

Multi-Faith/Inter-Faith Relations: Survey of World Religions

Christianity

Christianity grew out of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth in the first-century CE during the time of Augustus. The teachings generally urged a purification of Judaism, which would allow for a free Israel and the establishment of a kingdom of God upon earth. The faithful were asked to follow the moral code of love, charity, and humility forsaking the worldly matters. Many of the early followers believed in the coming of the messiah, which would usher in a final judgment. Initially converts to this sect of Judaism were Jewish by birth and followed Jewish law. The growing belief in Jesus as divine however caused hostility with the Jewish world and many believers were forced to leave Israel. Paul converted to the new early Christian religion and he helped to establish a new set of laws that insisted on abandoning the “old laws” of Judaism. Under his guidance missionaries were sent out across the Middle-East and Europe to spread the message of this new universal religion. Over the next 250 years Christianity won over many converts and by the fourth-century CE about 10-percent of the residents within the Roman Empire were Christian and there were flourishing Christian communities in the Middle-East and Ethiopia.²

Christianity believes in the unity of God and that He is infinite – infinite in perfection and infinite in time and space. God is also considered a “simple” being for He cannot be made up of finite parts nor can He possess accidental imperfections. God is also free, intelligent, and distinct from His creation. God is considered eternal and immutable in Christianity. God is also “omniscient or possesses the most perfect knowledge of all things ... [and] possesses the perfection of free will in an infinitely eminent degree.”³ Christianity believes that God is part of a “Trinity” and this doctrine is central to the Christian religion. The Trinity represents a unity of the Godhead which is made up of three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) and these three persons are distinct from one another – all being co-eternal and co-equal. This is taught in the Athanasian Creed: “the father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God.”⁴

The holy text of the Christian religion is the Bible. The Christian Bible includes the Tanakh – what Christianity refers to as the “Old Testament” – and the Christian texts known as the “New Testament.” Book lists of acceptable biblical books had been in existence since 170 CE but they did not always agree with each other. The Old Testament canon was derived from the books of the Septuagint – or Greek – version of the Tanakh. The New Testament canon was derived from the biblical book list of an influential bishop named Athanasius.⁵ The official canon was adopted at the Council of Trent. The source of evil in Christian tradition is attributed to the free-will choices of man. The willful disobedience to God by mankind causes evil and suffering.⁶ Christianity teaches that “Satan” or “The Devil” is a tormentor and tempter that can lead one to sin. The Christian religion teaches a theology of “original sin” whereby all mankind is tainted by the original sin of Adam. Mankind is born into a state of sin and is a slave to sin according to Christian doctrine. The use of baptism as well as accepting Jesus as one’s “Lord and Savior” are the only options for bringing about forgiveness of sin.

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Islam

Islam's origins can be traced back to about 600 CE in the central Arabian Desert. The religion began with the teachings of Mohammed who was considered by his followers to be the last messenger of Allah. Islam spread rapidly from the Arabian Peninsula in less than 30 years. The religion quickly spread into Asia, Europe, and North Africa.⁷ After the death of Mohammed his followers were faced with a decision of who should become the leader of Islam. The leadership position – known as the kalifa – became a contentious one and led to the split of Islam into what are now known as Sunni Islam and Shia Islam. Shia Islam considered Ali – Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law – to be the rightful successor while Sunni Islam considered Abu Bakr (a friend and father-in-law of Mohammed) to be the rightful successor. Abu Bakr was the first of four kalifas – the others being Umar, Uthman, and Ali – who contributed to the spreading of the religion of Islam.⁸

The central tenant of Islam is the absolute belief in a unique, One God known as Allah. Islam teaches that Allah is the all-powerful Creator of an ordered and perfect universe. He is transcendent and not part of His creation. Allah is considered to be ultimately unknowable and transcendent. However Islam also teaches that Allah is not aloof in heaven but is present everywhere and close to mankind. Allah is considered a God of Justice who expects submission to the divine will and righteous behavior of mankind. Allah responds to anyone who cries out to Him and He “mercifully provides guidance to mankind so they can follow the straight path.”⁹

The holy text of Islam is called the Qur'an. The Qur'an is considered the final revelation from Allah that was revealed to Mohammed in a series of divine revelations. The Qur'an is considered the direct and unaltered words of Allah revealed through the Angel Jibreel to Mohammed. The key teachings of the Qur'an are the same as those in the Tanakh and New Testament: belief in One God with no partners; refrain from sin; and, lead a life devoted to earning God's favor. The Qur'an was recorded during the time of its revelation by Mohammed's followers. Muslims consider the Qur'an as the only revealed book in existence today that is in the “precise form and content in which it was originally revealed.”¹⁰ For Islam, evil is the result of mankind's free-will choices. Suffering comes from the willful neglect of following Allah by sinning in one's life. Islam teaches that “Shaytan” is a tormentor and tempter that can lead one to sin. Islam does not teach a theology of “original sin.” Islam teaches that mankind is born into a natural state of submission to Allah and repentance of sins brings one back to that natural state.¹¹ The purpose of life for a Muslim is to live a life pleasing to Allah in order to gain Jannah (paradise). At puberty an account of each person's deed is opened and this account will be used on the Day of Judgment. Islam teaches that unbelievers and sinners will be condemned but if one truly repents of one's sins Allah will grant forgiveness and one will attain Jannah.¹²

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Baha'i

The Bah'ai Faith grew out of Shi'ite Islam and the belief in a 12th Imam – a successor of Mohammed – who would renew religion and guide the faithful. In 1844 Mirza Ali Mohammed proclaimed an imminent appearance “of a new messenger of God who would overturn old beliefs and customs and usher in a new era.”¹³ He himself declared that he was the forerunner of this coming prophet and took upon himself the title “Bab” (Persian for “Gateway”). The Bab's teachings spread quickly but ultimately led to his imprisonment and execution as well as the persecution and death of about 20,000 of his followers in Iran. Mirza Hoseyn Ali Nuri was an early ardent follower of the Bab and took on the name of Baha'u'llah (Persian for “Glory of God”). He was arrested in 1852 and jailed in Tehran where he came to realize that he was in fact the prophet that the Bab had spoken about in his teachings. He was released in 1852 and exiled to Baghdad where he assumed leadership over the Bah'ai community. In 1863 he was relocated to Constantinople where he declared to his fellow believers that he was the prophet foretold by the Bab. He was accepted by the overwhelming majority of the followers and declared the prophet. Before his death in 1892, he appointed his eldest son Abd ol-Baha to be the leader of the Bah'ai Faith and authorized interpreter of his teachings. The Bah'ai Faith spread rapidly through North America and Europe as well as other points around the globe.¹³

The followers of the Bah'ai Faith believe in only One God, the creator of the universe. God has absolute control over His creation and has complete knowledge of His creation. Bah'ai emphasizes the fact that God is entirely self-sufficient and is above and separate from His creation. God is not in need of worship “so the obedience he asks of humankind is entirely for the benefit of individuals and motivated only by his love for them.”¹⁴ Bah'ai teaches that even though mankind has different concepts of God's nature, and call Him by various names, we are all speaking about the same unique Creator. God is ultimately unknowable but to help assist mankind in understanding Him He has sent messengers to humanity.¹⁴ The holy text of the Bah'ai Faith is the Kitab-i-aqdas, which is a book of laws written by Baha'u'llah. It is comprised of 100 volumes, which cover a wide range of topics “including laws and principles for personal conduct and the governance of society, as well as mystical writings dealing with the progress of the soul and its journey towards God.”¹⁵ Bah'ai also recognize the Bible, Qur'an, and revealed holy texts of other religions.¹⁵

The Bah'ai Faith does not teach that there exists a “Satan” or a “Devil” or an “Evil Force.” Bah'ai teaches that evil does not have an independent existence but is really defined as the absence of good. The teachings of Bah'ai reject the concept of “original sin” or any other doctrine that teaches that people are at their base evil or have evil elements within their nature. According to Bah'ai teachings pride is one of the greatest hindrances to spiritual progress. Accordingly it is only revealed religion that can save mankind from their imperfections because God has “sent his Manifestations to show us the path to spiritual development and to touch our hearts with the spirit of God's love. ... Salvation means drawing nearer to God and progressing on the path to a deep and satisfying happiness.”¹⁷

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Hinduism

Hinduism is unique among the world faith systems because it has no founder and no date of origin. Most major religions derive their ideas from charismatic leaders but “Hinduism is simply the religion of the people from India.”¹⁸ This religion of the people from India gradually developed over four-thousand years and the origins are not known. Hinduism of today differs significantly from the earlier Indian religion but its roots go back to 2,000 BCE, which makes it one of the oldest surviving religions. Hinduism’s authors of its holy texts are mostly unknown and most of the ancient writings are still waiting to be deciphered. This means that, “for the earliest periods scholars must rely on educated guesses based on archaeology and the study of contemporary texts.”¹⁸

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion. The pantheon of Hinduism contains many gods and goddesses with the chief deities being the gods Shiva and Vishnu as well as the goddess Shakti. Devotion to the various gods and goddesses is based upon one’s region and needs. Generally devotion is limited to only one god or goddess but the existence of other deities is acknowledged. “Hindu worship virtually always involves sculptures and images, to which offerings are made and rituals are performed.”¹⁹

Hinduism’s holy texts fall into one of two categories: sruti (“heard”) or smriti (“remembered”). The sruti scriptures are those texts that are divinely inspired and hold the complete authoritative text of beliefs and practices. The smriti scriptures are considered the texts of the great sages which often carry the same authority as the sruti texts. The smriti texts help to explain the sruti texts, and makes them meaningful to the average Hindu.²⁰

Hinduism does not have a central belief regarding the source of evil. There are generally four ways of viewing evil according to Hinduism. According to the Vedas, evil is caused by mankind not fulfilling the laws or not performing rituals properly. The Upanishads believe that karma is the explanation for evil because suffering is caused by ignorance. According to the Samkhya and Yoga evil is caused by how much one is caught up in the illusions “generated by the primordial substance.”²¹ Hindu theism explains evil and in the Epics and the Puranas the gods are responsible for creating evil.²¹ Hinduism believes that there are four purposes to life. Dharma is the fulfillment of one’s purpose. Artha is prosperity. Kama is desire, sexuality, and enjoyment. Moksha is enlightenment. Karma – Sanskrit for “actions” – refers to “the fundamental Hindu principle that one’s moral actions have unavoidable and automatic effects on one’s fortunes in this life and condition of rebirth in the next.”²²

Buddhism

The founder of Buddhism was a royal prince born in 624 BCE in northern India – now a part of Nepal – who was given the name Siddhartha. He lived in the royal palace but when he was 29-years-old he moved into the forest to follow a life of meditation. According to Buddhist belief he attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree which grew in Bodhi Gaya, India. It was requested of him to teach fellow pilgrims who were attempting to attain enlightenment. The Buddha as he was now called proceeded to teach the first Wheel of Dharma which included the Four Noble Truths. Later he taught the second and third Wheels of Dharma including the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras and the Sutra Discriminating the Intention. The teachings of the Buddha included 84,000 teachings with the intention of leading mankind to permanent liberation from suffering and finding nirvana.²³ The First Council was convened after the Buddha's death in order to preserve his teachings.²⁴ The Second Council was convened about 100 years after the Buddha's death when conflicts began to arise amongst the Buddhists. It is unclear what happened during this Council but a split occurred within the Buddhist community. The group who felt they were keeping the original spirit of the Buddha's teachings became known as the Elders and eventually evolved into Theravada Buddhism. Those who taught a more lenient form of Buddhism in ways they felt were in tune with the Buddha's intentions broke off from the others and became known as the Great Community. This break-off group eventually became Mahayana Buddhism. "Within 200 years of the Buddha's death, there were 18 schools of Buddhism in India. ... Moreover, Buddhism had now spread to places with different languages and customs, and therefore different perspectives on the dharma."²⁵

The Buddha's teachings as well as those of Theravada Buddhism are in reality atheistic. However, the Buddha and Theravada Buddhism do not necessarily deny the existence of beings that could be called "gods." Mahayana Buddhism on the other hand believes in a universe that is populated with celestial buddhas and bodhisattvas who are worshipped by followers as gods and goddesses. Included in this pantheon of gods and goddesses is the Buddha himself. Most of the Mahayana Buddhist deities are adapted from indigenous religions of Tibet, China, and Thailand as well as the deities of Hinduism.²⁶ The First Council was convened after the Buddha's death in order to preserve his teachings. It was at this Council that the Buddha's teachings were divided into three categories known as pitaka. These categories include discourses, discipline, and higher knowledge. "The Tripitaka that was formed at this meeting is the same canon used by Buddhists today."²⁴

Evil according to Buddhism comes from the choices that mankind makes. The three basic roots of evil are greed, hatred, and delusion. It is the choices made by mankind from these roots that is the cause of suffering and evil in this world.²⁷ The Buddha taught a doctrine that rejected the idea of a soul and instead taught a doctrine of reincarnation (often called transmigration) in which one takes on a new body in the next life. Nirvana is the final liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth according to Buddhism and it is the end of all suffering. Nirvana was described by the Buddha as "incomprehensible, indescribable, inconceivable, unutterable. ... [In his teachings] the Buddha describes Nirvana as the place in which it is recognized that there is nothing but what is seen of the mind itself; where, recognizing the nature of the self-mind, one no longer cherishes the dualisms of discrimination; where there is no more thirst nor grasping; where there is no more attachment to external things."²⁸

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