), and the Vaisyas (merchants and farmers). The Dravidians were restricted to the peasant caste (Sudras).

The Dravidians did not calmly accept their lower-class status, but rose up in rebellion against their Aryan overlords. These wars led to the Hindu legends of wars between the Aryan gods and Dravidian demons. Despite the subjugation of the Dravidians, their already-existing forms of worship and beliefs were gradually incorporated into Hinduism.

#### PHILOSOPHIC PERIOD (c.500 B.C. - A.D. 500)

As we will see next week, the Aryans were philosophical monists, believing that all is one and all is God. When the Dravidian belief in reincarnation was incorporated into the emerging

religion, it became the main path by which one achieved union with the All, also known as the World Soul or Brahman (not to be confused with Brahma, the Creator God, or Brahmins, the priests). The writers of the Philosophic Period focused on the question of how the cycles of reincarnation could be ended, bringing final union with Brahman that would result in no further incarnations being initiated. Major works of Hindu literature arose during this time in an effort to answer this question.

- The Upanishads - These writings, considered along with the Vedas as the primary inspired scriptures of Hinduism, focus on the idea that each individual has within him a soul, or *atman*, that is really part of Brahman. Everything else is *maya*, or illusion, and needs to be disregarded. The journey to absorption into the Brahman involves the practice of one or more forms of *yoga*, designed to liberate the *atman* from the illusory world in which it is imprisoned.
- Brahmanas and Sutras - These are manuals for conducting rituals for almost anything imaginable.
- Epic poetry - The two greatest Hindu epics appeared during this time, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The former speaks of the exploits of Krishna and contains the most famous of all Indian holy books, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in which Krishna explains to a warrior named Arjuna how to attain union with Brahman. These writings are secondary to the Vedas and Upanishads in authority, but tend to be much more popular and better-known.

The Philosophic Period is also the era during which Hinduism split into two major groups. By far the larger is the Vedanta branch of Hinduism, which is monistic and is the source of most of the teachings we will consider next week. The minority branch, Sankhya or dualistic Hinduism, later spawned Jainism, with its extremes of asceticism, and Buddhism, which grew to become a major religion in its own right.

One of the paradoxes we will consider next week is the Hindu understanding of God. They are both pantheistic and polytheistic - something no easier to comprehend than the Christian belief that God is three in one. The worship of many gods existed in India long before the arrival of the Aryans, but with their arrival the idea of the *Trimurti* - three chief gods over all the rest - emerged (what follows is adapted from *Eerdmans Handbook to the World's Religions*, p.184). In the Vedic Period, these three chief gods were identified as Agni (life-force, god of fire and sacrifice), Indra (the god of the skies and of warfare), and Varuna (the upholder of the cosmos, the rewarder and punisher). In the Philosophic Period, these were replaced by more familiar deities:

- Brahma, the Creator, of whom nothing can be known and who is separate from mankind. He is pictured with four heads for the four Vedas and four arms for the four castes. His consort is Sarasvati, the goddess of truth and knowledge, associated with the arts.
- Vishnu, the Preserver, who controls human destiny. His consort is Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune and beauty, who is often pictured holding lotus blossoms. Vishnu came to earth in the form of ten *avatars*. These are:
  - Matsya - The fish who appeared at the time of the Flood to warn humans.
  - Kurma - A tortoise who rescued treasures from the Flood.
  - Varaha - A boar who raised the earth from the Flood.
  - Nara-Simha - A man-lion who defeated demons.



- Vamana - A dwarf who defeated demons.
- Parusha-Rama - He destroyed the Kshatriyas who sought world domination.
- Rama-Chandra - The hero of the *Ramayana*, he epitomizes all virtue in his battle against evil in the world.
- Krishna - The most popular of Hindu gods and the one to whom the most temples are erected, he is the hero of the *Mahabharata*, a king, warrior, and lover.
- Buddha - Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, is considered an avatar of Vishnu and is perhaps the only historical figure in the entire list.
- Kalki - The tenth avatar of Vishnu is yet to come. Guru Maharaj Ji (b.1957), second leader of the Divine Light Mission, claimed while he was still a teenager that he was the tenth avatar of Vishnu. He eventually gave up the claim.
- Shiva, the Destroyer, is the source of both good and evil and is closely associated with the process of reincarnation, since he both destroys the body and recreates new ones. He is usually pictured with a cobra. His consort is Kali, the goddess of death (cf. *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*), who is often pictured wearing a necklace of skulls and standing on Shiva with her tongue sticking out. The followers of Shiva include flesh-denying ascetics and those who seek holiness through extremes of heat, cold, or pain (walking barefoot on hot coals, lying on beds of nails, etc.), while the followers of Kali included the “holy assassins” known as the Thuggee (from which we get our word “thug”).

#### MODERN PERIOD (from A.D. 500)

The Philosophic Period saw the production of the last of the Hindu scriptures and the solidification of the concept of the godhead. What has followed since largely takes on the character of interpretation. Three major interpreters of the great writings of the Hindu religion in the modern era may be singled out.

- Shankara (c.788-820) - He is best known for his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita*, along with hymns and other writings. After the rise of Buddhism, he did much to restore Hinduism to prominence in India. He emphasized mysticism as the way of escape from the illusion of *maya*. This included escape from the idea of the self, and even the idea of God.
- Ramanuja (d.1137) - He, too, wrote a commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita*. He taught that the cosmos was God’s body and *karma* was his will. He rejected the monism of Shankara.
- Madhva (1197-1276) - He emphasized the differences among all beings - between souls and inanimate matter, between God and mankind, and between each man and his fellow-men. For him, *karma* is highly individualized.

As India came into contact with the West, the syncretism of Hinduism allowed it to absorb Western influence without changing significantly. Some Hindus, for instance, responded to Christian missionaries by adding Jesus to their god shelves; some even consider Him an avatar of one of their deities. When the British gained control of India, they attempted to force a number of changes in Hindu practice with varying degrees of success. They opposed the caste system (a total failure), ritual prostitution, *sati* (burning a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre; William Carey played a major role in outlawing this practice when he proved that the Hindu holy books didn’t teach it), and untouchability (something also strongly opposed by Mahatma Gandhi).



## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS VI

### Hinduism - Doctrine and Practice

Because Hinduism is a religion without a creed, discussion of Hindu teachings is difficult. This is true not only because of the absence of a formal system of belief, but also because Hindus vary widely among themselves in what they believe, even on basics like the nature of God, the nature of man, and the way of salvation.

#### HINDU WORLDVIEW

The underlying worldview of Hinduism is outlined by James Sire in *The Universe Next Door* under eight points. The differences from the Christian worldview are obvious and significant.

- *Atman* is *Brahman*; all else is *maya*. Vedanta Hinduism, on which we will focus today, is monistic and pantheistic. The eternal part of the individual, his *atman* or soul, is part of the World Soul, *Brahman*, and relates to it as a wave on the sea, emerging briefly in many incarnations until finally settling down to become one with the All. Everything else - time, space, matter, the body, the individual personality - is *maya*, or illusion.
- Some things are more “one” than others. What Sire means here is that Hinduism recognizes a hierarchy of consciousness. Rocks have none, animals a little, and even among men levels of participation in the World Soul vary because some are tied to the body, some to their consciousness, and a very few are free of these things and have become one with *Brahman*.
- Many roads lead to oneness with the World Soul. We will consider this later in today’s lesson, but note now that Hindus are syncretistic; some acknowledge that other religions may also be ways to union with *Brahman*.
- Achieving oneness with *Brahman* requires superseding personality. For a Hindu, “denying oneself” literally involves repudiating all that makes one a distinct individual.
- Achieving oneness with *Brahman* requires superseding knowledge. While Hindus speak of knowledge, they do not mean something in the cognitive realm, but rather intuitive oneness with the All. Anything that distinguishes one thing from another is *maya*. Western ideas of logic and consistency are foreign to the Hindu mind.
- Achieving oneness with *Brahman* requires superseding good and evil. Though moral uprightness is considered a prerequisite for following the paths set forth by the religion, ultimately the difference between right and wrong is another one of those distinctives that must be set aside. Pleasure and pain, cruelty and kindness, death and life in the long run do not matter. At the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna worries that those against whom he must do battle include friends and relatives. When he asks Krishna if he should lay down his arms, his charioteer advises him that life and death don’t really matter, death is not real, so he should kill them all.

- Death is the end of the individual consciousness, but not of the essence of the person. The *atman* lives on, either to enter another body or to unite forever with *Brahman*.
- Achieving oneness with *Brahman* requires superseding time. Time, too, is an illusion, meaning that history is cyclical, having no purpose or direction. The ultimate goal is to escape from the cycle of history and gain union with *Brahman* (“Stop the world, I want to get off!”). Thus the events of life, both for individuals and for the human race as a whole, are meaningless.

## HINDUISM AS A WAY OF LIFE

If Hinduism lacks a clear theology, then we should expect that it is best understood as a manner of living. Huston Smith, in his book *The Religions of Man*, lays out the key aspects of the lifestyle that defines Hinduism. After growing up the son of missionary parents, he tried other religions, Hinduism among them, before finally settling on a very broad version of Christianity that is more syncretistic than anything else. The material in this section comes from his widely-respected work.

### “YOU CAN HAVE WHAT YOU WANT”

He begins his chapter on Hinduism with a startling statement, arguing that the essence of Hinduism is, “You can have what you want.” The trick, of course, is to find out what you really want. For the Hindu, this journey of discovery begins with the obvious and ends in a very different place entirely. The Path of Desire begins with pleasure, but hedonism does not satisfy for long. The pilgrim then moves on to a desire for success and reputation, but that, too, turns out to be empty and lacking in ultimate fulfillment. He then moves on to the Path of Renunciation, which takes his mind off of himself and focuses on others; he lives by duty rather than personal goals. That, too, eventually becomes empty, leading him to seek liberation from the self entirely in order to merge with the Infinite and find true being, knowledge, and joy. But how does one pursue this journey? Hindus believe in many ways to salvation, summarized in the four paths below.

### FOUR PATHS

The four paths to salvation (i.e., liberation from the self and all forms of illusion) are different forms of *yoga*, which is *not* simply a form of good exercise.

- *Jnana Yoga* - the Path of Knowledge. This is the shortest and hardest path because of the mental energy and concentration required. Few people are capable of following this path. It requires hearing the words of your teacher, thinking about the meaningless of all but the *atman*, and meditating so that the *atman* is seen as one with *Brahman*. As the *Upanishads* say, “That thou art, other than Whom there is no other seer, hearer, thinker, or agent.”
- *Bhakti Yoga* - the Path of Love. This is the most common and most popular form of yoga and involves a life of love for God however you might picture Him; any “chosen ideal” will do, whether Krishna or Buddha or Christ. Images play a major role here, and are seen as runways to flight that draws the heart to God (Hindus deny that they worship idols or are

polytheists - these are simply representations of the Unseen All). Myths are important as well. No one cares whether Krishna or Rama really lived or not; their stories move men to love God. Love is also cultivated by repeating the name of God endlessly, often in the form of a *mantra*, a secret syllable such as “OM” assigned to each person by his teacher.

- *Karma Yoga* - the Path of Work. Work must be done for God and not for oneself. One must be detached, having no concern for the outcome of one’s actions. In fact, you must cultivate the ability to look at yourself and what you are doing from a distance so that you are able to say, “I do nothing at all.” Karma came to be associated with the actions appropriate to each station in life and role in society (caste). To fulfill your karma is to come back into a higher station when reincarnated. To fail to do so, or to seek to fulfill the karma of a different caste, is to doom yourself to a lower station in the next life. Note that in Hinduism there is no concept of forgiveness; everything works by pure and precise cause and effect. What you are now is the result of your deeds in your previous lives, and what you do now will determine your next life in the cycle of transmigration of souls.
- *Raja Yoga* - the Royal Path. This involves direct experience of the Divine by “willed introversion,” focusing first on the body, then the conscious self, then the unconscious self, and finally the *atman*. This may be accomplished in eight steps.
  1. Five Abstentions - from injuring others, lying, stealing, sensuality, and greed.
  2. Five Observances - cleanliness, contentment, self-control, studiousness, and the contemplation of the Divine.
  3. Eliminate bodily distractions by cultivating the lotus position.
  4. Learn to control your breathing.
  5. Learn to block out all sensory input.
  6. Concentrate the mind on one thing (one’s navel?).
  7. Become one with the object on which you are concentrating.
  8. Forget the object. You are now one with the All and have achieved Enlightenment.

#### FOUR STAGES OF LIFE

One who pursues yoga in any of its forms will typically pass through four stages of life, sometimes requiring many lifetimes to do so. These are the student, the householder, the hermit, and the monk - the *sannyasin* who has renounced everything, especially his own identity.

#### FOUR STATIONS

Part of the hierarchical aspect of Hinduism is the idea of caste, which appeared very early in the history of the religion, being an aspect of the Aryan beliefs that they brought with them to India. The conquered Dravidians, of course, became the lowest caste. Caste is associated with the idea of karma and has done much to stratify Indian society and keep it that way (more next week). The four major castes, as noted last week, are the Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaisyas (merchants and farmers; essentially the middle class), and Sudras (the peasant Dravidian population). India also has millions of outcastes who are beneath the caste system altogether. These four major

castes are divided into thousands of sub-castes; these divisions determine not only social status, but also eligibility for marriage.

## HINDU PRACTICE AND TRADITIONS

Hindu practices and traditions are as varied as the millions of gods they worship. A few general comments may be made here, however.

- Astrology - This is an important part of Hinduism, particularly as it relates to determining the karma of each individual.
- Veneration of cows - No one really knows how this became part of Hinduism, but it is one of the few things all Hindus have in common. At one time killing a cow was a capital offense in India, and one purification rite involves eating the five products of the cow (milk, butter, cheese, urine, and dung).
- Sacredness of objects - This varies from one village to the next, but it can include animals (besides cows, elephants, monkeys, and snakes, especially the king cobra, are venerated by some), plants, tools, and the Ganges River. Not only do Hindus flock to the Ganges to bathe and drink its waters, they also strive to die at Varanasi, the most sacred of Hindu cities, so they can be cremated and have their ashes cast into the holy river.
- Pilgrimages - These are not only sources of merit, but also ways of getting closer to the gods. Pilgrimage destinations include the Ganges, the supposed birthplace of Krishna, and many other shrines.
- Seasonal festivals - These are related to the agricultural cycle, as with most ancient religions. How they are observed again varies greatly from place to place.
- Temple worship - Hindu worship is more individual than corporate. It includes purification rites, offerings of food, flowers, and money, and the chanting of prayers.
- Home shrines - Most Hindus have shrines in their homes with images of their favorite gods, and often a mandala (a circular design representing the oneness of the universe) as well.

## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS VII

### Hinduism - Cultural Impact

Hinduism is almost as closely associated with India as Judaism is with Israel. Only India and next-door neighbor Nepal have a majority Hindu population. Other nations with large Hindu minorities (Guyana on the northeast coast of South America and the island nations of Mauritius and Fiji are at least one-third Hindu) are homes to significant numbers of Indian immigrants. The main reason for the association of Hinduism with India is not only its history, but also the role played by caste. Essentially, Hinduism, like Judaism, is usually something into which one is born; those not born into Indian families may share the beliefs of the religion, but can never be real Hindus because they are without caste. In the same way that the insularity of Judaism has contributed to its survival, Hinduism has been perpetuated to a large extent because of this ethnic identity.

### POLITICAL IMPACT

For more than three thousand years after the Aryan conquest of the native Dravidian population, India was a tribal society with little in the way of overall unity. While regional rulers sometimes controlled large territories and the Muslim invasions in the late Middle Ages led to the establishment of the Moghul Empire in much of the northern part of the subcontinent, life in India was generally centered in the agricultural village, where distinctive religious practices developed, leading to the varieties of Hindu belief and practice that still exist today. In these tribal societies, Hinduism operated within the context of the caste system, with the members of each caste living according to the station in society into which they had been born. This situation produced a largely static society, since one was expected to live according to his birth and not seek to change it for fear of being reincarnated as something lower on the scale.

For more than a hundred years, Britain and France struggled for colonial dominance in India. The British finally won out, and their rule contributed greatly to the reduction of tribal warfare in India. The country was initially under the control of the British East India Company, which sought largely to exploit its resources for financial gain. The inability of the East India Company to maintain the peace, especially between Hindus and Muslims, culminating in the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857, led to the direct takeover by the British government in the mid-nineteenth century. While the British sought to allow the inhabitants of the subcontinent to live and worship according to their own traditions, certain practices were seen as immoral, and the British sought to deal firmly to bring about the elimination of these, with varying degrees of success.

- The caste system - Attempts to eliminate this, which is at the very heart of Hinduism, were totally unsuccessful.
- Ritual prostitution - Missionaries played a major role here, setting up orphanages to take in children who had been sold into sex slavery by their parents or simply abandoned on the streets. One of the most notable of these was Amy Carmichael (1867-1951), who set up and operated an orphanage in Dohnavur for more than fifty-five years.
- *Sati* - This practice of burning a widow on her husband's funeral pyre was thought to enable her to accompany her husband into his next life. William Carey (1761-1834) played a major role in convincing the British to outlaw the practice by proving that it was not taught in the Hindu holy books. The practice still occurs today in isolated villages.

- Untouchability - Again, the British here were largely unsuccessful because of the ongoing importance of caste. Mahatma Gandhi, who referred to them as Harijan (children of God), also sought to end this brutal form of oppression.
- *Thuggee* - Gangs of holy assassins terrorized India for centuries. Originally formed by Muslims, Hindus eventually became involved as well. The British took direct action against these terrorists, who preyed on travelers by gaining their confidence, then strangling and robbing them in the middle of the night, so that the Thugs were virtually eliminated by 1870. Criminal subcastes still exist in India today, perpetuating their violent practices much like the Mafia in other cultures.

The conquest of northern India by Muslims and the establishment of an empire there led to centuries of conflict that still has not been resolved. While we often today think of Hindus as peace-loving, the glorification of the warrior caste means that Hindus are not at all reluctant to engage in battle to fulfill their karma, especially in the light of the military exploits of the heroes of the great epic poems of the religion. Muslims, of course, are not reluctant to take up arms against those of other religions either. The conflict became so heated that when the British granted independence to the subcontinent in 1947, it was partitioned into two nations, a mostly-Muslim north called Pakistan and a predominantly-Hindu nation of India, after which millions of refugees quickly migrated to the more hospitable destination, often facing murderous violence as they traveled. Pakistan itself was divided into two regions separated by more than a thousand miles; the eastern region soon rebelled and became the independent nation of Bangladesh. Violence between Hindus and Muslims in the region is still commonplace today.

The British sought to bring democracy to India and were to some extent successful in the endeavor. India today bills itself as the world's largest democracy, but the progress that has been made has come at a price. The caste system again has played a significant role. For millennia, the people of India have been accustomed to the idea that those who are born to rule should rule. One should not be surprised, then, that for the first fifty years of India's existence as a nation, not only one political party (the Congress Party), but *one family* controlled the government. The first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was succeeded soon after his death by his daughter, Indira Gandhi, who was succeeded by two of her sons. In the last twenty years, governments have changed hands peaceably and represented greater diversity, even to the extent of a Dalit (the acceptable term for an untouchable today) briefly serving as prime minister. These changes have accompanied the increasing secularization of Indian society, meaning that caste has less influence than it once did.

## SOCIAL IMPACT

The tenacity of the caste system affects basic aspects of everyday life like the jobs people perform and the partners they choose to marry. To a devout Hindu, one should no more form a union between a Vaisya and a Sudra than between a dog and a cat. The caste system inhibits any form of social movement because one who repudiates caste is dooming himself to worse conditions in the next life.

Hindus also tend to adopt a group identity rather than thinking of themselves as individuals; after all, individual personality is nothing but illusion, while oneness with Brahman (and with the atman of each other person) is the ultimate reality. This group identity has contributed to mass



conversions as a response to missionaries preaching the Gospel, especially in the Dravidian south and among the Dalit, though proselytism is generally frowned upon because it is a violation of karma. It has also led to a resistance to education, which was largely brought to the country by the British and by Christian missionaries. On the other side of the picture, Christian missionaries who are perpetually busy in pursuing their responsibilities are seen as shallow by Hindus, who value a life of contemplation above that of activity.

## ECONOMIC IMPACT

Hinduism has tended to breed poverty because it discourages ambition and concern for material things (not necessarily bad in itself) and promotes the contemplative life, which at its apex involves living by begging. The scorn for the material means that science and technology have been slow to catch on in India. This may seem to be a strange comment since every nuisance phone call dealing with technology seems to come from New Delhi or Calcutta, but we need to think about this a little more carefully. Note the following:

- Christianity is the only religion that could have, and in fact has, spawned the Scientific Revolution. If you don't believe matter is real, you are unlikely to have any interest in science.
- The tremendous growth in science and technology in India, to the point where it has become a major world center for computer technology in particular, therefore reflects the extent of secularization in India. India could only move to the forefront in computer technology by denying its religious foundations. Even today, while a small percentage of the population is technologically savvy and correspondingly prosperous, the vast majority of the people still live in abject poverty.
- The interaction of modern technology with traditional Hindu belief has had some tragic consequences in the villages of India. For example, the pressure by the government for population control combined with the prevalence of ultrasound technology, which allows parents to see the sex of a child long before birth, has led to frequent abortions of female babies, creating a situation in some parts of India where the percentage of the population that is male is as high as sixty percent. This has led to situations where young men are unable to find wives, among other problems.

## ART AND LITERATURE

For most of India's history, the art, music, and literature of the subcontinent have been dominated by religious subjects associated with Hinduism. This is much like the dominance of Christianity in the art, music, and literature of Christian Europe in the Middle Ages, and unlike the Muslims, who are opposed to imagery in any form. This, too, has changed in recent years with the increasing secularization of India, so that now India has a thriving motion picture industry known as "Bollywood."



## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS VIII

### Buddhism - History

Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism can be traced to a specific founder and a particular time and place of origin. That founder was Siddhartha Gautama, and in order to understand Buddhism we must begin with the story of his life.

#### SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA (c.560-480 B.C.)

The founder of Buddhism, whose life roughly corresponds with the time of the Babylonian Captivity of Judah, was born in northeastern India in what is now the nation of Nepal (his birthplace was confirmed in 1995 when archaeologists discovered a shrine built there by Asoka, of whom we will hear later). Siddhartha was born into an upper-class Hindu family of the Kshatriya caste; his father was a rajah - a tribal ruler. Many legends surround his birth, including the tradition that he was born of a virgin who was impregnated by a magic white elephant. His mother, who in giving birth to a Buddha (a title, not a name) had fulfilled her purpose in life, died a week after he was born. His birth was accompanied by a great earthquake and the presence of supernatural creatures.

His father died when he was quite young, but before his father died he heard a prophecy that his son would either become the ruler of all India or the savior of the world. As a member of the ruling caste, he favored the former destiny and saw to it that young Siddhartha was sheltered from all knowledge that would put him on the path to a religious life. After his father's death, his aunt carried out the father's wishes, raising the boy in wealth and splendor with all the pleasures his heart could desire and preventing him from having contact with anything unpleasant. He married at the age of sixteen and was also surrounded by beautiful dancing girls to enhance his pleasure. He found the life of luxury to be an empty one, however, and, as young men often do, managed to circumvent his aunt's supervision and go out on his own for long walks in the countryside. As the story goes, on four of these walks he encountered the very things from which his family sought to shelter him - an old and decrepit man, a sick man, a decaying corpse by the side of the road, and a joyful begging monk. These "Four Passing Sights" were such shocks to his system that they led him to leave his family and seek the life of a wandering mendicant. At the age of 29, he left his wife and infant son while they were sleeping to seek the experience that had thus far been denied him.

He began his quest in typical Hindu fashion, seeking guidance from gurus and living a strictly ascetic existence; according to one tale, he subsisted on one grain of rice per day. He gathered around him a group of companions who shared his ascetic lifestyle. After six years of extreme deprivation, which ruined his health, he came to realize that asceticism did no more to satisfy the longings within him than indulgence had done, and he renounced his strict manner of life, alienating his friends in the process. He then continued his search alone. One day, at the age of 35, he sat down under a fig tree to meditate. At this point Mara, the Evil One, sought to disrupt his concentration by stimulating his desire with a vision of seductive goddesses, filling him with fear with visions of destruction and death, and accusing him of pride for seeking what is given only to the few. Siddhartha resisted these temptations, the Evil One fled, and the gods of heaven rejoiced and showered him with flowers. According to some versions of the story, he remained under the tree for forty-nine days and finally received enlightenment - insight into the true nature of reality. This enlightenment is summarized in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which we will

examine next week. That special fig tree was thus called the Bodhi tree, or tree of enlightenment, and Siddhartha Gautama came to be known as the Buddha - the Enlightened One.

The Evil One was not done with him, however. Mara attacked him again, arguing that he should keep his newfound wisdom to himself rather than sharing it with others. After all, how can one communicate the ineffable? The Evil One suggested that he ascend to the state of Nirvana without telling anyone of his discovery. Buddha again rejected Mara's temptation, but was nonetheless reluctant to share the essence of his enlightenment with others for fear of rejection. As he continued to wander through northern India, he began to hope that perhaps a few would hear him and profit from his message. He preached his first sermon at Benares, where his five former friends were present. They began to mock him, but once they heard what he had to say they became his followers, the foundation of an order of monks called *Sangha*. For the next forty-five years the order grew in number, but never expanded to the general population. In fact, Buddha was very reluctant to include women in his movement, convinced that they were too weak and too tied to the physical to give themselves to the strict disciplines required in the monastic life; after all, they were the ones who kept the cycle of reincarnation going. When he finally gave in and admitted a few women, he prophesied that his movement would last no more than five hundred years, but would have lasted for a thousand years had he kept women out of it. He did, however, include men of all castes among his monks, thus separating himself in an important way from the Hinduism in which he had been raised. He died at the age of eighty when, dining at the home of a friend, he accidentally ingested poisonous mushrooms, but with his last dying breath he comforted his host, saying that his best meal was the one that issued him into Nirvana, and urged his followers to "Work out your own salvation with diligence."

## LATER DEVELOPMENTS

After Buddha's death, his followers gathered in a council to determine what they should do. They agreed that Buddha's mendicant and missionary ministry should be continued, but soon began to disagree about the essence of his teachings. Within a century of Buddha's death, the movement began to split into two major factions. One argued that following Buddha's teachings was a lifelong commitment, and that only those who were willing to forsake everything and become monks could partake in it. The other faction insisted that Buddha's teachings were good for the masses as well as for the select few, and that the road to enlightenment was a broad road that all could follow. The latter group came to be known around the first century A.D. as Mahayana ("Great Raft") Buddhism because it believed that the teachings of Buddha could ferry all across the river from this life to Nirvana. They referred to the elitists as Hinayana ("Little Raft") Buddhists, though the latter rejected a name they saw as pejorative and called themselves Theravada ("Way of the Elders") Buddhists instead to emphasize their faithfulness to the original teachings of Buddha as recorded in the Pali Canon or *Tripitaka*, which contains the teachings of Buddha as committed to writing by his followers in 29 B.C., about 450 years after his death. Mahayana Buddhism soon came to dominate the movement in China, Japan, Mongolia, Tibet, Korea, and many others, with Theravada Buddhism gaining significant influence only in Ceylon (Sri Lanka today), Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand.

The followers of Buddha were persecuted by the powerful Brahmins in India because of the extent to which they challenged Hindu orthodoxy, not only by rejecting the caste system, but also by repudiating the Hindu scriptures and the Hindu gods. A key turning point occurred with the rise

of Asoka (304-232 B.C.), who as head of the Maurya dynasty ruled almost the entire Indian subcontinent. After winning a great war to solidify his kingdom and feeling dismay at the magnitude of death and destruction it caused, he converted to Buddhism, seeing it as a foundation for unity among the people of India, then used his power and influence to spread Buddhism throughout Asia, beyond the confines of India, sending out missionaries and setting up shrines marking key events in the life of Buddha. For these deeds he is sometimes referred to as the Constantine of Buddhism. Pillars and shrines he erected still survive today in some parts of Asia, along with inscriptions containing his decrees.

## VARIOUS FORMS OF BUDDHISM

Like all major religions, Buddhism over the years fragmented into a variety of subgroups. While Theravada Buddhism has largely maintained its identity, Mahayana Buddhism has given birth to many diverse sects. We will list them briefly here, but discuss them in more detail in the next two lessons.

- Theravada Buddhism - This is the purest form of Buddhism, emphasizing their faithfulness to the teachings of Buddha as recorded in the Pali Canon and emphasizing the need to give up everything in order to live the life of an enlightened monk in pursuit of Nirvana.
- Mahayana Buddhism - The “Great Raft” is the dominant form of Buddhism. While insisting that they are faithful to the founder by preserving his lifestyle, they have deviated in significant ways from many of his teachings, as we will see next week.
- Vajrayana Buddhism - The “Diamond Raft” came into existence in the seventh century A.D. as an offshoot of Mahayana Buddhism and is the form of Buddhism, often known as Lamaism, that dominates Tibet and Mongolia. As we will see, it is very different from the two most common forms of Buddhism.
- Amita Buddhism - This “Pure Land” Buddhism appears most in Japan and teaches that one may reach Nirvana by chanting the name of Buddha continually before death, which will enable one to reach the Pure Land, from which entrance into Nirvana is easier.
- Zen Buddhism - Another popular Japanese variant, though it was founded in China, that has also gained influence in the West, it emphasizes meditation to gain self-knowledge, emptying one’s mind of all thoughts. One way of doing this is by the use of *koans*, which are sayings or stories that demonstrate the limitations of reason (perhaps the most well-known in the West is “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”).
- Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism - This, too, is largely found in Japan, and is based on the teachings of the Japanese monk Nichiren (1222-1282). Meditation on a sacred phrase leads to elevating one’s life conditions, leading some to compare Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism to the Prosperity Gospel of certain televangelists.

## BUDDHA AND CHRIST

Many scholars of comparative religions have compared Siddhartha Gautama and Jesus, pointing out the following similarities:

- Both were born into the dominant religions (Hinduism and Judaism) of the regions in which they lived.
- Both are said to be incarnations of gods (this is true for Buddha only in the Mahayana version of the religion).
- Both are said to have come into the world through miraculous births.
- Both suffered temptations by the Evil One before beginning their ministries.
- Both challenged the religious authorities (Brahmins and Pharisees) of their day.
- Both gathered a select group of disciples around them.
- Both lived the lives of itinerant teachers.
- Both challenged their followers to leave all and follow them.
- Both sent out their disciples to spread their teachings.
- Neither wrote down their ideas, which were recorded by their followers after their deaths.
- Both are worshiped as gods by their followers (again, this is only true of Mahayana Buddhism).

The differences, however, are far greater than the similarities, and illustrate key differences between Buddhism and Christianity.

- Jesus declared Himself to be God, while Buddha explicitly rejected such an identification.
- Jesus taught that He deserved worship while Buddha repudiated it.
- Jesus proclaimed His message to all who would hear, while Buddha restricted his to the select few who were able to follow the ascetic lifestyle he promoted.
- Jesus died a sacrificial death to save His followers, while Buddha died from poisonous mushrooms.
- Buddha claimed to show his followers the path to Nirvana by his example and teachings, while Jesus claimed to *be* the way of salvation, paying for the sins of all who believe in Him.
- Buddha taught a way of salvation by doing, while Jesus taught that salvation comes only by faith in Him.

## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS IX

### Buddhism - Doctrine and Practice

Discussing the major teachings of Buddhism is difficult for two reasons. The first is that Buddhism, like Hinduism, is not a creedal faith but is oriented more toward practice. What is important is not what you believe, but what you do. The second difficulty is that the many variants of Buddhism are enormously different from one another, including massive contradictions, which makes generalization very difficult. We will start, however, with what all Buddhists claim in common, and that is the basic content of the enlightenment communicated by Siddhartha Gautama following his experience under the Bodhi tree - the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

#### THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths express the essence of reality as understood by the Buddha and communicated to his followers.

1. Suffering is inevitable. Pleasure is ephemeral, but pain is fundamental. This marks one of the areas of sharp deviation from Hinduism. While Hindus view suffering as *maya*, an illusion, Buddha saw it as something so real as to be of the essence of human experience, characteristic of birth, sickness, old age, and death and passed on by *karma*, viewed simply as cause and effect, from one lifetime to the next. Because Buddha denied the existence of the *atman*, or individual soul, he did not see man as possessing a spark of the divine within. Suffering, therefore, is real.
2. Suffering is caused by selfish desire. The false desires that cause suffering involve clinging to the temporary world of the senses, valuing oneself above others, seeking individual immortality, and fear that such immortality will not be achieved - in fact, any desire that separates one from all of reality by affirming individuality. The ego, the self, is a prison that must be escaped in order for suffering to end. If not, the cycle of rebirth will continue.
3. Suffering ceases when desire ceases. The false desires that cause suffering must be suppressed. Because the method for such suppression may be learned, ignorance is a major cause of suffering and instruction is its cure. The goal of such suppression is the cessation of the reincarnation cycle and entrance into Nirvana.
4. Desire ceases by following the Eightfold Path. These practices lead to the suppression of desire and advancement to Nirvana.

#### THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

The Eightfold Path is not to be viewed as a ladder whereby one step follows another. All aspects are to be practiced simultaneously. It is also sometimes described as the Middle Way between self-indulgence and self-denial, asceticism and sensuality. As indicated below, translations of these eight steps vary.

1. Right Views, Understanding, Knowledge - One must accept the Four Noble Truths and renounce selfishness. This is the only acknowledgment of the role of reason found in Buddhism. Buddha did, however, reject all theological and philosophical speculation.
2. Right Aspirations, Attitude, Desires - If the mind must be properly directed, so must be the heart. Single-minded focus on the achievement of enlightenment must take the place of the self-centered desires that are the cause of suffering.
3. Right Speech - Speech is a mirror of the inner man, and deceptive and hurtful speech are ways of protecting the ego. Once one realizes the extent to which he coddles the self, he will be able to advance in the direction of making his speech truthful, peaceable, and edifying.
4. Right Conduct, Action, Behavior - One must first focus on what he does and the motives that drive those choices. He will then see the extent to which his choices are driven by selfishness, and thus be able to purge from his behavior the killing of any creature, stealing, lying, illicit sex (this required celibacy for monks and restraint for the married, who should be giving most of their attention to the search for enlightenment), and intoxicating beverages. One can easily see here parallels to the second table of the Decalogue.
5. Right Livelihood, Occupation - For those who sought to commit their entire lives to the search for enlightenment, this meant entering upon a monastic vocation; for all others, work should promote spiritual growth in oneself and others. Such occupations must be useful, harming no one, and free from luxury. Buddha was very specific about this matter, listing not only the obvious evil occupations as ones to be avoided, but also including butchers, brewers, and sharp-dealing caravan traders.
6. Right Effort, Endeavor - Buddha placed great emphasis on the discipline of the will, affirming that steady progress toward enlightenment required great perseverance. One must avoid the uprising of evil, overcome evil, maintain what is good, and develop detachment and concentration.
7. Right Awareness, Concentration, Mindfulness - Again the fundamental problem is ignorance, not sin. Self-examination is essential in order to separate what is elemental from what is temporal, what is important from what is trivial. The body, the senses, and the emotions must be recognized for the passing phenomena they are and relegated to the periphery. This requires long periods of isolation and silence.
8. Right Meditation, Composure, Absorption - This is very similar to what we saw earlier when we looked at *Raja Yoga*, and involves concentration on a single object until enlightenment is achieved.



## OTHER BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

### REJECTIONS OF HINDUISM

The major aspects of Hinduism retained by Buddha are the belief in *karma* and the idea of reincarnation, but even these are understood differently.

- *Karma* - While both religions see this as the operation of cause and effect over many lifetimes, Buddhism rejects the concept of the continuity of the self. That of which the continuity of cause and effect consists is unknown.
- *Atman* - The idea of an individual soul that is part of the World Soul is rejected by Buddhists. The self is real, but it is transitory, partaking of this world's suffering.
- Pain and suffering - Buddhism views these as real while Hindus see them as illusory.
- *Samsara* - Reincarnation occurs, but does not involve the continuity of the individual. It also has nothing to do with caste, since one can escape the cycle of reincarnation independent of one's social status rather than advancing to the Brahmin caste before reaching Nirvana. Unlike the idea taught by Hindus, Buddha taught that people always are reincarnated as people and cannot come back as animals.
- Caste - While Buddhists may recognize this as a social construct, it has no religious significance whatsoever. Buddha in particular rebelled against the dominance of Indian society and Hindu religion by the Brahmins, while claiming no special authority for himself.
- Ritual - Buddha rejected the complex rituals of Hinduism, which sustained the power of the Brahmins over the common people. His followers, of course, did not maintain this aversion.
- Enlightenment - Despite the similarities between the steps of *Raja Yoga* and the last part of the Eightfold Path, Buddhists and Hindus differ about who may seek it. Differences also exist among different Buddhist sects.
- Language - Buddha preached in the language of the people rather than the Sanskrit of the scholars of his day, somewhat like the Protestant Reformers translating the Scriptures into the languages of the common people.
- Scriptures - Buddha rejected the Hindu scriptures, and likely would have been very displeased that his teachings were incorporated into a body of writing considered authoritative by his followers.
- God - Technically speaking, Buddha was an atheist, recognizing no ultimate power (*Brahman*) and rejecting the many gods of Hinduism; he also repudiated the idea of contacting supernatural beings or seeking to perform supernatural deeds. Note, however, that many Buddhist sects, including the majority Mahayana sects, acknowledge a supreme power and worship Buddha as a manifestation of the power.
- Role of Buddha - Both Hindus and Buddhists view Buddha as a great teacher. Hindus also see him as one of the ten avatars of Vishnu. Theravada Buddhists reject this idea, though Mahayana Buddhists see him as an incarnation of the ultimate power.
- Nirvana - This is not seen as union with the World Soul. It is, in fact, indescribable; one can only say what it is not. For example, it is neither existence nor annihilation, neither changing nor static, neither limited nor infinite, neither temporal nor eternal.

## COMMON TO ALL

The differences among Buddhist sects are vast and the different groups contradict one another in many of their teachings, but they all hold certain fundamental ideas in common.

- The Four Noble Truths
- The Eightfold Path
- The reality of man and matter
- The denial of individuality
- Belief in karma and reincarnation
- The idea that enlightenment is achieved largely by human effort
- Nirvana as the removal of boundaries that constrict human experience

## DISTINCTIVES OF DIFFERENT SECTS

Much could be said here, but we will focus on some of the more outstanding differences among the major groups of Buddhists.

- Theravada Buddhism - This is the strictest form of Buddhism and adheres closely to the teachings of the founder, who is an example and no more, as embodied in the Pali Canon, or *Tripitaka*. The goal of the individual is to become an *arhat* - one who has freed himself from all improper desires and has gained true wisdom. Meditation is their only form of prayer and religion is seen as a full-time occupation that only monks may fully practice.
- Mahayana Buddhism - The “Great Raft” form of Buddhism reincorporated much of what Buddha rejected, including belief in a Divine Reality, the worship of Buddha as a manifestation of that Divine Reality and the savior of the world, belief in heaven, hell, and individual immortality, and the veneration of *bodhisattvas* - men who have attained enlightenment but, like Buddha, postpone their entrance into Nirvana in order to help others find the way. They are thought to accumulate works of supererogation through many lifetimes that can be used to assist others who seek enlightenment. The dependence on *bodhisattvas* and the recognition of a Supreme Power inject an element of grace into the completely works-oriented teachings of the founder. Mahayana Buddhists nonetheless claim to be true followers of Siddhartha Gautama because they seek to emulate his lifestyle, showing compassion to all, while rejecting some of his teachings; they see him as the prototypical *bodhisattva*. Mahayana Buddhists also claim scriptures in addition to the Pali Canon and have incorporated complex prayers and rituals of the very sort that Buddha himself rejected in Hinduism. They also believe in the Three Bodies of Buddha - the Historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama; the Eternal Buddha, who inhabits the Pure Land and assists others in entering Nirvana; and the Universal Buddha, the one with whom final union is obtained. The religion is open to all who wish to seek spiritual progress in whatever walk of life they may find themselves.
- Vajrayana Buddhism - Also known as Lamaism, this variant is prominent in Tibet and Mongolia and recognizes the head of the sect as an incarnation of the *bodhisattva* who is the patron deity of Tibet (the Dalai Lama). The sect is syncretistic, mystical, and given to practicing magic and the occult in order to obtain supernatural powers. Some teach that sexual intercourse during certain festivals contributes to achieving enlightenment, and all

worship female deities. These Buddhists also engage in demon worship, believing that such worship will prevent the demons from harming them. Sacred practices include repeating a mantra, meditating on a mandala, and practicing *mudras* - mystical hand gestures.

- Amita Buddhism - “Pure Land” Buddhism emphasizes attaining enlightenment by repeating a sacred phrase over and over continually, assuring entrance at death into the Pure Land where one can more easily achieve Nirvana.
- Zen Buddhism - Zen Buddhists claim knowledge of special teachings of Buddha that were not included in the *Tripitaka*. Zen Buddhists deny the existence of religion, enlightenment, or even Nirvana; in essence, we are here dealing with the belief that nothing real can be communicated through language or reason (“The essential art of Zen is non-thinking”). They do not worship Buddha, nor do they seek to become buddhas; instead they seek to understand that they are buddhas already. Students who ask their masters questions will as often as not be answered by silence, shouted nonsense syllables, or even physical blows. The Golden Lotus sermon of Buddha is highly valued by Zen Buddhists. According to the story, one day a Brahmin gave Buddha a golden flower and asked him to preach a sermon on the law. He did nothing but stare at the flower, but when one of his followers smiled, he is said to have understood and received enlightenment. The focus of Zen Buddhism is on self-knowledge through meditation, one aspect of which is the use of *koans*, which are cryptic phrases or questions intended to force a person to transcend the boundaries of human reason. Examples include:
  - What is the sound of one hand clapping?
  - A haiku -       The old pond.  
                  A frog jumps in.  
                  Plop!
  - What was the appearance of your face before your ancestors were born?
  - A cow passes by a window. Its head, horns, and the four legs all pass by. Why did not the tail pass by?
  - Is there Buddha-nature in a dog?
- Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism - Popular in Japan, this offshoot emphasizes the importance of family, manifested in ancestor worship and family conversions. They use the Lotus Sutra as their scripture and believe that chanting a sacred phrase leads to salvation as well as temporal benefits; when they become one with the universe, its benefits naturally fall to them. Soka Gakkai, founded in 1930 in Japan, is an offshoot that, unlike most Buddhist sects, is intensely intolerant of all other forms of Buddhism and is deeply involved in Japanese politics.

## KEY DIFFERENCES FROM CHRISTIANITY

While many differences between Christianity and Buddhism exist, a few key ones should be noted:

- God - While Theravada Buddhists are atheists who recognize no Supreme Being, Mahayana Buddhists recognize a Great Power that is largely impersonal. The denial of a personal God is inevitably connected to the ultimate denial of personality in man, which is seen as merely a temporal surface phenomenon.

- Man - Theravada Buddhists blatantly deny human individual identity, while Mahayana Buddhists seek a form of enlightenment in which that individual identity is swallowed up in the indefinable. This is far from the teaching of man being created in the image of a personal God.
- Sin - For the Buddhist, man's major problem is ignorance, not sin. Suffering is inherent in human experience because of karma, not because of moral culpability. Christianity defines man's ultimate problem quite differently.
- Salvation - For the Buddhist, law-keeping and meditation are the ways to salvation; *karma* is a teaching void of grace. Even when one examines the means of grace introduced by Mahayana Buddhists, one finds something for which one must work in order to achieve it. This is far from the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.
- Scriptures - Hundreds of years and dubious oral tradition separate the scriptures of Buddhism from the life and teachings of the founder, while the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry.
- Reincarnation - Totally unlike "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).
- Nirvana - Heaven involves an eternity in the presence of Christ where believers become all that God intended them to be apart from sin, while Nirvana, indescribable for most Buddhist sects, is a repudiation of individuality of which even Buddha himself partakes.

## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS X

### Buddhism - Cultural Impact

Because so many variants of Buddhism exist and because they are so different from one another, the best way to approach a discussion of the cultural impact of Buddhism is to go region by region. First, however, a few general observations may be made.

#### GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

- Because Buddhism recognizes no caste system as found in Hinduism, it has proven to be far more adaptable to different countries and cultures. While Hinduism is largely restricted to the Indian subcontinent, Buddhism has spread throughout much of Asia.
- The lack of a caste system also has contributed to Buddhism being a missionary faith. Particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, it is a faith for all and not restricted to the circumstances of one's birth.
- The eclectic and syncretistic nature of Buddhism, like Hinduism, has made it somewhat susceptible to the efforts of Christian missionaries in a shallow way. Again, adding Jesus to the god shelf has been a problem, as has the phenomenon of "rice Christians," where people profess Christianity out of gratitude for material aid, in places like China before the advent of Communism. Many people think they can be both Buddhists and Christians.
- The generally passive nature of Buddhism has made the countries where it is dominant largely immune to efforts to build democratic forms of government. As the United States, and France before it, found out in Vietnam, Buddhists are more willing to set themselves on fire to protest government policies than they are to engage in real participation. As with Hindus in India, aggressive involvement in government has tended to correspond to the rise of secularism, though the most secular forms of government in Asia - the Communist ones - are less democratic than the monarchies that preceded them.

#### INDIA

Buddhism has virtually disappeared from the land of its birth. Two reasons for this have been suggested.

- Massive persecution is the first. Buddha challenged the prevailing powers of his day - the Brahmin priesthood - and his followers were persecuted as a result. This persecution went on for hundreds of years until the religion for all practical purposes disappeared. The Muslim conquest of much of India in the twelfth century sounded the death knell for Buddhism.
- Another reason has also been cited, however, and that is the nature of the dominant Mahayana form of Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism is not only syncretistic like Hinduism, it also has reincorporated many of the aspects of Hinduism that Buddha himself rejected. The result is that it has easily been absorbed into the majority Hindu culture.

## THERAVADA BUDDHISM

Since Theravada Buddhism, faithful to the teachings of the founder, is a religion of monks restricted to those who are willing to commit themselves wholly to the quest for enlightenment, one would not expect it to have much impact on the culture of an entire region or country. In fact, this form of Buddhism is dominant in a few places, most notably Sri Lanka and Burma. Here some accommodation has been made for the common people by introducing temples and images and the worship of spirits and demons. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of cultural impact in these countries, however, is the attempt by leaders to merge Buddhism with the principles of Marxism. In part this is a reaction against British colonialism, but it also reflects the idea that capitalism does not readily lend itself to a life of contemplation. Instead, socialism, it has been argued, with its promised benefits for all, opens the door for a life of relative leisure. In practice, of course, nothing of the sort has come to pass.

## LAMAISM

Lamaism, or Vajrayana Buddhism, is most prominent in Tibet and Mongolia. The demon worship characteristic of the sect appears in the rituals and festivals that dominate the annual calendar. Perhaps the most notable aspect of cultural impact, however, is the role of the Dalai Lama, who is considered to be, not only the reincarnation of the patron deity of Tibet and the head of the sect, but also the political ruler of the nation. One of the more interesting aspects of Lamaism is the belief that, when the Dalai Lama dies, he is immediately reincarnated, and a massive search is undertaken to find the child who is to carry on the office. Since being driven out by the Chinese Communists in 1959, the present Dalai Lama has headed a government in exile located in India. Mongolia, too, has come under Communist domination. In both places, Buddhism is suppressed by the atheistic government.

## CHINA

Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant form of Buddhism in China and Korea. When it was brought there initially, Buddhism faced great opposition from the already-established religions of Taoism and Confucianism, though the three eventually arrived at a mutual accommodation. Even so, the Chinese have struggled with Buddhist teachings of reincarnation, which was taught by neither Confucius nor Lao Tzu (a legendary figure whose existence is doubtful), and asceticism, since they value the family so highly. However, the meditative practices of Taoism have been easily incorporated into Buddhism, as have some of the teachings of Confucius. Through more than a thousand years, Buddhism rose and fell in favor as dynasties came and went. Communism has, of course, made a strenuous effort to crush Buddhism along with all other religions in mainland China and North Korea.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA

In Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, Theravada Buddhism is the dominant form. Communism has again had a negative impact on the role of Buddhism in the lives of the people, but nonetheless millions have become followers of recently-formed Buddhist sects, often highly syncretistic and strongly resistant to political domination, either by the French or by the Communists.

## JAPAN

Syncretism is also characteristic of Japanese Buddhism. In this case, Mahayana Buddhism has been blended with the ancient Shinto religion, with its ancestor worship (including for many centuries emperor worship), social class structure, and strong nationalism and militarism. The worship of *bodhisattvas* also plays a prominent role in Japanese Buddhism. Multiple sects of Buddhism have flourished in Japan, including the Zen, Amita and Nichiren Shoshu variants mentioned last week. Soka Gakkai, an offshoot of the Nichiren Shoshu sect, is also Japanese, and unlike most forms of Buddhism it is very politically active.

## BUDDHISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Buddhist ideas first entered the United States with the formation of the Theosophical Society by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steele Alcott in 1875. The group was interested in all forms of the occult, but also gave considerable attention to Eastern religions, including Buddhism. Buddhist influence in America grew with increased immigration from Asia at the end of the nineteenth century. Immigrants brought with them the religions of their homelands, Buddhism among them. The forms of Buddhism that were the farthest removed from gods and images tended to have the greatest impact on the general population, most notably Zen Buddhism with its emphasis on self-knowledge through meditation and spiritual exercises like yoga and martial arts that few in America connect with Asian religion at all despite their deeply spiritual significance. Buddhism was one of many factors contributing to the growth of the New Age movement in the latter part of the twentieth century. What aspects of Buddhism have made the religion attractive to modern Americans?

- Tolerance - You can be a Buddhist and believe in anything or nothing. Many people today like the idea of being an atheist while still being able to feel religious.
- Justice - *Karma* teaches that you reap what you sow. If you don't believe in sin, this sounds like a good deal. Salvation by works only sounds attractive if you believe you are capable of doing the works that are required.
- Morality - The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path set high, though largely undefined standards that resemble in some ways the Ten Commandments without getting into messy specifics or involving God in the picture.
- Suffering Explained - Buddhism has a solution for the problem of evil in the sense of explaining why it exists, but provides no solution except for oblivion.
- Nirvana - The loss of all individuality and union with all sounds attractive to people who have trouble believing in an afterlife but still want something meaningful to look forward to.





# MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS XI

## Islam - History

In order to understand Islam, one must first understand the history of the religion, since the circumstances surrounding the founding and growth of the religion did so much to shape its character. One cannot understand contemporary Islam and the role it plays in the modern world without some understanding of past events that made it what it is today.

### THE LIFE OF MUHAMMAD

Like Buddhism, Islam has an identifiable founder. Unlike Siddhartha Gautama, however, Muhammad did not seek to found a new religion, which he however claimed was the completion of what God had started by revealing Himself to the Jews and Christians. Knowledge of his life is important because Muslims today believe that the Prophet provides the perfect model of how a person ought to live.

### EARLY YEARS

Muhammad (c.570-632) was born in Mecca, a member of the dominant Quraysh tribe. The inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula were polytheists whose worship centered around the Ka'aba, a large tent containing a black stone and 360 idols, one for each day of the lunar calendar. Their chief deity was Allah (not a name, but the Arabic word for *God*, equivalent to the Hebrew *Elohim* but singular in form); the other gods were thought to be sons and daughters of his. They also revered the *jinn* (or *djinn*), fire demons of the desert from whom we get our English word *genie*.

Muhammad's father died shortly before his birth and his mother died when he was six years old. Thereafter he was raised by his grandfather and later one of his uncles. This uncle was a trader who operated camel caravans, and Muhammad often traveled with them as far as Syria and Persia. During these travels, he encountered Jews and Christians and for the first time was exposed to monotheism. Many Jews inhabited the Arabian Peninsula so he had contact with them often, but the Christians he met were mostly from heretical splinter groups like the Nestorians. As a result, his comprehension of Christianity in particular was minimal and largely inaccurate, as the Qur'an clearly demonstrates. When he reached adulthood he began working for a wealthy widow, Khadija, for whom he ran caravans. He married her in 595 despite the fact that he was 25 and she was 40. By all reports their 25-year marriage was a happy one, and she supported him in the early difficult years of his ministry.

### THE REVELATIONS

Muhammad had long suffered with epileptic seizures, which were thought in his day to indicate demonic possession. He had a mystical bent, often experiencing dreams and visions. In the year 610 he climbed to the top of nearby Mount Hira to meditate; some say he intended to throw himself off the mountaintop. While there, he heard voices that he initially thought were demons speaking to him. Then the angel Gabriel assured him that he was neither mad nor demon-possessed (his opponents later claimed that both were true), but that he had been chosen to be the last and greatest prophet of Allah and the messenger through whom His final revelation to the world would

be transmitted. At first he remained silent about these revelations, which became increasingly frequent over the next twenty-two years and eventually became the contents of the Qur'an. He finally shared them with Khadija, who encouraged him, then spoke to a few close friends and family members. Most of those who heard his preaching mocked him, and he was only able to gather a small number of followers. The leading families of Mecca were especially angry with his message of monotheism, since much of their income was derived from pilgrimages made to the Ka'aba and its idols from all over Arabia. The opposition sometimes got physical, and his followers were often beaten or pelted with camel dung as they knelt in prayer.

## POLITICAL AND MILITARY LEADERSHIP

Muhammad had encouraged his followers to leave the hostile environment in Mecca. Some went to Medina, two hundred miles to the north, where they found that many who had gone on pilgrimages to Mecca had accepted Muhammad's teachings. They sent word to him, and in 622 he fled the city under cover of darkness and arrived in Medina, where he received a hero's welcome. This flight, called the *Hijra*, is so significant that it is the beginning of the Muslim calendar, much like the birth of Christ is to the calendar used in the Western world.

Muhammad soon rose to political and military leadership in Medina. Thus from the very beginning, Islam was a religion that encompassed every aspect of life in the sense that the leader of the religion also exercised control in the political and military realms. At this point Muhammad began a series of military conquests. This began with raiding camel caravans, by which he and his followers accumulated significant wealth. As he grew in power, he sent letters to neighboring tribes demanding submission to Allah (the word *Islam* means "submission," and no religion has been more aptly named). Some agreed, but those who resisted were soon conquered by Muhammad's growing army of followers. He was particularly disappointed in the response of the Jews, whom he expected to acknowledge him as the Prophet of the same God they worshiped. Instead they mocked him for the gross errors in his accounts of Old Testament stories (the Qur'an gets almost every story taken from the Bible wrong in at least some particulars). He then attacked them, killing all the men and selling the women and children into slavery. He won an important battle against the men of Mecca in which his followers were outnumbered three to one, and many saw this as an indication that Allah was with them and the forces of the Prophet were invincible. When they lost a battle shortly thereafter, Muhammad blamed it on the sinfulness of his followers and claimed that they were not sufficiently faithful to Allah. Finally, in 630, he and his army entered the city of Mecca, which surrendered with little bloodshed. He cleansed the Ka'aba of its idols and made it the center of his new religion. Muhammad ruled the city and established political and military control over the entire Arabian Peninsula by the time of his death two years later.

## FAMILY LIFE

As already mentioned, Muhammad's twenty-five-year marriage to Khadija was a happy one. They had six children, only one of whom survived - a daughter named Fatima. After Khadija's death, Muhammad began to take on multiple wives. Some were captives from his military campaigns, some were widows left behind when his followers died in battle, and others were relatives. He ultimately accumulated twelve wives (the Qur'an limits men to four wives, but makes an explicit exception for the Prophet) and an unknown number of slave concubines. The Qur'an also

forbid Muhammad's wives to remarry after his death. A few of the circumstances surrounding his wives are notable.

- Ayesha - Muhammad's favorite wife after the death of Khadija, he married her when she was six years old and began sleeping with her when she was nine and he was fifty-three. He favored her above all his other wives despite the fact that the Qur'an mandates that all wives be treated equally. As a teenager she was terribly jealous of his other wives and would often use her favored position to oppress them. Though she was only eighteen when Muhammad died, she went on to hold a powerful position in the Muslim community. She is often quoted in the *Hadith*, and her father Abu Bakr became the first caliph after the death of Muhammad. She is honored by Sunni Muslims but despised by Shi'ites, who see her as contributing to the bloody schism that followed the death of the Prophet.
- Zainab - She was Muhammad's cousin, and he arranged for her to marry his adopted son Zeid. He soon developed a personal interest in her and began visiting her when her husband was not at home. At this point Zeid acknowledged the inevitable and freed Zainab to marry Muhammad. In Sura 33 of the Qur'an, Allah gives explicit blessing to this highly questionable sequence of events.
- Toward the end of Muhammad's life, his "revelations" became increasingly convenient, granting all sorts of personal exceptions to the Prophet. One of the most notorious is found in Sura 66. Muhammad had sworn to one of his wives that he would no longer cohabit with one of her slave girls. She caught him in the act, and she and Ayesha proceeded to raise a fuss. Shortly thereafter, Muhammad received a word from Allah absolving him of his oath and demanding that the two women repent of their opposition to the Prophet.

## THE EARLY CALIPHS

Muhammad's death at the age of 62 was unexpected, so no succession arrangements were made. Muhammad, as the ultimate messenger of Allah and the channel through whom His final revelation was transmitted, could of course have no successor in the strict sense of the word. Someone, however, needed to step in as the political and military leader of the Muslims and the guardian of the Islamic faith. This leader came to be known as the caliph. The first four caliphs - Abu Bakr, the father of Ayesha, Umar, Uthman (both friends of Muhammad), and Ali (Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, the husband of Fatima) - ruled a united Islam for 29 years, though not without controversy. Umar was murdered by a military captive and both Uthman and Ali were assassinated.

## COMPILING THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an was compiled during the reign of Uthman, the third caliph. Muhammad was illiterate, and thus he recited his revelations (the word *Qur'an* means "recitation") to family members, friends, and followers, who in turn wrote them down on whatever happened to be available - palm leaves, pieces of bone, scraps of animal skin, or even rocks, at the same time committing them to memory. Twenty years after Muhammad died, Uthman appointed a committee to collect these fragments and put them in a book. Once this was done, all the fragments, along with any competing texts, were destroyed, so that only one authoritative manuscript remained. He was

not entirely successful in this effort, however, as scholars have discovered variant manuscripts in Syriac.

### THE SUNNI-SHI'ITE SCHISM

In the same way that the rivalry between the tribes of Judah and Ephraim never really disappeared after the time of the Judges, but later reemerged in the division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon, so the rivalry between the family of Muhammad, his original followers, and the leadership of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca reappeared shortly after Muhammad's death. What should be the source of the caliphate, the lineal descendants of Muhammad or the tribal leaders of Mecca? Of the first four caliphs, only Ali was related to Muhammad by blood; the purists refused to recognize the others, who were all from the leadership of the Quraysh tribe. After the assassination of Ali, Islam split into two rival factions. The majority Sunnis continued to follow the line of caliphs chosen by the leaders of Mecca; they today make up about 85% of all Muslims worldwide. The rival Shi'ites refused to recognize the caliphs and insisted that only those descended from the Prophet by blood were qualified to lead the faithful. They thus followed the descendants of Muhammad; they called their leaders *imams*. Shi'ite sects, of which there are many, differ on the number of imams who followed; the most common belief is that twelve imams succeeded the Prophet, and that the twelfth was caught up into the heavens and will someday return.

### THE MUSLIM CONQUEST

In less than one hundred years after the death of Muhammad, his followers conquered territory exceeding that of the Roman Empire. Under Abu Bakr, Islam expanded to the shores of the Red Sea. Umar conquered the Persian Empire and much of the Byzantine Empire, while Uthman expanded the influence of Islam into modern-day Iran, Afghanistan, and Armenia. After the Sunni-Shi'ite division, Muslim warriors swept through North Africa, across the Strait of Gibraltar (named for the Muslim general Al Tarik, the Gate of Al Tarik is the entryway by which Muslims invaded Europe), through Spain and across the Pyrenees into France, where their advance was finally halted by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732. This did not end the Muslim quest for territory, however, as the warriors of Islam later conquered much of India and exerted continual pressure on what was left of the Byzantine Empire.

How did the Islamic religion spread so quickly? One word - *jihad*, the holy war. The Qur'an teaches that the entire world was originally Muslim and that all children are born Muslims, so that any land that is not Dar al-Islam, the House of Islam, is Dar al-Harb, the House of War, which is to be retaken by its rightful owners, the Muslims. The early conquests were made easier by the disunity of Christians in North Africa and the weakness of the Byzantine Empire, but many of those faced with the sword of the Prophet converted rather than suffer the consequences. For polytheists, the choices were conversion or death. The People of the Book (Jews and Christians) were permitted to keep their religion as long as they made no attempt to evangelize, avoided public displays like processions and church bells, and paid a heavy tax to support the holy wars in which they could not participate. They became *dhimmi*s ("protected ones") who allegedly received the benefits of Islam while enjoying its protection. In reality, they were second-class citizens, often harassed, subject to loss of property, unable to build new churches when theirs were confiscated or destroyed, and often

simply killed by the zealous warriors of Islam because they had rejected the true faith into which they had been born, and were thus apostates and blasphemers.

## SECONDARY SCRIPTURES

Islam is much like Judaism in that many of its beliefs and practices are derived from sources outside of its primary scriptures. While Jews have the Mishnah and the Talmud, Muslims have the *Hadith* and the *Sunna*. These were compiled hundreds of years after Muhammad's death based on oral tradition.

- *Hadith* - This is a collection of the sayings of Muhammad recorded from conversations with his followers. The most widely-accepted version is that of Al-Bukhari (810-870), a Persian scholar. He spent sixteen years sifting through hundreds of thousands of traditions related to Muhammad, rating them as correct, good, and weak, then compiled the best 3295 entries into 97 books. One of Al-Bukhari's students, Sahih Muslim (817-875), produced a more extensive and less selective collection of about twelve thousand entries. Other shorter versions were compiled later. No definitive text of the *Hadith* exists. Muslims sects - Sunni, Shi'ite, and Druze - differ as to which version they recognize as authoritative.
- *Sunna* - This consists of incidents from the life of Muhammad. Since the Prophet is considered to be the ideal Muslim, his example becomes the model for all good Muslims to follow. The problem here, of course, is that Muhammad lived the life of a seventh-century desert nomad. The *Sunna* is typically incorporated into editions of the *Hadith*.

These works explain passages in the Qur'an, add to it in significant ways, and provide the basis for Islamic Shari'a law.

## ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

One of the aspects of Islam as presented in the Qur'an is the complete transcendence of Allah. He is beyond human experience and little can be said about Him aside from some of His deeds and vague descriptions like "the compassionate, the merciful" with which most of the suras of the Qur'an begin. Islam knows nothing of having a personal relationship with Allah. This unbridgeable gap between Allah and man left many Muslims yearning for something more, something personal. The result was the rise of Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam. While Sufis trace their origin back to Muhammad himself, the first organized Sufi sect appeared in the eighth century. Sufis see Islamic law as mere outward observance and seek a relationship with Allah through meditation and the rejection of material goods. Because they practice meditation and chanting of the names of Allah, Sufism has become especially popular in regions influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. Many consider it to be pantheistic in its teachings.

## FROM THE ARABS TO THE TURKS

Once the early stages of the Muslim Conquest were completed, the conquerors settled down into a somewhat comfortable relationship with the conquered peoples. While *dhimmi*s were treated as second-class citizens to the extent that many voluntarily converted to Islam for the social benefits

it provided, forced conversions generally came to an end; after all, the caliphs profited from the exorbitant taxes paid by the *dhimmis*. The Arab world had fragmented by this time, with rival caliphs in Cairo, Baghdad, and Damascus. The somewhat comfortable relationship between Arab Muslims and their subjects ended with the coming of the Seljuk Turks, who in the eleventh century conquered the Arab world in an effort to unite what had become a fractured Islamic community. The Turks made life increasingly difficult for the Christians and Jews under their rule, with frequent massacres and harassment of pilgrims seeking to visit the holy sites in Palestine, some of which were destroyed multiple times. In addition, the Turks put increased pressure on the Byzantine Empire, causing the Byzantine emperor to call for help from the West.

## THE CRUSADES

The Crusades were the response of the Christian world to this increased persecution. The Crusades lasted from 1095 to 1291 and were ultimately a complete failure. The First Crusade succeeded in taking Jerusalem, and slaughters of Muslims and Jews ensued. Every other Crusade failed, whether because of the inability of Europeans and Byzantines to work together, the superior organization of the Muslim armies, or the outright follies of the Crusaders (sending hundreds of thousands of peasants armed with little more than pitchforks against the Turkish military, getting distracted by Byzantine politics and sacking Constantinople, attempting to invade Egypt when the Nile was about to flood and getting swamped in the process, and most notoriously sending armies of children who were assured of victory because they were “pure in heart”). The Crusades have been a sore point in relationships between Christians and Muslims ever since, but a few points should be noted:

- Muslims had seized Christian territory and the Christians were simply trying to get it back. Unlike the Muslim *Jihad*, these were not wars of imperialistic conquest, nor were they wars to convert people to Christianity by force.
- The atrocities committed against pilgrims were real. In this sense, the Crusades were wars of defense.
- The attempted conquest of the Byzantine Empire by the Turks led to the emperor seeking a military alliance with the Western powers. Europeans traveled eastward by invitation.

## CONTINUED EXPANSION

The Muslim *Jihad* existed before the Crusades and continued after they were over. The Ottoman Turks, successors of the Seljuk Turks, conquered what was left of the Byzantine Empire when Constantinople fell in 1453 and continued to seek expansion into Europe, besieging Vienna in 1529 and again in 1683. These sieges were spearheaded by the powerful *janissaries*, crack troops consisting of boys kidnaped at a young age from Christian parents, raised as Muslims, forbidden to marry, and trained to fight to the death against the infidels.

## THE FALL OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

After the Turks were turned back from Vienna in 1683, the Ottoman Empire slowly declined from being the scourge of Europe to what was called the “sick man of Europe.”

## THE RISE OF COLONIALISM

As the Ottoman caliphs became increasingly weak and corrupt, they faced revolts from within by reformers and ethnic minorities and were confronted with European imperialism from without. Russia continued to push southward in a search for warm-water ports, the French coveted North Africa across the Mediterranean, and the British wanted to exert their influence in Egypt, eventually gaining control of the French-built Suez Canal as an important shortcut to their most important colony, India. The Ottoman Empire sided with the Germans in World War I and was partitioned shortly thereafter. Much of the Muslim world continued under European influence as most of the Middle East was divided into League of Nations mandates under the French and the British (making matters worse was the fact that the British, during the war, had encouraged both Arab nationalism through T.E. Lawrence and Zionism with the Balfour Declaration, promising both groups the same territory). Only Turkey proper was left to the Turks. Even there, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, seeking a modern secular state that could compete with Europe rather than be dominated by it, ended the caliphate in 1924.

## THE RISE OF MILITANT ISLAM

Because the caliphs were seen as the religious, political, and military leaders of Islam, the end of the caliphate left chaos in its wake. Who would step in and fill the void? Extremist groups were already in existence to claim the mantle. Among the oldest was the Wahhabis, a Sunni movement founded in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century when they formed an alliance with the ruling family, the House of Saud. Shi'ites, too, sought to restore the unity of Islam under their ayatollahs, including Ruhollah Khomeini, who led the takeover of Iran in 1979. More recent Sunni terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS seek the same goal, wiping out all national boundaries and uniting the entire world under the banner of the Prophet. Though such groups often point to the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 as the motive for their violence, the elimination of the caliphate really opened the door for such radical movements. These groups have made their presence felt, not only in the Middle East, but also in Asia and Africa, where efforts to establish Shari'a are increasingly common.

## ISLAM IN EUROPE AND AMERICA

One of the more alarming aspects of recent history has been the growth of Islam in countries formerly dominated by Christianity, at least in a nominal sense. Both Europe and America are experiencing massive growth in the number of Muslims, with the pressure that accompanies such growth.

## IMMIGRATION

Much of the growth of Islam in Europe and America has come through immigration. The end of the European colonial empires and the independence of the former colonies has opened the door to large numbers of immigrants, who settle, often in isolated enclaves in or near large cities, and avoid assimilation. Such enclaves have often been the site of riots and terrorist activity, spurred on by radical clerics in the mosques. The United States has experienced the same thing to a lesser extent because of the absence of a colonial history in the region dominated by Islam.

## THE NATION OF ISLAM

The growth of Islam in the United States has come more often through conversion than through immigration, much of it in the African American community. The Islamic religion first gained entrance into the black community through a black supremacist movement originated in the early part of the twentieth century by Wallace D. Fard and Elijah Poole, who later changed his name to Elijah Muhammad. This “Nation of Islam” grew from the roots of an earlier black nationalist movement started by Marcus Garvey and taught that white men were of the devil, while encouraging blacks to take charge of their own lives. In reality, it had little to do with Islam, and Muslims in the Middle East refused to acknowledge the movement. The Black Muslims opposed the push for integration led by civil rights advocates like Martin Luther King, instead encouraging blacks to separate themselves from their white oppressors and seize control of their own lives, and then of society as a whole. While most of the Black Muslim leaders spoke of blacks gaining economic self-determination, there were some who spoke of violence against the oppressors, and these prophets of confrontation helped contribute to the atmosphere that produced the urban race riots of the late sixties. A split in the movement occurred when Malcolm X (1925-1965), who had become Elijah Muhammad’s chief assistant, became disillusioned with what he viewed as hypocrisy on the part of his leader (the head of the Nation of Islam had been carrying on affairs with several of his secretaries while preaching a message of sexual purity). Malcolm X became increasingly interested in mainstream Islam, was eventually ejected from the Nation of Islam, and later was assassinated. When Elijah Muhammad died in 1975, his son Wallace Muhammad became the leader of the Nation of Islam. He quickly shifted the emphasis of the movement away from black supremacy and more in the direction of mainstream Islam (it is now called al-Islam in America), though some broke away in order to continue to preach the separatist gospel under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, who continues the racist teachings of his mentor, even going so far as to claim that W.D. Fard was the incarnation of Allah and that Elijah Muhammad was his Messenger.

The attraction of Islam for African Americans is difficult to fathom. Although some of the slaves brought to the New World were taken from Muslim parts of Africa, they were largely bought and sold by Arab slave traders, who engaged in African slavery long before Europeans ever arrived there and continued their involvement long after Europeans discontinued the practice. This makes it difficult to understand how Islam could portray itself as native to Africa while picturing Christianity, which was in Africa for centuries before Islam ever appeared on the scene, as the “white man’s religion.” Nonetheless, Islam is growing rapidly in the United States, especially among urban blacks.



## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS XII

### Islam - Doctrine and Practice

Some have argued that Islam is the simplest religion in the world, not only because the fundamentals are so basic and conversion is so easy, but also because it dictates almost every detail of life and how it ought to be lived. It leaves little room for individual thought or decision-making. Instead, one simply does what the name of the religion indicates - submit.

#### THE FIVE PILLARS

The basic practices to which every Muslim is expected to adhere are called the Five Pillars. Not all of these are found in the Qur'an.

- *Shahada* - The first pillar is the recitation of the creed: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet." Anyone who recites these words with sincere intent is considered to have been converted to Islam. The words are not found in this form in the Qur'an, but are derived from 3:18 ("Allah bears witness that there is no god but Him") and 48:29 ("Muhammad is Allah's apostle").
- *Salat* - The second pillar is prayer, to be offered five times daily while facing Mecca. While prayer is often mentioned in the Qur'an (e.g. 29:45), it never says anything about how often, in what posture, or in what words. The *salat* involves a recitation of the first sura of the Qur'an plus additional prayers, both memorized and spontaneous. The call for prayer is sounded by an official from the mosque called a *muezzin* and goes forth from a tower called a *minaret*. Muhammad originally commanded his followers to pray facing Jerusalem, but later changed it to Mecca (2:125, 142-145). The question of facing Mecca in itself has been somewhat controversial; should one follow the direction on a flat map (in the U.S. this would be somewhat southeast) or the shortest distance a plane would fly around the globe (northeast)?
- *Zakat* - The giving of alms is the third pillar. The Qur'an mentions this often, listing those who are true followers of Allah as those who "have faith, do good deeds, and give alms." The Qur'an does not set the amount, but later tradition indicates that almsgiving should involve at least one-fortieth (2.5%) of one's material possessions (as opposed to 10% of one's income). One of the consequences of this requirement is that Islam, where it is dominant, has spawned a class of professional beggars to take advantage of the required charitable giving.
- *Sawm* - The fourth pillar is the required fast during the month of Ramadan, the month in which Muhammad received his first revelation. For the entire month, Muslims are to abstain from food, drink, and sexual intercourse from the time in the morning when a black thread and white thread can be distinguished from one another to the time in the evening when they no longer can be told apart. The purpose is meditation and repentance, but in many cases the evening hours are given over to making up for what has been missed during the day. The fast of Ramadan is explicitly commanded in the Qur'an (2:183-185).
- *Hajj* - The fifth and last pillar of Islam is the pilgrimage to Mecca, which all good Muslims are to undertake at least once in their lives. This is to be undertaken during the month set aside as the month of pilgrimage. It involves dressing in simple white garments, circling around the Ka'aba and the black stone it contains (a meteorite less than one cubit foot in size

and shiny with the kisses of the faithful), running between two small hills to commemorate the travails of Hagar in the wilderness, then traveling to Mount Arafat to meditate. This observance is specifically commanded in the Qur'an (2:196-203)

## GOD

Muslims are strict monotheists - Allah is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. He is also completely sovereign over everything, even being the cause of evil. Cause and effect are illusions produced as Allah recreates the world at each instant. Whatever happens, "God wills it." Note the following:

- The Qur'an explicitly denies the doctrine of the Trinity in many places, arguing that Allah could not possibly have a son (e.g., 5:73).
- The Qur'an misunderstands the doctrine of the Trinity, understanding it as teaching tritheism. It also affirms that the Christian Trinity consists of God the Father, Mary the Mother (Mary as the "Mother of God" is a phrase that appeared during the Christological Controversy in opposition to Nestorianism), and Jesus the Son. Muhammad clearly thought that this implied that Allah had relations with Mary and Jesus was the result.
- The Qur'an teaches the Virgin Birth of Jesus (19:16-33), though the entire birth narrative is completely inaccurate. What it denies is the Adoptionist heresy, which Muhammad believed was the Christian view.
- The Qur'an teaches that Jesus was a great prophet who taught people to obey Allah, but that He was not God.
- The Qur'an denies that Jesus died on the cross (4:156-157), accepting the Gnostic view of His death.
- The Qur'an teaches that Jesus will return to earth before the Last Judgment (43:61).
- The Qur'an mentions the Holy Spirit four times, including the birth narrative of Jesus and references to Muhammad's revelations; Muslims understand this to be a reference to the angel Gabriel.

## ANGELS AND DEMONS

The Qur'an frequently mentions supernatural beings - angels, demons, and *jinn*. Many Muslim beliefs have their origin in pre-Islamic superstitions.

- Angels are beings made of light, though they have wings (Gabriel apparently has 600 of them). They have no free will and can only do what Allah instructs them to do.
- Two recording angels sit on the shoulders of each individual recording his or her deeds, which determine the person's final destiny.
- *Jinn* are beings made of smokeless fire (15:27) who are invisible. Unlike angels, they have free will and may either worship Allah or disobey Him. Those who reject Allah are the demons. The Qur'an teaches that they are born, eat and drink, marry and beget children, may have sexual relations with human beings, and die, ultimately going either to heaven or hell. *Jinn* (i.e., genies) are the powers behind good and evil magicians.
- Satan is a *jinn* who disobeyed Allah when He created Adam. Allah ordered angels and *jinn* to bow before Adam, but Satan refused (7:11-13). Allah condemned him, but Satan begged

for a reprieve until Judgment Day, boasting that he would bring “all but a few” of Allah’s creatures under his control.

- *Jinn* can be converted to Islam, though most are not. The first *jinn* to become Muslims did so in response to Muhammad’s preaching (72:1-2)

## THE PROPHETS

Allah has sent thousands of prophets into the world so that each people group would know His will. Some of those prophets are mentioned in the Bible, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Job, David, Solomon, Elijah, Ezekiel, Jonah, and Jesus. The 100 most important prophets were messengers through whom Allah sent books. Of these hundred books, only four have survived - the Torah given through Moses, the Psalms given through David, the Gospels given through Jesus, and the Qur’an given through Muhammad. Muhammad, the “Seal of the Prophets,” was the last of Allah’s messengers and brought His final and complete revelation.

## THE SCRIPTURES

Unfortunately, the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospels (i.e., the Old and New Testaments) have been distorted in the transmission process by Jews and Christians, so only the Qur’an is infallible (this is the explanation for all of the discrepancies between the Qur’an and the Bible). According to Muslims, the Qur’an has existed eternally in heaven in Arabic and was gradually revealed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. Because it was dictated word for word, it is absolutely accurate. Because Arabic is its rightful language, Muslims long resisted any attempt to translate it. Many who memorize it in Arabic have no idea what it says.

## FEATURES OF THE QUR’AN

- It consists of 114 suras (chapters), arranged by size from longest to shortest except for the introductory first chapter. They are not arranged topically or chronologically; in fact, the chronology of the revelations is largely impossible to determine.
- The chapters themselves are disorganized with little apparent structure; the titles of the suras, which are original, often have little to do with their content.
- The Qur’an is exceedingly repetitious. Similar language shows up repeatedly in many chapters in unrelated contexts, if one may even speak of contexts in such a random work.
- The Qur’an is full of vague generalities; the narrative sections, which are relatively few, contain little detail when compared to corresponding biblical stories; this reflects how limited was Muhammad’s knowledge of the Bible, which had not been translated into Arabic by the seventh century.
- The Qur’an pictures an angry and violent God. Seemingly an average of four or five times per page, it speaks of how Allah is going to punish, destroy, and send to hell all non-Muslims. The only way in which terrorists misread the text is by thinking that Allah intends them to do such work for Him.
- The Qur’an is self-referential, repeatedly insisting that it is the very words of Allah. The criticism to which Muhammad was subjected appears frequently in the text, including language like “whoever says that the Prophet made up these words is a liar” and “the Prophet is not mad, nor is he possessed.” In fact, he was probably both.

## NARRATIVE ERRORS IN THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an mentions many stories found in the Bible and misrepresents almost all of them (this is why the Jews of Arabia mocked Muhammad when he tried to convince them that he was a prophet sent from their God). Here are some examples.

- The Creation of Man - Adam was formed from soil collected by the angels; this soil was of many colors, like the humanity that would result from it, and was collected from many places around the earth. Allah kneaded it into black mud and formed Adam, then breathed a soul into him. Eve was created from Adam, though the Qur'an doesn't say how.
- Noah and the Flood - Noah was called by Allah to be His prophet, and he preached the word of Allah to his depraved generation for 950 years (this was his entire lifespan according to the Bible), then got frustrated and prayed to Allah to destroy all the sinners. He had four sons, not three, but the fourth refused to enter the ark and drowned, as did Noah's wife. The Qur'an does not indicate that the Flood was worldwide. The ark landed on Mount Judi. Four different places in the Muslim world claim to house the tomb of Noah.
- Abraham and His Family - The Black Stone at the heart of the Ka'aba in Mecca was white when it fell from heaven, but turned black when Adam and Eve sinned. Adam built the shrine surrounding it, but it was destroyed in the Flood and later rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael. Abraham had many sons, but only Ishmael and Isaac became prophets. Ishmael, not Isaac, was the son almost sacrificed by Abraham, and this was not done at the command of Allah.
- Lot and the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah - According to the Qur'an, Lot was a faithful prophet of Allah. He warned the people of Sodom (the names of the cities in question are never mentioned in the Qur'an) but they refused to listen. Allah delivered Lot and his family while he pelted Sodom with hard clay stones with the name of Allah inscribed on them. Lot's wife remained behind in Sodom and was destroyed.
- Saul and David - Sura 2:246-252 tells of the appointment of Saul as king and the fact that the people objected because he was not wealthy. He then gathered an army, took them to a river, and had them drink, in the process reducing his army to a mere handful. He and his troops then crossed the river, where David killed Goliath.
- Jesus and the Birds - Jesus not only preached to people when He was in the cradle, but He also made birds out of clay, breathed on them, and they flew away (5:110). This story also appears in the second-century pseudepigraphal Gospel of Thomas.

## MAN

According to the Qur'an, Adam and Eve were created as Muslims. After they sinned, they repented and were forgiven by Allah. Their sin was not passed on to their descendants. Since then, everyone who enters the world is born a Muslim in a state of perfection. If they sin, that is their choice, and they will receive suitable punishment for doing so.

## SALVATION

Salvation is pointedly a matter of works. After death, one's good and bad deeds are weighed on a scale. If the good deeds outweigh the bad, the person goes to heaven; if not, hell is the result.

Another contradictory picture is also given in the Qur'an: the deceased person crosses a bridge narrow as the blade of a sword over the fiery chasm of hell. If he crosses, he goes to Paradise, but if he falls, he burns forever. Only Allah determines the outcome. This contradiction shows that Islam struggles with the paradox of God's sovereignty and human responsibility as much as Christians do.

## ESCHATOLOGY

After Jesus returns, all will be raised from the dead and the Last Judgment, to which all are subject, will occur; the varying portrayals of it have been outlined above. While hell is pictured as a place of torment similar to what is portrayed in the Bible, one key difference exists, and that is that one's stay in hell may or may not be permanent (though the Qur'an is unclear on the subject, Muslims teach something vaguely approximating the Catholic idea of Purgatory). Heaven, however, is pictured very differently from what we find in the Bible.

- Because no one ever knows if his good works are sufficient, no one is assured entry into Paradise, at least not immediately. The only exception is those who die fighting for Allah and His Prophet, who are assured immediate entrance into Paradise no matter what their previous works may have been.
- Paradise is pictured as a beautiful garden. Those who go there sit in the shade among flowing streams and eat luscious fruit. The wine they drink never makes them drunk and never gives them hangovers (this presumably compensates for the prohibition against drinking alcoholic beverages on earth).
- Muslim men are attended by dark-eyed houris, lovely women created by Allah for the specific purpose of attending to the faithful. They are available for sexual gratification, yet remain perpetual virgins (55:54-59; these are the seventy-two virgins to whom suicide bombers look forward). The Qur'an even mentions comely young boys who are also available (52:24; 76:19), despite the condemnation of homosexuality elsewhere.
- While the Qur'an makes vague statements about faithful women entering Paradise, it never says anything about what they will find when they get there. Their husbands will be otherwise occupied, and Allah is hardly likely to create virgin males for them to enjoy.

## MORALITY

While the Qur'an affirms most of the commandments in the second table of the Decalogue - prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing, and lying - such prohibitions seem to have exceptions when doing these things benefits Islam. Note the following:

- According to the *Hadith*, deceiving the enemy is permissible in warfare. Remember, however, that Islam is engaged in perpetual war with infidels.
- Sura 3:28 encourages Muslims never to befriend unbelievers unless one does so in order to guard against them.
- Sura 16:106 says that lying about being a Muslim is acceptable if necessity requires it.
- While thieves are to have their hands amputated (5:38), looting in warfare is offered as an inducement to undertake *jihad* (48:18-20).

- The oft-quoted Sura 5:32 forbids murder (“Whosoever kills a human being . . . it shall be as if he had killed all mankind”), but the context is a warning to Jews not to make war on Muhammad’s followers. When Muslims face infidels, however, the Qur’an’s teaching is quite different - “Kill them wherever you find them” (2:191).

Islam thus preaches no true absolute morality. The bottom line is that whatever is good for Islam is right and whatever is harmful to it is wrong.

## MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS XIII

### Islam - Cultural Impact

A substantial part of the world is under the control of Islam, including the entire Middle East except Israel, all of North Africa, Turkey, significant parts of sub-Saharan Africa, especially those parts adjacent to the Sahara desert, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, much of Central Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the southern Philippines. Because Islam recognizes no such thing as separation of church and state, the religion dominates these regions and their culture.

#### GOVERNMENT

Despite the fact that unified Islam has not existed since the assassination of the fourth caliph in 661 and that no caliph at all has existed since 1924, Islam continues to teach that the caliph is the only rightful ruler of the Islamic world and that he exercises religious, political, and military authority as the guardian of the faith. Islam thus does not recognize the legitimacy of national boundaries (e.g., ISIS), but views them as imposed by the infidel imperialists. The restoration of the caliphate and the unification of the Islamic world has been the stated goal of leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran, Muammar Khadafy of Libya, and of course terrorists like Osama bin Laden of Al Qaeda and the leaders of ISIS. Furthermore, democracy is completely incompatible with Islam, as attempts at “nation-building” in the Middle East have so tragically demonstrated.

#### LAW

Muslims believe that Shari’a, which has its roots in the Qur’an and the *Hadith*, should be the law for all, not just for Muslims. Demands for the imposition of Shari’a have spread, not only in Muslim countries where “fundamentalists” have influence, but also in regions where Muslims make up a substantial portion of the population, such as northern Nigeria, where Boko Haram is terrorizing the population in order to bring this about. More recently, Muslim enclaves in such Western nations as Britain and France have demanded to be able to rule people within those communities by Shari’a law and have received some freedom to do so.

This has led to the imposition of harsh criminal penalties wherever Shari’a has been put into practice. Not only has the news been filled with accounts of thieves suffering amputation of their hands, but also adulterers have been stoned (usually women; somehow the men don’t attract the same attention of the authorities), even women who have been raped. Honor killings, where a woman is murdered by the members of her own family for immodest dress or being seen outside with a man who is not her relative, are increasingly prevalent. Meanwhile, Muslims who convert to Christianity are subject to the death penalty.

#### STATUS OF INFIDELS

Islam is not a tolerant religion, especially with regard to contrary beliefs. Infidels do not fare well in Muslim countries. Because all are born as Muslims, any who do not profess Islam are by definition apostates and blasphemers who must be converted or brought into submission to Islamic rule. *Dhimmi* status continues to exist in most Muslim nations with its corresponding religious,

social, and economic restrictions. Christians are regularly accused of blasphemy for speaking against Muhammad or Allah (this can be as simple as an affirmation of the Trinity or the deity of Christ) or persecuted for seeking to spread the Gospel, both of which are considered capital offenses. Churches are often converted into mosques or destroyed, but may not be rebuilt according to Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an.

## WARFARE

Because the entire world is divided into Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb (the House of War), Muslims are expected to use force wherever necessary in order to bring regions not under Muslim control into the House of Islam. While many contemporary Muslims argue that the *jihad* to which they are called is really the internal struggle against sin, the Qur'an described this struggle in graphic military terms. The rhetoric of the ayatollahs of Iran and the leaders of terrorist groups is coherent with the Qur'an, which demands that the faithful fight against the infidels. Muhammad also advocated subtlety where force would be ineffective, advising his followers to make friends with unbelievers in order to gain an advantage over them. Anyone who thinks negotiating with Iran, ISIS, Boko Haram, or other like-minded groups will create progress and peace has no real understanding of Islam and its teachings.

## MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

One of the areas in which Islam has received the greatest amount of criticism is in its teachings about marriage and the family, particularly with regard to the treatment of women. Note the following:

- The Qur'an explicitly states that men are superior to women (4:34); the testimony of a man in court is worth that of two women (2:282), and daughters receive only half the inheritance of sons (4:176).
- Women are to be veiled at all times outside the home (24:31) and may not go out alone, but must be accompanied by a male relative.
- Muslim men are permitted to have up to four wives, but may only marry "People of the Book" and must treat all wives equally (generally understood in a financial sense). They may, however, have an unlimited number of slave concubines; if these concubines are captured in war, Muslim men may marry them even if they are already married. Muslim women may not have more than one husband, and he must be a Muslim.
- One of the most controversial verses in the Qur'an is the one that tells men to beat disobedient wives (4:34). Apologists today say this refers to beating her with a feather, but Allah's instructions to Job in 38:44 suggest otherwise.
- Divorce according to the Qur'an is easy for men - they only need say "I divorce you" three times - but impossible for women. Divorced women are permitted to take their dowries with them, however. Contrary to the regulation in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 prohibiting remarriage to divorced wives who have taken other husbands, the Qur'an sanctions this practice (2:230).
- The Qur'an permits temporary marriages (4:24). A husband who is away on a caravan trip, for instance, may contract a temporary marriage for a weekend with a woman in the town where he is trading, paying her an appropriate sum. What is in reality prostitution is not even considered adultery in the Qur'an.



- Child marriages and incest were common in Muhammad's day, and the Qur'an places few limits on these.
- Some Muslim societies today do not permit women to drive or vote, and female circumcision is common, especially in some Muslim regions of Africa.
- Men gather at the mosque to pray, but women must pray at home.

## DIETARY RESTRICTIONS

Islamic dietary restrictions are similar in many ways to those found in the book of Leviticus. Muslims may not eat pork, anything containing blood, anything used in the worship of pagan gods, or animals killed in forbidden ways. They also are forbidden to drink alcoholic beverages, though this is a prohibition widely ignored, especially among prosperous Muslims. If you violate dietary regulations unintentionally, in cases of extreme hunger, or because you are forced to do so, Allah is merciful (2:173).

## MONEY

Gambling (2:219-220; 5:90-91) and usury (2:275) are forbidden. As is the case among Jews and Christians, the prohibition against usury has been reinterpreted in a money-based economy to forbid exorbitant interest rather than legitimate return on an investment.

## ART AND SCIENCE

The major contribution of Islam to the arts is in the realm of architecture (think of the Taj Mahal, though the Dome of the Rock was built by Byzantine craftsmen following the model of Byzantine churches). Many mosques are magnificent buildings constructed to the greater glory of Allah. Though the Qur'an says nothing about art, the *Hadith* prohibit the pictorial representation of any sentient beings, human or animal (this has not prevented Muslim artists from creating such representations, however). Note the following:

- Pictorial representations of Allah are strictly forbidden, of course, especially since He is not only unseen, but also nothing can be known about Him. The Iconoclastic Controversy in the Eastern Orthodox Church arose partly because the Muslims, who prohibited images of God, were defeating the Byzantines, who venerated icons.
- Pictorial representations of Muhammad are also considered blasphemous, as numerous recent incidents of murder have demonstrated.
- Islamic art is thus dominated by arabesques, intricate geometric patterns, and calligraphy.

In the realm of literature, most of the best-known writings to come from Muslims (even the *Thousand and One Nights* and the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam) were written by mystics or heretics. Music fared no better, since the *Hadith* prohibits the use of musical instruments.

Despite claims of a flowering of philosophy, mathematics and science in the Muslim world in the Middle Ages, much of what adorned the lands of Islam at this time was borrowed from the classical world, whose works were preserved and translated by the Arabs (Avicenna and Averroes built on the philosophy of Aristotle), or from Christian sources. Even Arabic numerals and the zero,

for which the Muslims often get credit, were first used in India. Advances were made, as seen in the fact that the words *algebra* and *algorithm* come from the Arabic. Progress in medicine was limited by the prohibition against dissecting human bodies or drawing the human form.

## PROGRESS

One might well ask why the advances in mathematics and other fields did not lead to the kind of technological innovations produced in the West when this same knowledge arrived there. As with Hinduism in India, progress in Muslim lands has only come where secularization has flourished (which has been rare). The simple reason is that Muslims look for their model to the lifestyle of a seventh-century desert nomad; modernity is the enemy of Islam. Is it any wonder that the most zealous among today's Muslims wish to destroy all that is new in the world? They either denounce it as openly immoral (as, sadly, much of it is), see it as a threat to the strict demands of Shari'a law, or else "make friends" with Western technology in order to destroy the Western world and all it stands for (e.g., the use of cell phones and the Internet by terrorist groups). One should also note that Muslims in Western countries will often seek to use democratic freedoms to undermine the democracy that is completely incompatible with the religion of Allah.