

UNIQUE AMONG RELIGIONS

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What makes Christianity so unique? This is a question that a friend of mine started to ask toward the end of his time in seminary.

My friend had grown up in a Christian home, been raised in the church, and majored in Bible at a Christian college. He led Bible studies, served the homeless, and wanted to be a pastor.

During seminary, he started to regularly take spiritual retreats at a local retreat center. This retreat center was not exclusively Christian, so people from a number faith backgrounds would be there at the same time.

On one of these retreats, my friend started a conversation with a couple of Buddhist monks. After spending a fair bit of time talking about life and faith, he was struck by what he heard. These monks talked about the way that their religion had given them true joy and peace, helped them find meaning and purpose in life, and had created in them a genuine humility and love for others. If you could have replaced their references to “transcendence” with “the Holy Spirit,” “the divine” with “Jesus Christ,” and “inner transformation” with “sanctification,” you may have had thought they were Christians—and very mature ones at that!

This interaction and several others that followed made my friend start to question, What is it that makes Christianity so different? If people of other faiths have similar experiences with “god” (however you define that), and if other religions can produce in people a similar (or even better) morality that Christianity does—then what’s so unique about our faith? What is it that makes Christianity unique among religions? That’s the question that we are going to tackle this morning.

If you have been with us for a while, you know that we’ve spent the last seven months studying the book of Acts. At a few points throughout this series, we have paused our study to look at topics that are important themes in Acts and are particularly relevant to our culture today.

Along these lines, Scott preached a sermon on Government, Paul taught on Generosity, and guest preacher Ephrem Smith preached about Race and Unity in the Church. This morning is the last of these topical messages, and our topic is World Religions.

Now let me stop right there because I know what many of you are thinking. Isn’t topical preaching a sin? Here at Peninsula Bible Church, we exposit the Scriptures, we don’t preach topical sermons! Well, you will have to forgive me, because I’ve only been here for a year and a half, which is just a baby in PBC years.

In all seriousness, world religion is an important topic for us to discuss, and it is very much related to what we have been studying in Acts. How does Christianity compare to other religions? How do we as Christians engage with those of other faiths?

In Acts, we have seen this newly formed religion of Christianity interact with a number of other religions. In Acts 15, the Jerusalem Counsel is all about how Christianity relates to Judaism. In Acts 17, Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill is about the similarities and differences between our religion and the religious perspectives of the intellectuals in Athens.

Just last week, we looked at Acts 19, where Christianity was wreaking havoc on the Artemis cult that was at the center of Ephesian culture and religious life.

Likewise, in our world today, we as Christians are not siloed from the various religions that people practice around the world—nor should we try to be.

In a globalized society like ours, we are impacted by the ideas that come from Hindus in India, Buddhists in Japan, and Muslims in The Middle East.

Even more significantly, the religions of the world are in our back yard. In the city of Palo Alto, there are Christian, Mormon, and Unitarian Universalist churches; Buddhist temples, Jewish synagogues, and Christian Science reading rooms.

If we move up or down the peninsula by just a few cities, we can find Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, and Baha'i communities.

The followers of these religions are our neighbors, our coworkers, and our friends. They are our children's teachers and classmates. For some of us, they are our family.

Because of this, it is important for us to understand these religions. If we are going to love our neighbors of other religions, we need to understand what they believe. And if we are going to be faithful followers of Jesus, we need to understand how our faith is unique among the religions of our world.

The “World Religions”

The term “world religions” is typically used to refer to five religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. According to a 2015 study, there are 2.5 billion Christians in the world today, nearly one third of the total population of the world. There are 1.7 billion Muslims, which makes Islam the fastest growing religion in the world. There are 1 billion Hindus, 500 million Buddhists, and 14.5 million religious Jews.

For our purposes, we are going to look at the way Christianity compares to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, as these are both the largest religions in the world and the ones that we tend to be less familiar with.

Christianity and the World Religions

Let's start by looking at Hinduism.

According to Hindus, their religion is the oldest of all religions. It began in India and has no specific founder. Rather, it developed over time among the peoples of India. Still today, most of the world's Hindus live in India.

At the risk of being overly simplistic, let me summarize Hinduism into three words. First, there is *Brahman*. For Hindus, Brahman is god, but not god as we think of him. Rather, Brahman is god in the sense that it is ultimate reality. In fact, everything that exists is Brahman—including you, me, this stage that I am standing on, the pews that you are sitting on, the trees outside, everything! This view is called *pantheism*: god is everything, and everything is god.

Brahman is not a personal god like the God of the Bible. Rather, Brahman is an impersonal force. This force manifests itself in you, me, and everything around us. It also manifests itself in the form of other gods: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, Shiva the destroyer, Agni the god of fire, and on and on and on. The traditional number of gods included in the Indian pantheon is 330 million! So Hindus worship many, many, many gods, but in an ultimate sense, they believe that all of these gods are just different manifestations of the same god, Brahman.

The second word is *reincarnation*.

As the ancient Hindus observed the world, they observed a kind of hierarchy at play, what we call the “food chain.” The fly gets eaten by the toad. The toad gets eaten by the snake. The snake gets eaten by the hawk. The hawk gets eaten by the fox, and so on.

But this hierarchy doesn't continue forever in the same direction. Eventually, the fox dies. Maggots eat the fox and grow into flies, and we are back where we started. This observation led Hindus to conclude that life was cyclical, an idea that developed into the concept of *reincarnation*—an ongoing cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and redeath.

This brings us to our third word, *Karma*.

Karma is the law of cause and effect. Do good, and good will happen to you. Do bad, and bad will come your way. There is no avoiding it.

For Hindus, karma is what determines what you will be reborn as in your next life. If you are a good person, if you pay off enough karma, then you will be born into a better place in life. But if you do more bad than good, then you build bad karma and will be reborn as a rat, a snake, or an outcast.

The ultimate goal of Hinduism is to escape the cycle of reincarnation. The thought is that if you are good enough over enough lifetimes, then eventually you can pay off all your karma, stop being reborn, and your soul will lose its individuality and just absorb back into Brahman. This state of your soul disappearing into Brahman is called Nirvana. The average person is thought to be able to pay off their karma and reach Nirvana after 600,000 lives.

How does that sound to you? 600,000 lives in the hopes that one day you will be good enough that you fade into the universe? That doesn't sound very hopeful to me. But the Bible tells us a different story, one filled with much more hope.

Hebrews 9:27-28:

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

These verses in Hebrews paint a picture of life, death, and the afterlife that is very different than the Hindu worldview. We have one life to live on this earth. Our existence is not made up of an ongoing cycle of birth and death. Rather, we die once, and then we face judgment.

Judgment is very different than karma. In a world controlled by karma, God does not judge us. There is no person to whom we must give an account. Rather, our future is determined by our past. We get what we deserve—not because God is punishing or blessing us, but because that's the way the universe works.

But in a world where our future is determined by God's judgment, the door opens for the possibility of grace.

Karma is a natural law, like gravity. If you jump off of a tall building, you will fall. As you are falling, you are moving very quickly, and you know you are going to hit the ground. Gravity is not going to be gracious to you. Gravity cannot be gracious to you. The same is true of Karma. You reap what you sow, and there is no way around it.

But if you commit a crime—let's say murder—and you are brought before a judge, your future is now determined this person. And yes, this person can choose to be harsh with you. But this person can also choose to be gracious and merciful.

As we saw in Hebrews, the Bible teaches that when we die, we are not subject to karma, but to a judge—God himself. And while God must be just, he can also choose to show us grace. And that is exactly what he has done. He sends Jesus to die once and bear the sins of many. Grace has become an option.

Where Hinduism teaches karma, the Bible teaches judgment from a gracious, yet just, God. And, where Hinduism teaches reincarnation, the Bible teaches eternal life.

If existence is nothing more than a series of 600,000 lives and deaths until we are finally able to fade into the universe, we don't have much to look forward to. But that is not our future. Christ is coming back, and when he does, he will bring us into his presence for all of eternity.

For Hindus, reincarnation is something to break free of as soon as possible. But for Christians, eternity is something to long for. When Christ returns, he will bring with him the new creation, and everything will be as it was first designed to be. We will be in perfect relationship with God and with each other. There will be no more sadness or death. Instead, we will experience the fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

Hinduism teaches karma and reincarnation, but the Bible teaches judgment and eternal life. And I would take the latter over the former any day.

Let's consider another eastern religion, Buddhism.

Buddhism was founded around 500 B.C. by a man named Siddhartha Gautama. Born into a wealthy Hindu family, Gautama was raised in comfort and luxury. However, in his young adult years, he began to realize that wealth and comfort did not guarantee happiness. In search of happiness, he became an ascetic, living a life of extreme poverty and self-denial. However, after doing this for some time, he realized that happiness was not guaranteed by this path either. His solution was what he called the Middle Way. When he discovered the Middle Way through becoming enlightened, he became the Buddha.

The foundations of the Middle Way are captured in the Four Noble Truths³ of the Buddhist religion.

First, life is suffering. Suffering is a universal human experience. Some experience it more than others, but nobody can escape it.

Second, suffering is caused by desire. We all have desires, but sometimes our desires can't be fulfilled. I am hungry, and I want a cookie, but the cookie jar is empty. The result, suffering. I am lonely and desire a close friend, but I can't seem to find one. Again, suffering. When I have desires that are not fulfilled, that produces suffering in my life.

Third, the way to end suffering is to get rid of all desire. If I didn't want a cookie in the first place, then I wouldn't be disappointed when I can't have one. If I have no desire for close relationships, then being lonely is not painful. If I can get rid of all desire, I will eliminate all suffering along with it. The state of having fully removed all desire is referred to as Enlightenment, Liberation, or Nirvana.

Fourth, the way to achieve enlightenment is through the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of:

(1) Right Understanding - We must accept the Four Noble Truths

(2) Right Intention - We are to renounce the things of this world; become detached from them so that they don't affect us.

(3) Right Speech - Don't lie, slander, or use harsh speech

(4) Right behavior - no killing anyone or anything, no stealing, no adultery

(5) Right occupation - meaning we are to avoid occupations that bring harm to ourselves or others

(6) Right effort - work hard to rid yourself of all your bad practices and qualities. In other words, work hard at being good.

(7) Right mindfulness - always be aware of what is going on within you and around you.

(8) Right concentration - something accomplished through practicing meditation properly.

If you follow this Noble Eightfold Path, you will be able to rid yourself of all desire, overcome all suffering, and find true happiness.

Because of their emphasis on detaching from the world and ending desire, Buddhism doesn't place much emphasis on god. In fact, Buddha himself was agnostic about whether god existed. In his mind, whether god existed or not was of little importance. And spending time thinking about god was likely to lead to desire of some sort - desire to know him or find him or be with him — so we are better off not worrying about whether god exists at all. However, those Buddhists who do believe in god tend to think of him in much the same way as Hindus do.

As I think about Buddhism, with its Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, I cannot help but think about how much common sense is found in this religion. Think about it. How much suffering could you avoid in life if you were able to get rid of all your desires? If you never had any expectations, how could you ever be disappointed? There is something logical about that idea.

But in the Scriptures, we find a better solution to the problem of unfulfilled desire.

Isaiah 55:1-2:

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Do you ever feel thirsty, thirsty for something that water cannot satisfy? I know I do! Buddha got it right, in part at least. We do all have desires. We do all have cravings. We hunger, and we thirst, and not just for food and water.

We hunger for meaning. What is life really all about? We thirst for impact. How can I make a difference in the world? We are looking for joy and peace and happiness. For friendship and intimacy and love. Sometimes we find these things, but never in a full or complete sense. We are always left wanting in some way.

But the real problem is not that we have desires in the first place. The problem is that we are looking to the wrong things to fulfill our desires! So the solution is not eliminating our desire. The solution is finding the full and complete satisfaction of our desires in God.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis has said, “If I find within myself a desire which nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”¹

We should not be surprised when we have desires that nothing in this world can satisfy. Those desires are not a deficiency. Those desires are not a liability. Rather, those desires have been put there by God.

Certainly, we experience desires for all sorts of inappropriate things as well. We have been so deeply affected by sin that this is unavoidable. As we grow in maturity in Christ, we work to replace those sinful desires with desires for Christ and his kingdom. But desire itself is not bad.

Buddhism tells us that the path to happiness and joy is the elimination of our desires, but the Scriptures show us that God can fulfill our deepest, most significant desires in ways that we cannot even imagine.

We looked at Hinduism. We've looked at Buddhism. Now let's consider Islam.

Islam was founded by the prophet Mohammed in the 6th Century A.D. According to Muslim tradition, Mohammed was visited by the angel Gabriel, who gave him a final revelation from God, known as the Quran. This revelation was a call for Mohammed to depart from the religious practices of his culture, where people worshipped all kinds of gods, and turn to Allah, the one true God. Muslims trace their faith back to the Old Testament, believing that Islam is the true religion of Ancient Israel, and Judaism and Christianity have gotten it wrong.

Muslims, like Christians, believe that God is the Creator of the universe. He is personal and knowable. He is wise. He is merciful. And he is the judge of all mankind.

Muslims do not believe that Jesus was God. They accept him as a prophet, a great man and a good ethical teacher. But they do not believe he was God, nor was he as important as the prophet Mohammed.

Another significant difference from Christianity is that Islam does not believe that salvation is a free gift given by grace and received by faith. Rather, they believe that Allah is a strict God, requiring extreme devotion and submission from his followers. Salvation is granted to those who follow his demands with devotion.

Allah's expectations for his followers are detailed in the Quran. These expectations include the Five Pillars of Islam. To be a good Muslim, you must:

(1) Recite the *Shahadah*, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet."

(2) Pray five times a day facing Mecca

(3) Give alms to the poor —2.5% of your total savings every year

(4) Fast during the day for the month of Ramadan

(5) Make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in your life (if you are able.)

According to Muslims, when you reached puberty, a record of your deeds was opened. Every good thing you have ever done—including following the Five Pillars, but extending beyond that as well—every good thing you have ever done and every bad thing that you have ever done are recorded there. And when you face Allah on the day of judgement, that record of your actions is used to determine whether you go to Paradise or be condemned to hellfire. However, Allah is merciful, so he may choose to save you even if you don't quite deserve it. But you can never know with certainty what your eternal fate will be until you die and find yourself in front of Allah.

As you can imagine, this uncertainty creates an incredible amount of fear for Muslims. Many Muslims live their lives in fear that if they are not good enough—if they don't follow the Five Pillars, if they don't serve and worship Allah as they should, if they don't have good enough morals—if they aren't good enough, then they will be sentenced to hell. To add to this sense of fear, the Quran includes incredibly vivid descriptions of what hell will be like. Hell is a place of fire fueled by the flesh of unbelievers. Those sent there will wear clothes of fire, drink scolding water, and eat thorny plants that do not nourish or satisfy.

These vivid descriptions are given in order to motivate people to follow Allah. Would you rather have that fate, or would you like the endless wealth, pleasure, and delight of heaven? Imam's today play off this kind of fear in order to motivate people towards submission to Allah.

Now, some might argue that Christianity is not that different. The Bible talks about the fear of the Lord, and it includes plenty of descriptions of the torment of hell. So couldn't I stand up here today and drum up some sort of fear in order to motivate obedience to God?

Well, I suppose I could, but I don't think I would be very effective. Why is that? Because God has given us a far more powerful motivation than fear and uncertainty. He motivates us through love.

1 John 4:18-19:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. 19 We love because he first loved us.

At the heart of the gospel is the love of God. John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” We love because he first loved us. In Christ, we have experienced the love of God in the most amazing way imaginable—the sacrifice of his son of our sake.

As 1 John 4 says, there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. If we have truly experienced the love of God in Christ, there is no room for fear in our relationship with God. We are not worried about whether he will be merciful to us because we have seen his mercy poured out in Christ. We are not running out of fear that the fires of hell are about to consume us. Rather, we are drawn forward, compelled by the love of Christ.

By this point, I have you have seen how true unique Christianity is among religions. Christianity does not teach the hopelessness of karma and incarnation of Hinduism. Rather, it offers eternal life through Christ from God our gracious judge.

Our faith does not send us on a quest of eliminating our desires to set us free from suffering and disappointment. Rather, it directs us to God, who fills us with joy as he satisfies our deepest desires.

Our religion does not seek to motivate us through fear. Rather, it draws us to God in response to the amazing love that we have received from him.

We’ve looked at Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, which, along with Christianity make up the four largest religions in the world today.

But there is a growing number of people in the world—some who are followers of these religions and many who are not—who believe in a religious prospective called *pluralism*, the belief that all religions lead to God.

We don’t have time to tackle this view this morning, but that is the topic for tonight’s Theology Roundtable with Laurie Schlaepfer. Laurie is a professor at Western Seminary and an expert in world religions. Tonight she is going to help us think carefully about the question, “Do all religions lead to God.” I hope you can come back and join us.

Conclusion

This morning, while we have not answered the question, “Do all religions lead to God?,” we have answered a related question that many people have asked, “Aren’t all religions basically the same?”

In our brief look at Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, I hope that it has become apparent that all of these religions are different from each other in significant ways. They have different conceptions of God, different beliefs about humanity, and different ideas about salvation. But all of these religions, and indeed all of the religions of the world besides Christianity, share something in common. They are all attempts by people to reach up to God.

Call him Brahman. Call him Allah. Think of him as a personal god or the spirit of the universe. Believe that he is up there or in here. All of these religions are attempts by humans to reach up to God.

But our faith is different. Christianity is not an attempt to reach up to God. It is the story of God reaching down to us.

Philippians 2:5-8:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Christianity is the only religion in which God takes initiative. Christianity is the only religion in which God acts first. Christianity is the only religion in which God comes down.

Though he was fully God, Jesus left his home in heaven and came to earth in the most unexpected way imaginable. He was born to a poor family from an unimportant town. He worked alongside his father as a carpenter. He loved people. He served people. He made himself nothing.

But he didn’t stop there. He died for us on the cross. He took our sin upon himself and bore the penalty that was ours to bear. All so that we could be with him forever!

It has been said before that religion is spelled D O, but Christianity is spelled D O N E. Our faith is not about what we can do for God. It is about what he has done for us in Christ.

But the story does not end with the cross.

Philippians 2: 9-11:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Three days after Jesus was crucified, he rose again from the dead—a day that has become the most important day in all of history, and a day that we will celebrate just two weeks from now—Easter Sunday. He has now been exalted to the highest place of honor, at the right hand of the Father.

Eventually, whether on this side of death or the other, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Think back with me to my friend who began to question the uniqueness of Christianity. The conversation that he had with those Buddhist monks sent him on a journey—one that he is still on today.

As of today, that journey has led him away from the Christian faith. He has become convinced that all religions do eventually lead to the same place.

As he and I talk about this, there is much that we don't agree on. But there is one thing that we do agree on: we are both sincerely searching for the truth. And if either of us become convinced that our position was wrong, we would be willing to change it.

Such an openness to the truth is not scary for me. God is truth. All truth belongs to him. And so, if I earnestly seek after the truth, I am confident that it will lead to God.

If you are here this morning, and you are not really sure what you think about Christianity, or you have already decided that Christianity is not for you, let me encourage you to continue seeking the truth.

And for those of you who are already followers of Christ and know people who are not, I would encourage you to seek the truth with them. Engage them in conversation. Talk with them about the big questions of life: Who is God? Who are we? How do we achieve salvation?

Christianity is unique among religions. It does not answer these questions in the same way that other religions do. But it does answer them truthfully because God is true. Let's seek him together.

Endnotes

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