# Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry Vol 14 No 1 • Jan/Feb 2008

# The World At Our Door: Understanding Key World Religions Around Us

## By Randall Otto

A subtle shift in religious affiliation is occurring in the United States. Just like tectonic shifts under the earth that portend potential disaster for huge portions of the West and the coastal regions of our country, this shift is occasionally discussed and debated, but its impact may not be understood until it has altered the landscape of our country. While Christianity remains the predominant religion in this country with over 76% claiming association, increases in other religions are striking over the past ten years. The percentage of Hindus in the United States increased by 237% from 1990-2000, with current estimates of approximately 1.2 million adherents in the U.S.[1] numbers that would be considerably higher were variants of the faith, such as New Age and Sikhism included.[2] The percentage of Buddhists in this country increased by 170% between 1990 and 2000, with estimates of up to 4 million adherents in the U.S., more than any other Western nation. The population of Muslims in the United States doubled from 1990-2000, increasing to its currently estimated number of about 6 million adherents. Of particular note is the *world* increase in Islam: Islam is said to be the fastest growing religion in the world and, "if current trends continue, Islam will become the most popular world religion sometime in the mid-21st century."[3] Because these religions are increasingly coming to our doorsteps, it behooves Christians to familiarize themselves with these faiths, as well as others, such as Judaism which, despite negative growth (-10% between 1990-2000), remains second to Christianity in adherents within this country at roughly 6 million.

### Why Should We Study Other Religions?

It has been variously said, "life is religion."[4] If religion is understood to be a system of belief or worldview that entails activities stemming from or focusing on that which is perceived to be of sacred or ultimate value, it may be seen that humanity *is* inherently religious. Virtually everything we think, say, and do has a religious thrust to it. Our language, customs and cultures, morals, relationships, backgrounds and futures are all formed or informed by religious concepts. There are thus several reasons why we should study religion, both our own as well as that of others.[5]

Table of Contents

We should study religion because we are religious beings. We are beings with what is called a capacity for self-transcendence; we yearn for what lies beyond us in an ultimate sense. We all ask the same questions: 'why am I here?', 'where am I going?', 'what is life all about?', 'what will happen to me when I die?' How we respond to these fundamental questions indicates something about our religious orientation. Because we all ask these questions, they may serve as a useful point of contact in our efforts to converse with others about the issues of life! We may differ about where to find the answers or what those answers are, but we should at least be willing to discuss the viability of proposed responses. Why should we suppose that others will be willing to listen to our view if we are unwilling to listen to theirs?

This leads to another reason for studying other religions. We often have little awareness of how others respond to the great questions of life. If this is true for how the variations within Christianity look at certain aspects of our common faith, it is all the more true for how those of other religions answer the great questions. If we know very little about the doctrine of other denominations, how much less do we know about whether Buddhists worship Buddha or whether Jews are all looking for a personal messiah (the answer to both is "no"!). We ought to study other religions (as well as other denominations of Christianity!), therefore, to overcome our ignorance. We often have a rather narrow view of what constitutes religion, because we tend to identify religion with the experience of our own tradition. Obviously, this can result in uninformed or poorly informed views, in prejudices and attitudes which do not reflect love for our neighbor.

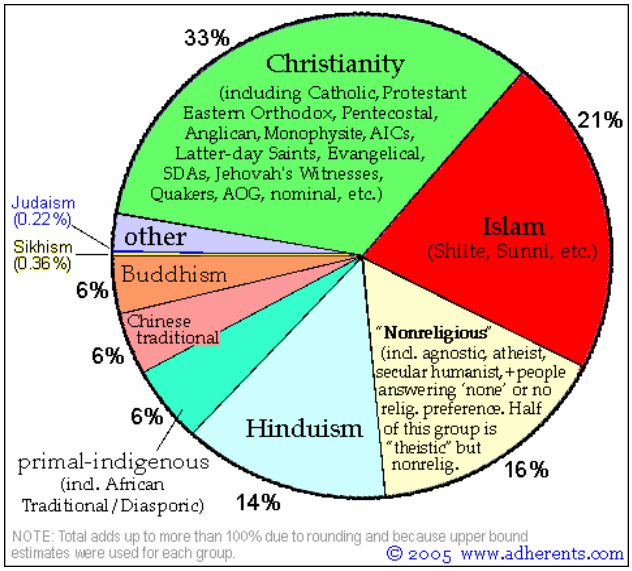
A third reason for studying the religions of the world is so that we may better understand our own history and culture, as well as that of others, which are increasingly melding into our own. The formation, history, and culture of the U.S. have been shaped significantly by varying perspectives on Christianity. It is not possible to understand the American experience with any fullness without allusion to the Christian faith. Similarly, it is impossible to understand other countries, and those who come from those countries, without some acquaintance with the religions which have informed and molded their cultures and thus their beliefs about nature, self, family, government, and work.

Another reason to study other religions is to achieve more of a global perspective. As we are involved in other countries, personally, professionally, or politically, it behooves us to know more about what motivates conflicts between Arabs and Israelis in the Middle East, Indians and Pakistanis along their border, and numerous other aspects of life, most of which are grounded in religious perspectives. Why do radical Muslims insist on casting the U.S. as a "great Satan" and issue *fatwas* calling for *jihad* against the U.S. "crusaders"? Why are Sunnis and Shi'ites willing to kill one another in Iraq? Some awareness of the compelling religious motivations in each of these instances will greatly assist us in understanding and responding to global affairs.

Finally, studying other religions can help us better formulate our own perspective on the key questions of life. Learning about how others answer the big questions can help us better examine our own beliefs. Investigating the beliefs of others can help us to expand our own understanding of our faith, cause us to recognize where we need to explore for answers more fully.

The apostle Paul demonstrated in his own life and ministry that an acquaintance with "pagan thought" could be used as a point of contact in expressing the gospel more clearly. Paul cited the poets Epimenides and Cleanthes in his speech to unbelievers on the Areopagus (Acts 17), Menander in his ethical teaching in 1 Cor. 15:33, and Epimenides again in Titus 1:12. While there is debate regarding the influence, value, and significance of other religious thought to key leaders within biblical and church history, there can be no question that other currents of thought, i.e., philosophical, religious, and cultural, have helped the Church frame and share its concepts of faith more effectively. As contemporary missions acknowledges, the Christian church must learn to listen more carefully to the ideas, interests, and concerns of those not committed to its faith in order that it might know how to share the faith more effectively and genuinely.

The religions to be studied in this article are among the most widely followed in the world. As the chart




indicates, Christianity is the largest religion in the world, including numerous denominations and variants (some not generally considered genuinely Christian,

such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Latter-Day Saints, etc.), followed by Islam, then "Nonreligious," comprised of agnostics, atheists, and secularists. This latter group is too disparate to focus on in any meaningful way here and has been discussed in this journal and others on many occasions. Again, although Chinese traditional religion and indigenous religions have the same percentage of adherents throughout the world as Buddhism, the former are composite groupings having too much variation to make meaningful generalizations useful. They also exert less influence in the U.S. religious melting pot than other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism which, while having great variation themselves, have sufficient fundamental coherence that meaningful descriptions may be offered within the limits of a study such as this. Thus, for the purposes of this study, we will look at what are often considered the primary religions of the world and are generally those studied in a world religions class (excepting Christianity here, of course, since knowledge of that religion is assumed amongst the readership of this journal): Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam.

## Hinduism

Often spoken of as the world's oldest religion, Hinduism traces its themes and forms to the third millennium BC ("Before Christ"). The term *Hinduism* is thought to have been coined for the villagers that lived in the Indus River Valley and, while first applied by Muslim conquerors to those peoples of this region who did not convert to Islam, *Hindu* did not become a common term until the nineteenth century when, for the purposes of British census-taking, it was applied to all people not belonging to a known named religion such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Jainism. This already serves to indicate the widely varied nature of Hinduism, as well as its close association to the people of India. Further accenting the tremendous variation within Hinduism is the tradition that maintains "there are actually 330 million deities in India," though these are often said to be simply manifestations of one divine essence. [6]

### History

The origins of Hinduism are unclear and shrouded in debate. The general consensus would still seem to be, however, that Aryans coming from Central Asia and bringing the scriptural traditions found in the *Vedas* (Sanskrit meaning "knowledge") interacted with the religion of the pre-Aryan peoples, called Dravidians, to form the basis of what is today called Hinduism. It is to be observed here that *Aryan* and *Dravidian* both refer to language groups and not races, the Aryan (which means "noble ones" in Sanskrit and has historically been applied to groups as diverse as North Indians, Western Asians, and Europeans, Nazi usurpation of the term notwithstanding[7]) languages including those commonly called Indo-European (Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and English e.g.) and the Dravidian including several south Indian languages (e.g. Tamil). Archeological investigation has unearthed various amulets and statues associated with the Dravidian natives' religion, which dates back to around 2500 BC, including certain gods and goddesses sitting in the lotus position, later adopted by yoga Hinduism.

While Hindus today prefer to call their religion *Sanatana Dharma*, "eternal religion," the Vedic tradition, on which Hinduism is based, dates from 1200 BC, the probable date of the Rig Veda ("verses of knowledge"), to around 400 BC, the probable date of some of the Upanishads. The mention of these texts itself indicates both the basis and key subsequent developments within Hinduism. According to Hindu tradition, the Vedas were not composed by humans, but rather were heard by ancient seers or *rishis*, transmitted orally, and then compiled after hundreds of years. The oldest and most important of the Vedas, the Rig Veda, is a collection of 1028 hymns to various deities generally associated with nature while fire sacrifices are being presented by Brahmins, i.e., priests. The focus of the Vedas is on ritual and one means of transmitting the sacrifices to the gods via Agni, the god of fire, involved the exalted state, perhaps even visions, achieved by use of the *soma* plant, now thought by many scholars to be the stimulant ephedra, presently under scrutiny in contemporary concerns over performance enhancement in professional sports.

The Vedic universe is populated with various benevolent and malevolent supernatural beings. Virtually every tree and river has a divine being associated with it. Rivers such as the Ganges are believed to be not simply the representation, but the actual presence, of the divine, so that to bathe in it is to have one's sins forgiven. While there is no central god in the Rig Veda, key deities mentioned there which later become more prominent are Vishnu and Rudra, later known as Shiva. Also of note is the fact that verses in the Rig Veda refer to the cow as a devi, or goddess, identified with Aditi, the mother of all gods. While this clearly provides a basis for the veneration of the cow, Hindus insist they do not worship cows.

The sacrificial ritual may still be practiced by a few Brahmin priests, but the Vedas are little read and less followed; notwithstanding, the Vedas are considered central to Hinduism. Hinduism may have no core beliefs, but it does require acknowledgement that the Vedas are inspired. Furthermore, the caste system, which derives from the Vedas, is also considered foundational to Hinduism. There were four classes (*varna*) of Aryan society, the three highest being known

as "twice born" because their male members had undergone a rite of initiation which gave them access to full membership in society, including being able to marry. The highest class was that of the Brahmins, the priests and philosophers who focused on the life of the spirit and placating of the gods. The next group, later called the Kshatriyas, was the nobility in feudal India: kings, warriors, and vassals. Their role was to guard and protect society, particularly the Brahmins. The third class was the common folk, called Vaishyas, farmers and merchants. According to the Vedas, this hierarchical system was divinely ordained and reflects orders of purity: the head, associated with the Brahmins, is purest, while the feet, associated with the Vaishyas, was most polluted. The fourth class, the Shudras, was that of manual laborers, considered incapable of participating in Hindu society. Outside of the caste system altogether were the "outcastes," also termed "untouchables." They were consigned to the most degrading work, such as removing human waste and corpses. Although Mahatma Gandhi worked tirelessly on behalf of these whom he called harijans ("children of God"), resulting in the formal illegality of caste discrimination in 1947, the caste system is still a part of Indian life and is viewed as something one has earned according to the merits, or lack thereof, of previous lives. Thus, the Brahmin, who is considered the most spiritual, has acquired this status because of the goodness of previous lives, whereas those of lower castes are viewed as receiving such birth for having lived poor previous lives. Living one's life according to the obligations of one's class, together with one's obligations within his stage of life, thus constitute "brahmanical orthopraxy" and form "part of an essentialist definition of a Hindu."[8]

## Philosophy

Although the key doctrines of karma, samsara, and reincarnation do not appear in the Vedas, but only later in the Upanishads, the fundamental idea of *dharma* as the cosmic and thus social order of righteousness which determines the way things are is central to the Vedic tradition.

The later Upanishads (meaning "to sit down", as disciples around a master) represent mystical insights of the *rishis* for advanced students of Hindu philosophy. The Upanishads represent a decided alteration of focus, away from rituals performed by an elite group toward an inward search, available to all, for *moksha*, or deliverance. Life is portrayed as cyclical, a wheel of rebirth (*samsara*), conditioned by *karma*, which is one's actions and the effects of those actions in this life and previous lives on one's present and future, according to the Eastern acknowledgement of reincarnation. Self-exploration here serves as the means of knowing Brahman, the all-pervading reality. The Upanishads paint a monistic portrait of reality, meaning all things are one existence under different names. All things are manifestations of the one divine essence. It is in this way that Hinduism transmutes from the polytheism of the Vedic tradition to something variously termed pantheism (all is divine), monotheism (belief in one god) or henotheism (belief in one god, while recognizing the existence of others). Because all is viewed as a manifestation of this one divine reality, *pantheism* (all is God) or *panentheism* (all is in God) is probably the best way to view the concept of God in the Upanishads.

The one divine reality which is called Brahman is generally viewed as impersonal and beyond description: "invisible, incomprehensible, without genealogy, colorless, without eye or ear, without hands or feet, unending, pervading all and omnipresent, that is the unchangeable one whom the wise regard as the source of beings."[9] The *rishis* taught that Brahman, the all-pervading reality, could be known from within as the deepest or innermost self or soul, *atman*. The self is, after all, a part of reality; thus, by understanding the self, one could understand ultimate reality. Atman, the essence of the self beyond all living, sensing, and thinking that directs all an individual does, known only through enlightened inner self-consciousness, is identical with Brahman. To know the true self, therefore, is to know Brahman.

Thus, the Hindu quest becomes the search to know the deepest self (atman), which is ultimate reality (Brahman). The religious quest is no longer primarily associated with ritual, but with withdrawal, with asceticism and meditation as means of achieving release from the world and the cycle of rebirth. "To escape from samsara is to achieve moksha, or liberation from the limitations of space, time, and matter through realization of the immortal Absolute. Many life-times of upward-striving incarnations are required to reach this transcendence of earthly miseries."[10]

## Practice

A fundamental aspect of the Hindu search for enlightenment and deliverance (*moksha*) is yoga. Yoga means "yoke" or "union," referring to the union of atman with Brahman. Practitioners of yoga seek *samadhi*, union with the Absolute. Yoga encompasses many forms of spiritual discipline, all of which seek self-knowledge. Yogic practice may include regulation of breathing, various physical postures (*asanas*), the use of sacred formulas or *mantras*, and/or concentration on a visual form. Various forms of yoga are geared towards different personality types, from the active (karma yoga) to the rational (jnana yoga) to the emotional (bhakti yoga). Most common is bhakti yoga, the path of devotion to a personal deity. The bhakti or devotional approach came to dominate at least in part because it was open to both women and *Shudras*

(manual laborers and artisans), who had been excluded from direct participation in Vedic ritual.

The divine that is worshiped depends on the practitioner. Some people join a sect, identifying with devotion to a particular deity by marks upon their foreheads *(tilakas*). One joins such sects by means of initiation through the communication of a sacred mantra by a guru, an esteemed spiritual guide. The mantra is usually some form of "AUM" (or "OM") which, while having no meaning as a word, is viewed as the primordial sound, the beginning of creation, and the essence of Brahman. The Katha Upanishad says, "The goal, which all Vedas declare, which all austerities aim at, and which humans desire when they live a life of continence, I will tell you briefly it is *Aum*…. The one syllable [*Aum*] is indeed Brahman. This one syllable is the highest. Whosoever knows this one syllable obtains all that he desires."[11] *AUM* is also associated with what is often called the Hindu trinity (*Trimurti*) and represents the union of the three gods, *A* representing Brahma, the god of creation and the first member of the Hindu triad; *U* stands for Vishnu, the god who preserves all of creation; and *M* symbolizes Mahadev, which is another name for Shiva, the god of destruction who, at the final stage of existence, reduces all things to their essence. While efforts are sometimes made to find a point of contact with Christianity here, Flood rightly observes that the Trimurti is "erroneously referred to as the 'Hindu trinity'."[12] Because these gods are variously understood to be either divinities in themselves, thus forming a version of polytheism, or more generally manifestations of Brahman, thus forming something akin to the heretical form of trinitarianism known as modalism, there is no congruence with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity here.

The Sakta tradition may or may not include the Vedic path. The power of the goddess is known as *sakti*. The goddess may be fierce, like Kali who is portrayed as the destroyer of evil by carrying a sword and severed head, or gentle, like Durga who is represented as a beautiful woman whose ten arms hold weapons with which she vanquishes the demons who threaten dharma. Goddess worship may be linked to nature, especially trees and rivers, such as the Ganges. To bathe in the Ganges is to have one's sins washed away. The Ganges is also the place where the ashes of the Hindu dead, whose corpses are always cremated, are preferably scattered.

The god Shiva is regularly depicted as the Lord of the Dance, trampling the demon of evil, bearing the flame of destruction, while at the same time beating the drum of creation. In this way, Shiva is seen to be the reconciler of all dualities, overcoming and destroying evil while at the same time initiating new life. Shiva is a terrifying divinity to be propitiated, with serpents for hair and whose consort may be the grim Kali.

The god Vishnu has been worshipped since Vedic times; he is a god more like the Western concept, masculine, benevolent, acting on behalf of righteousness. Vishnu is understood to have appeared in a series of earthly incarnations, some in animal form.

While many people have a chosen deity, they may also worship other deities for various reasons. Hinduism accepts all gods of all religions as manifestations of Brahman; since, for instance, Buddha is viewed as an avatar of Vishnu, Hindus could acknowledge the master of Buddhism as a manifestation of Vishnu. This would also be true of Jesus Christ.

The practice of Hinduism varies as widely as the number of gods worshiped. Belief and practice are generally contingent on one's caste, god(s), and regional traditions. "Generally, then, the situation in Hinduism is one of small groups, castes, subcastes, and regional traditions setting down clear guidelines for orthodoxy, and sometimes orthopraxy, often strictly enforcing these guidelines, whereas in terms of Hindu tradition as a whole, diversity in proper belief and practice is what is most characteristic."[13]

Ritual is central to Hinduism. Whereas the Vedas described a host of rituals centered around a sacrificial fire performed by Brahmin priests to nourish the gods and receive their blessing, puja rituals are more common today and have been for centuries. *Puja* refers to a wide variety of rituals, all of which essentially entail an image of the god or goddess, whether at home or in a temple, to which offerings of some kind (usually not fire) are offered. For most Hindus, puja typically takes place in the home, where there is a shrine and the image of the deity that is worshiped.

Many Hindus observe days of fasting and prayer determined by a complex lunar or solar calendar. Astrology is very important to many Hindus (e.g., in determining time for a marriage). Many women daily decorate the entrance to their homes with auspicious designs.

There are pilgrimage sites throughout India, some associated with particular gods or goddesses and thus "naturally" sacred, such as a mountain or river, and others which have become holy by association with a revered saint, teacher, or divine event. These places are deemed important to visit because of the divine power associated with them. "The importance of pilgrimage in Hinduism and the very number of locations underline the important idea that India itself is a holy place, the center of the world, and that for a Hindu it is important actually to live in this environment in order to partake of sacred power. To be a Hindu is to live in India."[14]

While there are some in India known as "Hindu fundamentalists" who reject secularism and conversion

to other religions, Hinduism is generally tolerant of all religious paths. This view was corroborated by the Indian Supreme Court in 2002. According to the court to be Hindu means:

- Acceptance and reverence for the Vedas as the foundation of Hindu philosophy;
- A spirit of tolerance, and willingness to understand and appreciate others' points of view, recognizing that truth has many sides;
- Acceptance of the belief that vast cosmic periods of creation, maintenance, and dissolution continuously recur;
- Acceptance of belief in reincarnation;
- Recognition that paths to salvation and truth are many;
- Recognition that there may be numerous gods and goddesses to worship, without necessarily believing in worship through idols;
- Unlike other religions, absence of belief in a specific set of philosophic concepts.

## Witnessing to a Hindu

Because Hinduism is open to other religions as legitimate ways to the divine, a Hindu may not see the importance or necessity of the idea of conversion. Furthermore, because Hindus worship numerous gods, it may seem perfectly reasonable to add Jesus to that number without recognizing his claim to be the unique revelation of God, only incarnation of God, and sole mediator between God and humanity. However, because Hinduism does acknowledge the idea of the incarnation of the divine in some of its thought, there is here a point of contact that might be further explored. It would be important to accent, though, that the God of the Bible is not Brahman or any of its manifestations, but the God who entered into covenant with Israel and revealed himself in the events and proclamations found in the Bible.

While Hinduism is a religion, it is as much a culture, with a great deal of diversity and, accompanying that, a great deal of uncertainty. While the exclusivist claims of the gospel may initially seem the antithesis of Hindu tolerance, the love of God found in the Christian gospel of a Savior who has done all that is necessary for our salvation can offer great relief to Hindus who engage in strenuous feats of self-deprivation and asceticism in their efforts to attain deliverance from the wheel of rebirth. The presentation of the gospel as the simple message of peace with God through faith in what Jesus Christ has done on the cross may thus bring great relief to Hindus who hope by austere efforts to rid themselves of accumulated bad karma over untold numbers of lives.

# Buddhism

Buddhism is the sixth largest religion in the world and arose out of Hinduism. While Hinduism acknowledges aspects of Buddhism, seeing the Buddha as an incarnation of the god Vishnu, and while there are many elements of terminological and conceptual similarity between the two religions, there are also some very important differences. The most important and fundamental differences lie in the Buddhist disinterest in the existence of the divine, rendering Buddhism a theoretically non-theistic religion, and the Buddhist emphasis on the impermanence of all things, including the denial of a personal soul or enduring self.

## History

Buddhism's origin is as difficult to ascertain as is that of Hinduism. If, as is typically done, Buddhism is said to have been born with the enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama around the age of 36 beneath a bo-tree near Gaya, a tributary of the middle Ganges River, we may establish Buddhism's origin in the sixth century BC. However, it is important to understand that there is a Buddhist tradition that records the names of at least twenty-four Buddhas who preceded Gautama, though "there is no evidence for their existence as historical personages; their existence is affirmed as 'revealed truth', proclaimed by Buddha Gotama."[15] The tradition is that a Buddha appears periodically throughout history whenever people's knowledge of the dharma is lost and needs to be revived, roughly every five thousand years. Thus, technically speaking, Buddhism did not begin with Siddhartha Gautama, generally known as the Buddha. Rather, he is said to have learned from a previous Buddha named Dipamkara such wisdom and compassion that he himself resolved to emulate. In undertaking to cultivate the virtues of generosity, morality, desirelessness, vigor, wisdom, patience, truthfulness, resolve, lovingkindness and equanimity, he became a bodhisattva, a being intent on and destined for buddhahood.

Scholarly debate continues about the exact dates of the Buddha's life; he most likely lived for about eighty years during the sixth century BC. Historically verifiable details of his life are sparse; what is important for Buddhism are the many ways followers have recalled his life in various sacred biographies. "Extant complete biographies of the Buddha date from four centuries after his passing on. These texts venerate the Buddha as a legendary hero, and were written by storyteller poets rather than historians."[16] These sacred biographies describe the life of a child named Siddhartha, born to Maya and Shuddhodana, who was a chief of the Shakya clan in northern India in the foothills along the Himalayas. Maya dreamed that a white elephant entered her womb with the result that when the child was born, he immediately proclaimed

his exaltation.[17] At the time of Siddhartha's birth, priests foretold that this child would become either a great king or a person who would renounce earthly life in order to share his enlightenment with the rest of the world.

After having left his luxurious life for a rigorous ascetic search of seven years for enlightenment, Siddhartha decided upon a Middle Way between passion and deprivation, arriving at enlightenment through earnest meditation. While the Buddha could have stayed in the eternal realm, out of compassion for the world he devoted himself to proclaiming the *dharma*, the eternal truth of awakening. The Buddha spent the next forty-five years traveling and teaching throughout India.

Entering into discipleship meant taking the Three Refuges (also known as the Three Jewels): taking refuge in the Buddha, taking refuge in the dharma (Buddha's teaching) and taking refuge in the *sangha* (the order of monks or community of believers). Life in the sangha meant a life governed by Ten Prohibitions: no taking of life, no taking of what is not given, no sexual misconduct, no lying, no taking of intoxicants, no eating after noon, no watching or participating in dancing or singing, no use of perfume or ointments, no sleeping on a soft bed, and no receiving of gold or silver. The sangha was notably different from Hinduism in *not* making distinctions on the basis of caste. Some followers became *bhikshus*, i.e., monks. Later women were allowed to pursue a life of renunciation as well, becoming *bhikshunis,* although the Buddha was somewhat reluctant to allow this and agreed only with the provision that nuns follow eight special rules.

The Buddha died after eating a piece of spoiled pork that had been presented as an offering. It is said that a crowd of his disciples watched as he entered into nirvana. His body was cremated with ceremonies befitting a king and the relics dispersed among eight clans, each of whom built a sacred cairn over their portion to form a memorial known as a *stupa*. The stupa thus became a focus of lay devotion, later developing into the pagodas found throughout southeast Asia.

## Philosophy and Practice

The basic facts of existence revealed to the Buddha in his enlightenment have become known as the Four Noble Truths:

- Life inevitably involves suffering, is imperfect and unsatisfactory.
- Suffering originates in our desires.
- Suffering will cease if all desires cease.
- There is a way to realize this state: the Noble Eightfold Path.

The term translated here as "suffering" is *dukha*. The Buddhist understanding of suffering goes beyond the connotations of the English term. Suffering is not simply being miserable, but results from the impermanence of everything in life. Thus even the greatest happiness is temporary; even when one's life is going well, there are nagging fears that something or someone cannot last. The concept of *dukha* extends to the Buddhist understanding of self as well; while Hinduism seeks knowledge of the eternal soul or *atman*, the Buddha found no such entity, and instead taught that there is no permanent self or soul (*anatman*, i.e., the negation of *atman*). Rather, the self is a changing bundle of fleeting feelings, sense impressions, ideas, and evanescent physical matter.

> It was the Buddha's denial of the reality of the individual soul which more than anything else distinguished his doctrine from that of other religious philosophers in Asia. All these, therefore, regarded his views as heretical. If the soul is denied, they argued, moral striving is pointless, and moral justice has no basis. If there is no enduring soul, there is no bearer of merit or demerit, punishment or reward. [18]

Instead of founding morality in a selfish desire for reward, the Buddha urged that the search for the transcendental state of nirvana provides all the motivation necessary for moral striving.

The Second Noble Truth asserts that suffering arises from desires, because we seek satisfaction and permanence in our lives even though, according to the Buddha, no permanent satisfaction is possible. We cling to what cannot be held and feel frustration as a result, because all is impermanent and life is illusory (*maya*).

The Third Noble Truth is that suffering ceases when desire ceases. The Fourth Noble Truth indicates the way by which desire ceases. The Eightfold Path incorporates morality, concentration, and wisdom as the means to stopping desire:

1. Right Understanding is to realize and understand the Four Noble Truths.
2. Right Thought or Motives is to uncover the roots of thinking and eliminate self-centeredness.
3. Right Speech is to abstain from vain talk, gossip, divisive speech, harsh words, and lying.
4. Right Action is to observe the Five Precepts, namely to avoid destroying life, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxicants.
5. Right Livelihood is to make a living without violating the Five Precepts.
6. Right Effort is to cut off unwholesome states.
7. Right Mindfulness is to be aware in every moment.
8. Right Meditation is to quiet the mind through mental discipline.

The goal of Buddhism is the achievement of nirvana, the state of absolutely transcending all duality and all conditioned reality. "Nirvana" means "blowing out" or "extinguishing" of all desires which constrict human beings. While *nirvana* is a central term in Buddhism, it is difficult to define. The Buddha himself didn't say much about it and later Buddhists have proposed varying explanations of it. It is used of both a state of mind and of a locale of deliverance. It has been defined as the extinction of aging and dying, as escape from suffering, but also as a place into which one enters as an arhant (one who is enlightened, never again to be reborn) at death, though nirvana is not viewed as a heaven. Nirvana may be attained while one is still alive, and at death such a person is not reborn. Therein lies some of the difficulty in defining the term, for if all that remains after one dies is karma, what is left to experience nirvana for the person who no longer has any karma? The Buddha apparently chose not to try to describe this state any further, explaining that to do so would not lead people towards nirvana. Nirvana is simply a universalization, a becoming one with all, so that one is undifferentiated from the infinite.

Buddhism spread throughout India but essentially died out there by the twelfth century. However, Buddhism in a variety of forms spread throughout Asia. There is much more of a missionary impulse to Buddhism than there is in Hinduism.

There are two major branches within Buddhism, *Theravada* and *Mahayana* Buddhism. Theravada is prevalent in the southeastern Asian countries of Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Mahayana is dominant in China, Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, Japan, Nepal, and Tibet. Both groups are in general agreement about the basic concepts of the Four Noble Truths, karma, and nirvana. However, the differences between these two branches are so profound as to almost overcome the similarities.

*Theravada* means "path of the elders" and seeks to maintain what it considers the original teachings of Buddhism. It is an older and more traditional form of Buddhism involving a sharp distinction between monks and lay people. Theravadins believe that only monks may achieve nirvana.

The other main branch of Buddhism is *Mahayana* ("great vessel"), which reflects innovation in Buddhist thought and practice, including a focus on the liberation of all beings, monastic *and* laypeople, with a vast array of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Wisdom and compassion, as well as the skillful means needed to cultivate awakening, are key virtues in Mahayana.

Whereas Theravada Buddhism regards the Buddha as a historical figure who no longer exists, but who left his dharma as a guide, Mahayana teaches that the Buddha is a universal principle, that everyone is an unrealized Buddha and that any means of realizing Buddhahood is acceptable.

Tibetan Buddhism is sometimes presented as a third vehicle of Buddhist teaching, but it is better to view it as a form of Mahayana that developed in Tibet in the seventh or eighth century. This vehicle is a speeded-up path to enlightenment within one lifetime based on tantric yoga from India. Best known for its *lamas* ("superior ones") who are its teachers, Tibetan Buddhism practice includes deity yoga, meditating on various deities who, having been absorbed from the indigenous Bon religion, embody qualities which the practitioner wishes to cultivate. Tibetan Buddhist practice at all levels may include the use of *thangkas* and mandalas (visual aids to concentration portraying various Buddhas and bodhisattvas in diagrams representing the entire cosmos), and mantras, which may be inscribed on prayer flags, or inserted within prayer wheels. Tibetan Buddhism has suffered since the Chinese persecutions beginning in the 1950s. The fourteenth Dalai Lama fled to India and established his headquarters in Dharamsala.

Buddhism reached China via central Asia and then spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Zen Buddhism is traditionally traced back to the monk Bodhidharma, whose missionary efforts in fifth century China emphasized that the truth of Buddhism was not achieved by monasteries and scriptures, but only through meditation and sudden insight. (*Zen* is the Japanese rendering of the Chinese word *Ch'an*, "meditation.") Elements of Chinese and Japanese culture such as tea ceremonies, rock gardens, and haiku draw on ideas of quieting the mind and enabling the sudden insight of enlightenment.

## Witnessing to a Buddhist

It should be readily apparent that Buddhism, syncretistic like the Hinduism out of which it arose, involves a great deal of diversity. Like most Eastern religion, Buddhism is highly adaptive and able to accept a variety of sometimes apparently conflicting ideas into itself in order to gain a greater adherence.

While there is wide variation in Buddhism, it should not be expected that someone who practices Buddhism will necessarily understand these variations, but only be familiar with his or her own understanding. Since forms of Buddhism in the U.S. are primarily Mahayana, there will be basic points of similarity, namely, the idea that each person is an unrealized Buddha and that there is a bodhisattva available to assist the one who calls upon the merits of that one to achieve enlightenment. The idea of the bodhisattva is fundamentally that of an expedient. "In actual reality there are no Buddhas, no Bodhisattvas, no perfections, no stages, and no

paradises—none of this. All these conceptions have no reference to anything that is actually there, and concern a world of mere phantasy."[19] "Thus this promise of salvation is based on nothing more than empty speculation."[20] In the end, the doctrines of karma, reincarnation, and skill in means, require us to recognize that salvation in Buddhism is still very much dependent on one's own deeds.

Buddhism calls attention to the nature of suffering and the possibility of deliverance, but does not provide a clear and historically-verifiable method of finding deliverance. It sees all as impermanent, but yet concepts such as karma, reincarnation, and the ideal of the bodhisattva seem to transcend that flux, though having no actual reality in themselves. Many forms of Mahayana view the bodhisattva as something like an eternal Buddha principle incarnated, so this may provide a point of contact with the actual incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and the historical realities found in the gospel.

## Judaism

In coming to Judaism, we land on much more familiar terrain! We also arrive at a very definite monotheistic perspective, vastly different from the plethora of deities found in Eastern religion. There are some other noteworthy differences between monotheism and Eastern religion. Whereas Eastern religion is not particularly interested in historical events, seeing life and history as cyclical (e.g., "the wheel of samsara"), monotheism sees life and history in linear fashion, heading toward a particular goal, and emphasizes historical events. Whereas Eastern religion is syncretistic, adopting and adapting local deities and practices into its belief and practice, monotheism is exclusivistic, insisting that there are no other gods than its God.

Although adherents of Judaism comprise less than 1% of the world population, the impact of Judaism upon civilization has been monumental. The two largest religions in the world today, Christianity and Islam, derive from Jewish roots and the revelation given to Abraham.

Judaism may be defined in terms of "Israel," those who with Jacob of old struggle to live in covenant with God (cf. Gen. 32:28). The word *Jew*, however, is particularly difficult to define. Although we may naturally think of a Jew as anyone who adheres to a certain set of religious beliefs or practices, there are some called Jews who are atheists and do not practice any religious faith. Some Jews believe that one is Jewish if his or her mother is Jewish or if one converts according to the Orthodox tradition, which is irrevocable, regardless of whether one maintains Jewish faith and practice or subsequently converts to some other faith![21] Others believe one is Jewish if either mother or father is Jewish, or if one converts according to the Progressive tradition which does not require the Orthodox stipulations. Thus, even among Jews there is disagreement as to who is a Jew, further accenting the emphasis on exclusivity within monotheism.

### History

The Jewish sense of history begins with Tanak or the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament. *Tanak* is simply an acronym for the three sections of the Hebrew Bible, the ***T****orah* (also traditionally known as the five books of Moses or the Pentateuch), the ***N****evi'im* (i.e., the Prophets) and the ***K****etuvim* (i.e., the Writings).[22] The Protestant Old Testament contains the same books as are found in the Tanak, but differently numbered and arranged. Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments contain additional books known as the Apocrypha that were found in the third century BC Greek translation of the Tanak called the Septuagint.

The Hebrew Bible begins with God's creation of the world, and details the experiences of Abraham and the patriarchs, through Moses, who brought Israel out of Egypt and received the commandments from God, to the Davidic kingdom and its subsequent division and disruption through idolatry into Babylonian captivity and the Jewish dispersion among the nations, culminating in the Jews' return in the late sixth century BC with the rebuilding of the Second Temple, completed in 515 BC. Because many from Judah had been taken into exile in Babylonia, they were called Jews.

In the diaspora, some Jews may have adopted ideas from other traditions pertaining to Satan, the hierarchy of angels, resurrection and an afterlife (perhaps from the Zoroastrianism of the Persian Empire). Ideas from rationalistic, humanistic Hellenism also affected some Jews. In the second century BC, a Hellenistic ruler of Syria named Antiochus IV sought to impose Hellenistic practices on all his subjects, including the Jews, which led to the Maccabean rebellion. The successful rebellion led by the Hasmon family of priests established an independent kingdom called Israel, centered around Jerusalem, which lasted until 63 BC when it was conquered by a Roman general. That was the last independent Jewish nation until the twentieth century.

Three sects formed under the Hasmonean king: the Sadducees were priests and wealthy businesspeople who did not accept any Scripture beyond the Torah and did not hold to the resurrection of the dead; the Pharisees held to the entire Tanak as scripture, as well as accompanying oral tradition, and did hold to the resurrection; the Essenes considered the priesthood

corrupt and retreated to Qumran, where they lived ascetic and celibate lives awaiting apocalyptic judgment upon Jerusalem and a restoration of the temple worship, as attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

After the Romans took over in 63 BC, Jewish belief in a messianic age strengthened in intensity, drawing on apocalyptic literature which viewed the world in stark terms of good and evil and foresaw God's decisive and cataclysmic victory over evil ushering in a new world order. Some Jews concluded that a Messiah would come to bring evil to an end and establish peace. In 66 AD, led by the anti-Roman Zealots, Jews rebelled against Rome. In 70 AD, the Roman legions destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and Jews scattered throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond. The Western "Wailing" Wall is all that remains of the Second Temple.

Rabbinic Judaism emerged from the Pharisee tradition, with synagogue worship, liturgical prayer and ethical behavior substituting for temple rituals. Torah study became increasingly important for men; women, however, were excluded from such study. The rabbis' study, called Midrash, brought about two types of interpretation: *halakhah* (proper conduct) and *haggadah* (folklore, historical/sociological knowledge, etc.). The literature of the Midrash came to be known as the oral Torah. In 200 AD, Judah the prince produced an edition of the oral Torah called the Mishnah. Later, the Mishnah and commentaries on it were organized into the Talmud, which preserves multiple interpretations of religious questions.

Most Jews lived in eastern Europe during the Enlightenment, but in western Europe, Enlightenment values of tolerance and reason over tradition and authority lessened restrictions on Jews. Moses Mendelssohn, an eighteenth-century German Jew, founded the Jewish Enlightenment which sought to integrate Jews more fully into European culture. This became the basis for Reform Judaism, which revised traditional references to a return to Israel, changed some liturgies from Hebrew to the vernacular, and envisioned Judaism as changing with the times, its followers loyal citizens of the nations in which they lived.

In eighteenth century Poland and Ukraine, the ecstatic path of piety known as Hasidism developed. In the nineteenth century, Jews from Germany and eastern Europe began immigrating to the United States. Today the United States has the largest Jewish population in the world.

The Holocaust is for Jews the defining event of the twentieth century. Centuries of anti-Semitism in various forms came to a head in the murder of nearly six million European Jews under the Nazi Third Reich. The Holocaust has offered a daunting theological challenge to Jewish thinkers and theology as a whole: how could a caring God have allowed the Holocaust to happen?

The Zionist movement dedicated to establishing a Jewish state in the biblical land of Israel was led by the journalist Theodor Herzl in response to late nineteenth century European anti-Semitism. A 1947 United Nations decision partitioned Palestine into two areas, one governed by Jews, the other by Arabs, with Jerusalem an international zone. Israel declared itself an independent state in 1948, and immediately came under attack. Conflict with neighboring countries continues, particularly with Arab Palestinians.

## Philosophy

Despite changes in Judaism over time, major themes may be identified. In the narrowest sense of the term, Torah (teaching) refers to the Five Books of Moses, though by extension it may include the entire Hebrew Bible and Talmud, or even all sacred Jewish literature and observance. At the highest level, Torah is God's will and wisdom.

Monotheism is the central Jewish belief. Humans are to love God and this commandment is emphasized in prayers and religious services. Humans are created in God's image, an idea generally understood as having to do with the intellectual capacity of human reason. Judaism does not hold to a doctrine of original sin or instinctive evil; thus people are viewed as potentially perfectible.

Acting in accord with Torah is the means to upholding humans' part of the covenant with God. Rabbinic literature teaches that the Torah contains 613 *mitzvot* (commandments), ranging from ethical guidelines to civil matters such as inheritance and family law.

Jewish thought is by no means monolithically messianic. Whereas Orthodox Jews believe in a personal messiah to come from the Davidic line and hope to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, other forms of Judaism, such as Reform and Recontructionist, see Jewish people themselves as messianic, bringing justice to the world. Similarly, dietary laws regarding *kashrut* (kosher foods) that are believed to be fundamental to Jewish faith in Orthodoxy are viewed in other types of Judaism as remnants of a bygone era.

## Practice

Daily scriptural study has been a major practice for males since the rabbinic period. Ritual male circumcision traditionally occurs on the eighth day of life. Medical circumcision in the absence of the *brit milah* (covenant of circumcision) ceremony, however, does not fulfill the requirements of the *mitzvah* (command).

Jewish boys celebrate their coming of age at thirteen with the ritual known as the *Bar Mitzvah* (son of the commandment). In non-Orthodox congregations, girls may now celebrate a similar ritual called the *Bat Mitzvah*.

Traditional Jews may begin each day with a prayer; male Orthodox Jews wear a prayer cloth and *t'fillin* (phylacteries) on the forehead and upper arm. There is a traditional prayer schedule for men; women are excused from this schedule due to their household responsibilities.

The Sabbath is observed from sunset Friday night to sunset Saturday night. Traditionally, no work is done on the Sabbath. Families may attend Sabbath services and begin the Sabbath with a special Friday night dinner.

According to the Jewish lunar calendar, the year begins with the High Holy Days of *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year's Day), the ten Days of Awe and *Yom Kippur* (day of atonement and cleansing). *Sukkot* is a fall harvest festival. After the seven-day Sukkot festival comes *Simhat Torah* (joy in Torah), commemorating the end of the yearly cycle of Torah readings. Near the winter solstice is *Hanukkah*, a celebration of the Maccabean rebellion and the purification of the Temple.

*Tu B'shvat* celebrates the reawakening of nature at the end of Israel's winter rainy season. On the full moon of the month before spring begins is *Purim*, commemorating the deliverance of the Jews through Esther. Later in spring comes *Pesach* or Passover, celebrating the exodus from bondage in Egypt. Pesach is marked by the Seder dinner. Some also celebrate a new holy day termed *Yom Ha'Shoah*, Holocaust Memorial Day. *Shavuot* in early summer marks Moses' receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai, followed by three weeks of mourning for the Temples.

There are many different contemporary Jewish groups, with differences centering on issues such as adherence to the Torah and Talmud, conversion, use of Hebrew, and women's participation. In response to secularization, Orthodox Judaism has affirmed the Hebrew Bible as the revealed word of God, the Talmud as legitimate oral law, and use of Hebrew alone in worship. Orthodox Judaism observes *kashrut* and holy days. It has no central governing body and there are thus debates within it over Zionism, views of other Jewish groups, and accommodation to a secular environment.

Contrariwise, Reform Judaism, which began in eighteenth century Germany, has changed traditional liturgies and highlighted ongoing development in Judaism. It emphasizes religious authority in each individual and has abandoned *kashrut* and ideas of a personal messiah.

Conservative Judaism, the largest movement in the U.S., is dedicated to traditional rabbinic Judaism but also sponsors critical study of Jewish texts and allows adaptations for modern life.

Reconstructionist Judaism seeks to preserve Judaism in the face of rationalism and seeks to reconstruct Judaism as a natural religion in accord with scientific thought. Closely related is Humanistic Judaism, founded in the 1960s as a "nontheistic alternative in contemporary Jewish life" featuring "a human-centered philosophy that combines the celebration of Jewish culture and identity with an adherence to humanistic values and ideas."[23]

## Witnessing to a Jew

Though Jews and Christians have a common foundation in the Hebrew Bible (which is how Jews refer to it; since they do not acknowledge a New Testament, theirs is not the "Old Testament"), the person of Jesus is clearly the challenge. Most Jews have been taught to avoid talk of Jesus; though Jesus was a Jew, most Jews see him as having been a mistaken prophet who was killed for treason and who was subsequently divinized by a misguided group of early believers which became the institution of the church that has historically caused great pain for Jews. Talk of Jesus is thus a topic thought best by Jews to avoid, as it has been the source of great pain and suffering. Christians thus need to be sensitive in using Old Testament prophecies of Jesus.

Many Jews are like adherents of many other religions, including Christianity; they generally know what they have been taught, while they don't know their scriptural texts well, they may resent someone from another faith presuming to interpret them. Ask any Jew with whom you have a trusted relationship about his faith, what his hopes are (messianic?) and how he practices his faith. You can point to areas of convergence with Jews, particularly if your church celebrates, say, a Jewish Seder on Maundy Thursday. As you show interest in Jewish faith and observance, you may open up opportunities to share your own faith and demonstrate a caring concern that many Jews have thought lacking in Christians historically. Opportunities to share about Christian faith may be supplemented by literature that portrays the Christian concept of fulfillment in Jesus and especially by messianic Jewish worship, which retains Jewish forms of worship while recognizing Jesus as the promised messiah.

# Islam

There is no question that Islam is the religion of greatest concern in the modern world. No religion arouses more concern or controversy than Islam because of its

associations with terrorism and differences over what is sanctioned by the religion. There are also numerous misconceptions about Islam, such as the notion that it is a strictly Arabic religion. While Islam originated in the Arabian peninsula and worship is conducted in Arabic throughout the Muslim world, a minority of Muslims are Arabs. The largest Muslim nation is not in the Middle East, but is Indonesia, with 170 million Muslims, followed by Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.

## History

Muslims consider Muhammad to be the final prophet in a chain of prophets going back to Abraham, who brought monotheism to the world. The Qur'an, Islam's most sacred book as revealed to Muhammad, traces the ancestry of the faith to the patriarch Abraham and his son Ishmael by the Egyptian slave Hagar; i.e., Abraham is viewed as the first Muslim. The monotheism established by Abraham was not maintained, Islam insists, so Muhammad was eventually sent to restore it. God asked Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael, who was the firstborn of Abraham by Sarah's maid, Hagar. Note that this is a major difference from the Hebrew Bible, which in Genesis 22 says that it was Isaac whom God commanded Abraham to sacrifice! Notwithstanding, Islam speaks of the time preceding the coming of Muhammad as an "age of ignorance" when the religions revealed through Moses and Jesus, though once pure Islam, had been distorted by Jews and Christians. It is by means of this alleged distortion that Islam purports to accept the previous monotheistic scriptures while at the same time dismissing their differences from the Qur'an.

Muhammad was born in 570 AD in Mecca, a commercial city already considered sacred to the Arabs because of the Ka'bah stone, a meteor that Islam claims fell at the time of Adam, around which Abraham and Ishmael built an enclosure. Numerous deities were worshiped by the Arabs prior to Muhammad. The city of Mecca had become a holy place because of animistic associations and deities associated with the planets; among these was a supreme and unapproachable deity named Allah.

Muhammad was born to the Quraysh tribe, of the clan of Hashim, known as custodians of the sacred places of Mecca. His father, Abd-Allah, died before Muhammad was born and his mother died when he was six. Muhammad was thus raised by his uncle Abu Talib, with little opportunity for schooling. It is important to Islam that Muhammad is understood to have been illiterate, for the revelations he received were not written by him, but are said to have been memorized and then recorded by those alongside him.

As a young man, Muhammad went to work for a wealthy widow named Khadijah, and the two married when Khadijah was forty and Muhammad twenty-five. When Muhammad was forty, the angel Gabriel came to him during the night of the 26th of the month of Ramadan, thereafter called the "Night of Power," and instructed him to recite. Thus began the revelation of the Qur'an, which means "recite." The revelations asserted that there was one true God who called people to submission, or Islam. His emphasis on the torments of hell to the recalcitrant met with great opposition. Many of Muhammad's earliest followers were harassed. Muhammad and his followers were forced to leave Mecca for several years, but then were invited to return. During this time, in 619, known as the Year of Sorrows, Muhammad's primary supporters, his uncle and wife Khadijah, both died. During this difficult period, Muhammad experienced the Night of Ascension, when he is said to have traveled from Jerusalem into God's presence and to have met the prophets who had preceded him, from Adam to Jesus.

Residents of Yathrib, north of Mecca, invited Muhammad to live in their city. Muhammad and his followers accepted the invitation in 622 AD. The migration or *hijrah* to Yathrib (subsequently renamed Medina, "City of the Prophet") marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. In Medina, Muhammad instituted a constitution which later became the basis for Islamic social administration. During the first eighteen months after the hijrah, Muhammad carried out seven raids on merchant caravans, which were militarily unprotected and an easy prey. As the first raid in 624 occurred during a holy month of Rajab, "when bloodshed was forbidden according to pagan convention, it was met with a wave of indignation in Medina. The embarrassed Muhammad claimed that his orders had been misunderstood and waited for a while before distributing the booty. Eventually a new Qur'anic revelation appeared to justify the raid,"[24] something one finds repeatedly to be the case as the life of Muhammad unfolds.[25]

Having solidified his support, Muhammad urged all to join the *ummah*, the community of faith. When the Jews refused to accept Muhammad as a prophet, viewing an Arab and his revelations as inconsistent with the prophetic precedent found in the Hebrew Bible, Muhammad expelled most of the Jewish tribes from Medina.

Meccan leaders feared that Muhammad posed a threat, and conflict broke out between the two cities. In 627 a force of 10,000 Meccans attacked Medina, only to withdraw after failing to take the city. This was viewed as a great victory for Muhammad and was a turning point in the history of the Muslim community. In 629 he and his followers were able to return to Mecca with such strength that they were not challenged and the following year Muhammad conquered Mecca. The Ka'bah was purged of its 360 idols and

became the center of Muslim piety. Many Meccans converted to Islam and "several tribes were subdued by force."[26] Muhammad married new wives, many who were widows of Muslims who had died in battle.[27] Muhammad went back to Medina, whence he undertook campaigns to spread Islam further. In 632 AD Muhammad made a final pilgrimage to the Ka'bah to demonstrate the proper form of worship there.

Prior to his death in 632 AD, Muhammad had given no instructions as to who should succeed him. His close friend Abu Bakr was elected as the first caliph, but this election later caused controversy. Shi'ite Muslims believe that Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law 'Ali (married to Muhammad's daughter Fatima) should have been the first caliph ("deputy").

## Philosophy

The heart of Islam is not Muhammad, but the revelations recorded in the Qur'an which affirm God's unity and direct life. Muhammad dictated the revelations to scribes, and they were carefully recorded. Qur'anic study and recitation became central for Muslims, with recitation understood to have a healing and protective effect. "Perhaps no Scripture has ever been so influential to its people as the Qur'an. Surely no Scripture is read as much or committed to memory as often."[28]

The authoritative written version of the Qur'an was established around 650 AD. The third *caliph* ("deputy") Uthman worked with Zayd to develop an authorized version that replaced variations in text. Because the art of paper making was unknown to Arabs at that time, the messages given by Muhammad to his associates had been memorized and written on leather scraps, stone, palm leaves, even bones. The Qur'an does not quote the Bible and often differs from it. Parrinder speaks of it as "an original religious inspiration with a point of view quite different from that of the previous scriptures."[29] For instance, Muslims are able to say that Jesus prophesied the coming of Muhammad by taking Jesus' reference to the Paraclete in John 14:16, 26 as a reference not to the Holy Spirit, but to Muhammad.

While Muslims purport to recognize the truth and even divine origin of all the sacred books of the world, the Qur'an is understood to be the final and complete version of the teachings of all the prophets, for the messages given to Muhammad were taken from a heavenly book, eternal, and uncreated, co-existent with God, known as the *Well-Preserved Tablet* or *Mother of the Book*, containing the eternal speech of God. Because the Qur'an is thus viewed as the literal and uncorrupted word of God, extraordinary reverence is paid to the Qur'an. It is never to be laid on the ground and it is among the highest acts of piety to memorize the entire Qur'an.

Muhammad is thus viewed as the Seal of the Prophets. While Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet, they do not accept the notion that he may pardon sin or atone for others' sins, for only God can do so. Jesus (Arabic, *Isa*) is viewed as the greatest prophet before Muhammad called to preserve Torah. Islam acknowledges that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, but denies he was crucified; instead, it maintains, people only thought Jesus died. Islam suggests that it was not Jesus who was crucified, but Simon of Cyrene or possibly Judas. Islam says Jesus was really taken directly to heaven, from which he will descend at the appointed time to destroy the Anti-Christ and usher in a time of peace. Jesus is not Son of God, says Islam. Any such view is characterized as polytheistic and idolatrous.

## Practice

The basic teachings of Islam are straightforward, encapsulated in what are known as the Five Pillars. The *Shahadah* is the basic confession, "There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God," and is the first statement made to a newborn Muslim infant. God's unity is a central focus of Islamic theology. People must believe in and surrender totally to *Allah* (Arabic for "God"). The two greatest sins involve one's relationship to God: *shirk* is associating anything besides the one God with divinity (such as Jesus), and *kufr* is ungratefulness to God, atheism, or unbelief.

The second pillar is daily prayer (*salat*). Muslims are to pray facing Mecca five times daily. Prayer is preceded by a ritual purification with water (or sand if water is unavailable) and must be done in a clean place, which is why prayer rugs are used. When prayers are performed in a mosque, women and men pray separately, usually following the prayers of a leader. The third pillar is *zakat*, almsgiving, or donating a certain percentage of one's income to charity each year (often assessed as a tax of between 2.5 and 10%). Fasting (*sawm*) is the fourth pillar, obligatory during the month of Ramadan, when Muhammad first began receiving revelations. Those who are able must abstain from food, drink, sexual intercourse, and smoking from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan.

The *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, is the fifth pillar, expected of all Muslims at least once in their lifetime if they are able; minors, the poor, elderly, and infirm are exempt, though someone may go in their place. Seven trips around the Ka'bah are made, finally kissing the black stone. On the tenth day of the pilgrimage, a sheep or goat is slaughtered, commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Ishmael.

*Jihad* is sometimes spoken of as the sixth pillar. Jihad literally means "striving," though it has come to be known as "holy war." The Greater Jihad is the struggle

over the lower self, whereas the Lesser Jihad is protection of God's way over the forces of evil, safeguarding the Muslim community. Controversy exists as to how faithful radical Islam is with Muhammad's use of the word. However, it is quite likely that Muhammad's militaristic use of the word was an alteration of "a common tribal practice into a supreme religious duty and the primary vehicle for the spread of Islam throughout the ages."[30]

The issue of Muhammad's successor led to a split between two factions, the Sunni (roughly 80% of Muslims) and the Shi'a. The Prophet's son-in-law and cousin 'Ali became the fourth caliph, but he was assassinated. 'Ali's son Husayn challenged the fifth caliph's legitimacy, and rebelled when the fifth caliph named his own son as successor. Husayn and many of his relatives were massacred at Karbala. The Shi'ites broke away, established their own line of succession, and have remained separate ever since. The country with the largest Shi'a majority is Iran.

Sunnis or "people of the *Sunnah*" (tradition) emphasize the authority of the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (sayings of Muhammad). Their understanding is that Muhammad did not appoint a successor but rather left this up to the Muslim community. For Sunnis, the caliph is the leader of worship and the administrator of the sacred law of Islam, *Shari'ah*.

Islam spread rapidly as both a spiritual and secular power, by personal contacts in trade, but predominantly by way of conquest. Although he never gained any territory outside of Arabia during his life, Muhammad was toward the end organizing against Christian border states on the north of the peninsula which eventually brought Islam into conflict with the Byzantine empire. After his death, Islam took key areas: Damascus was taken in 635, Persia in 636, Jerusalem in 638, most of North Africa was made Muslim by the end of the seventh century and Spain by 711. They were turned back from conquering the remainder of Europe by Charles Martel in 732 at the Battle of Tours.

Monotheistic followers of revealed religions, i.e. Christians and Jews, were designated as *dhimmis* or protected people. What this meant, however, closely resembles later Nazi treatment of the Jews and present treatment of non-Muslims in countries led by S*har'ia*, Islamic law.

> They had to pay special taxes … and suffered from social indignities and at times open persecution. Their religious activities outside the churches and synagogues were curtailed, the ringing of bells was forbidden, the construction of new church buildings prohibited, and the proselytizing of Muslims was made a capital offense punishable by death. Jews and Christians had to wear distinctive clothes to distinguish them from their Muslim lords, could ride only donkeys, not horses, could not marry Muslim women, had to vacate their seats whenever Muslims wanted to sit, were excluded from positions of power, and so on and so forth. [31]

The Abbasids took over the caliphate in 750 AD, and moved the capital to Baghdad, where a period of great intellectual and artistic activity followed until 1258. As Islamic civilization reached great heights, Europe was in the Dark Ages. Christian crusaders from Europe sought to take Jerusalem from Muslim leadership; a series of violent conflicts ensued, leading to animosity between the two faiths whose effects are still felt.

Islam also moved eastward through central Asia into India and beyond. Some rulers of the Muslim Mogul empire encouraged interfaith explorations. Tensions between Hindus and Muslims became acute during British rule of India, and led to the partition of British India in 1947 into Pakistan and India. Islam became the majority tradition in Indonesia, and there are sizable Muslim populations in China and the former Soviet Union. Africa, too, has a substantial Muslim population, with some Muslims maintaining indigenous traditions as well.

Most of the world's oil-rich nations are predominantly Muslim. Oil wealth and Westernization led to social change in many Muslim nations, including efforts toward democracy. An anti-Western and anti-secularist fundamentalist backlash began to occur at the end of the nineteenth century, drawing on such thinkers as Mohammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), whose strict brand of Islam was taken up by the ruling al-Saud family when Saudi Arabia declared its independence in 1932. Later thinkers deeply influenced subsequent radicalism, particularly Hassan al-Banna, who founded the Society of Muslim Brothers (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt in 1928, and Muwlana Mawdudi, who founded the fundamentalist *Jamaat Islami* in Pakistan and called for Islamic revival in India during British rule there. By the late 1940s, Banna's Muslim Brothers had roughly one million members among some two thousand branches in Egypt, with additional branches throughout parts of the Middle East, committed to using all means necessary to establish a truly Islamic government in Egypt and expand such rule throughout the world.

Similarly, Muwdudi would declare in 1941 that Islam is revolutionary, militant, and seeks to rule the world.

> Islam is a revolutionary doctrine and system that overturns governments. It seeks to overturn the whole universal social order…and establish its structure anew…. Islam seeks the world. It is not satisfied by a piece of land but demands the whole universe…jihad is at the same time offensive and defensive…. The Islamic party does not hesitate to utilize the means of war to implement its goal. [32]

These thinkers laid the foundation on which the Egyptian Sayyib Qutb built his brand of Islamism. After returning from a two-year stint in the U.S., during which he was utterly disgusted at what he viewed as American depravity, Qutb was in 1951 elevated to propaganda director for the Muslim Brothers, from which he asserted that jihad, killing in the name of Allah, was central to achieving the universal Islamic kingdom.

Although executed in 1966 for conspiracy against the Egyptian government of Gamal Abdel-Nasser, which he viewed as insufficiently Islamic and corrupt, Qutb lived on through his writings. They were "the spark that ignited the Islamic revolution against the enemies of Islam at home and abroad," wrote the prominent Egyptian Islamist Ayman al-Zawahiri, known to the world as lieutenant to Osama bin Laden and co-founder of the terrorist organization al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks against New York's World Trade Center in 1993 and again on September 11, 2001 with coordinated attacks on the Pentagon and potentially other Washington targets, have been supplemented by growing waves of terrorism on targets throughout the world, including targets in Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia.

While many would urge that the majority of the Muslim world does not support the radical Islamist agenda, the Middle East Forum's Daniel Pipes suggests the likelihood that 10-15% of the Muslim world (i.e., 100-150 million) is comprised of radical Islamists and that "one half of the world's Muslims—or some 500 million persons—sympathize more with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban than with the United States." [33]

## Witnessing to a Muslim

Evangelizing Muslims is almost certainly the most difficult missionary task facing the Christian church. This is because Islam is also a missionary religion with universal aspirations and is one in which there is little tolerance for questions or doubt. *Islam* means "submission" and the unwillingness to allow open discussion of other religious views is evident in numerous Islamic countries' "anti-conversion" laws, which make it a capital offense to proselytize or convert to another religion. The plight of Christians in Muslim countries is often extremely harsh, with the brutalization, rape, or killing of anyone even suspected of being Christian frequent in those countries that have invoked Shari'a law. If, for instance, one says, "Jesus Christ is the Son of God," he will likely be found to have offended or blasphemed against Muhammad and be in danger of death.

Muslims in the West may not be as intolerant, but they are likely just as unaccustomed to questions about their faith or thinking about others' faiths on their own. They may often be ready to rebut Christian assertions regarding the Trinity, the incarnation of God in Jesus, or allusion to the Bible with standardized responses, but engaging in a respectful conversation about the similarity, as well as difference, of these faiths, can perhaps be a point of rapprochement on which to build for future sharing of faith. Both faiths look to Abraham as their father, claim to acknowledge the Hebrew Bible, view Jesus as born of the virgin Mary and an exemplary prophet, and seek to honor God.

There are, furthermore, adumbrations of key Christian teachings in the history of Islam itself. The concept of the heavenly book as eternal, uncreated, and co-existent with God correlates strikingly with the Logos concept in John 1, the Word which became flesh. Further, the generation immediately after the prophet Muhammad embroidered his life with tales of miracles and wonder, so that by medieval times he was viewed as sinless, perfect and an intercessor for his people on the Day of Judgment.

Ideas within Shi'ite Islam of the imam "made his a unique and divinely blessed spiritual office, though they varied from conservative doctrines in which he was little more than a divinely-blessed caliph to extremest theologies that saw him as virtually an incarnation or manifestation of God himself on earth and so even greater than Muhammad."[34] These trains of thought clearly converge with the incarnational theology of Christianity and provide a further point of contact and opportunity for discussion.

Finally, Muslim allegations of the Bible as corrupted are based on textual variants of little or no consequence and affecting no doctrine of Christian faith. "It can be pointed out that if someone had burned all textual variants of the Bible, as Uthman burned Qur'an variants, then there would be a single version of the Bible as well."[35] More important than variants is the discrepancy that occurs between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament over against the Qur'an. Whereas the New Testament quotes large portions of the Hebrew Bible as indication of its fulfillment of what it speaks of as the old covenant, the Qur'an does not, but where it does allude to the Old and New Testaments, differs markedly from them. The chief instance, as it pertains to Christian faith, is the Muslim denial that Jesus died on the cross, that someone else died in his place, and that he was instead miraculously transported to heaven. How could Mary and the disciple John, for instance, have failed to realize it was not Jesus on the cross before them if the Muslim allegation is to carry weight? Furthermore, how is Islam to account for the centrality of the cross in the entire New Testament if Jesus did not die there? This then leads the Christian to the point of proclaiming why Jesus died there and what he accomplished, namely salvation by grace through faith.

## Conclusion

Increasingly in this country, the church is finding the world of religions at its own doorstep. While the need for Christians to go to other countries continues, all Christians today will find themselves more and more in the midst of those who are of other faiths. A basic understanding of those faiths, such as has been presented here, provides us with the basis for dialogue, demonstrating our own interest in their background and beliefs, as well as enabling us to find points of contact and areas for possibly questioning aspects of their faith, thereupon urging upon them in a loving and tactful way the hope that is in Christ.

**Note: In order to save space, we have placed the references at www.theologymatters.com. If you would like a printed copy of the references, contact us at scyre@swva.net or call (540) 898-4244.**

*Rev. Randall Otto, Ph.D. has taught world religions for several colleges, such as the University of Phoenix, and now serves as interim pastor at Green Hill Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, DE. He is on the Board of Directors of PFFM.*

**Please send a donation today to support this vital ministry:**

**Theology Matters**
**P.O. Box 3940**
**Fredericksburg, VA 22402**

**Back issues are on our web site at www.theologymatters.com or contact us at: scyre@swva.net; (540) 898-4244**

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry
P.O. Box 3940
Fredericksburg, VA 22402-3940

**Change Service Requested**

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AUTOMATED
MAILING
SYSTEM

**References for "The World At Our Door: Understanding Key World Religions Around Us" by Randall Otto**

[1] All percentages are drawn from http://adherents.com/rel_USA.html#religions. The numbers listed there as 2004 estimates seem generally to be low; hence, most of the numbers of adherents listed here are taken from "The Pluralism Project" at Harvard University. (http://www.pluralism.org/resources/statistics/tradition.php#Hinduism)

[2] The New Age movement, though imprecise, grew by 240% from 1990-2000, whereas Sikhism grew by 338% during that period to a present estimated 250,000.

[3] http://www.religioustolerance.org/islam.htm; however, cf. http://www.bible.ca/islam/islam-myths-fastest-growing.htm, where it is maintained that, while Muslim growth is double that of Christianity, this owes largely to its predominance in third-world countries, whereas worldwide Christians are actually converting others to the faith as a rate almost double that of Muslims.

[4] So said by the Zoroastrians (http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/WhatisReligionHowisitthattherearemoreThanOneReligions.pdf ), Hindus (http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1994/3/1994-3-14.shtml), African traditional religion (http://afgen.com/atr.html), as well as Christians and others!

[5] The following is drawn from James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion* (5th ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2005) 12-15.

[6] Mary P. Fisher, *Living Religions* (6th ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2005) 69. However, in one of the Upanishads, a sage, when asked how many gods there are, "says there are 303, then that there are 3,003, when pressed further that there are 33, 6, 2, 1½ , and finally 1. In the next verse he settles on 33" (Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996] 44).

[7] Interestingly, Aryans who did not migrate into India became the founders of the ancient Iranian (*Iran* means, "land of the Aryans") religion of Zoroastrianism, which seems to have had some influence on Jewish faith during the time of the Babylonian Captivity under the Persian Empire in the 6th C. BC. "It is a debatable point among scholars in what specific ways and to what extent Persian influence made itself felt among the Jews; but it can hardly be denied that the apocalyptic teaching, for example, concerning such matters as 'the two ages', the determinism of historical events, angelology and demonology, the notion of the final judgment and eschatological ideas generally owes much to this source" (D. S. Russell, *The Method & Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964] 19).

[8] Flood, *Hinduism*, 58.

[9] Mundaka Upanishad, 1.1.6, cited in Manuel Velasquez, *Philosophy: A Text with Readings* (9th ed.; Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2005), 44.

[10] Fisher, *Living Religions*, 75.

[11] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Om

[12] Flood, *Hinduism*, 116.

[13] David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective*, (2nd ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 19993) 55-56.

[14] Ibid., 115.

[15] Geoffrey Parrinder, ed., *World Religions from Ancient History to the Present* (New York: Facts on File 1971) 262.

[16] Fisher, *Living Religions*, 129.

[17] Such legends are common of the founders and key personages of many religions. Thus, for example, Jewish legend has it that Moses was able to walk and talk the day he was born, despite being three months premature! He was purportedly of exceptional beauty, having been conceived with the glory-cloud of God's Shekinah overshadowing him, and of such wisdom that at four months he would prophesy that he would receive the Torah (cf., e.g., Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998] 2:264-270). It is worth observing, however, that despite such legends of Moses and of Jesus in the apocryphal gospels, none of this material was deemed to have the credibility and validity necessary to be included in canonical scripture.

[18] Parrinder, *World Religions*, 275.

[19] Edward Conze, "Buddhism: The Mahayana," in R. C. Zaehner, ed., *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Living Faiths* (London: Helicon, 1988) 309.

[20] Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1998) 247.

[21] The requirements under Halakah for conversion are that a *beth din* (house of judgment) witnesses and approves of the conversion. Men are circumcised and both men and women are immersed (*t'vilah*) in a

*mikveh* (ritual bath). There must be an understanding and acceptance of the obligations of being a religiously observant Jew. After confirming that all these criteria have been met, the *beth din* issues a *Shtar Giur* ("Certificate of Conversion"), certifying that the former gentile is now a Jew and will always be one.

[22] The Torah, of course, consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, but the Prophets consist of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel [considered one book, not two], 1-2 Kings) and Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve [Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, all considered one book]; the Writings consist of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (considered one book) and 1-2 Chronicles.

[23] Society for Humanistic Judaism, http://www.shj.org/

[24] Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 14.

[25] This is seen repeatedly, e.g., in Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1983).

[26] Theodore M. Ludwig, *The Sacred Paths: Understanding the Religions of the World* (3rd ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: 2001) 435.

[27] Although the Qur'an allows Muslim men to marry up to four wives, providing they can care adequately for all of them, Muhammad had at least eleven wives after Khadijah's death in 621, the youngest of whom was Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakr, who was nine years old when they were engaged and eleven when they married. A complete listing of Muhammad's wives may be found at http://anwary-islam.com/women/prophets-wives.htm.

[28] Lewis M. Hopfe, *Religions of the World* (9th ed.; ed. Rev'd by Mark R. Woodward: Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005) 339.

[29] Parrinder, *World Religions*, 475. Elwood says, "even allowing for the elements of rhythm and allusive eloquence that are presumed to have been lost in translation, one may feel an initial disappointment. The book may seem disorganized, repetitious, or platitudinous" (*Many Peoples, Many Faiths*, 338).

[30] Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 5.

[31] Ibid, 28.

[32] Cited by Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Fundamentalism Since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 26.

[33] Pipes, "Who is the Enemy?," January, 2002, http://www.danielpipes.org/article/103.

[34] Robert S. Elwood, *Many Peoples, Many Faiths* (5th ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996) 362.

[35] Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 108.