

JUDAISM: *The Lord is One*

A Study of Other Faiths

Session 1

Judaism has about 18 million adherents in the world – a small number among the great world religions – yet, Judaism has had a profound effect upon the history of the Western world. The oneness of God, the fact that God is revealed through ethical standards, the fact that God acts in human history, the emphasis upon worshiping God not only through religious rites but especially through serving others – all these are Jewish ideas bequeathed to Christianity, Islam, and to world religion generally. When you read the Sermon on the Mount, you are reading deeply Jewish teachings, Paul’s major ideas about the Messiah, the Atonement, and the justification of sinners, and his style of interpreting Scripture are “reconfigured Jewish ideas.”¹

Historical Highlights

In the Genesis stories familiar to many, Abraham migrated with his family to Canaan around 2000 B.C. and his descendants populated the area. Hebrews eventually settled in Egypt and became slaves there. The Hebrew leader Moses and his family led the people from Egypt back to Canaan around the 1200s B.C.

By the 100s B.C., the monarch David had established a United Kingdom thus creating a sense of national identity. Eventually the United Kingdom separated into two nations and each was eventually conquered. Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., and the Babylonians conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C. Strictly speaking, Judaism as we know it emerged in the late 500s B.C. and following, when the Hebrews – now called Jews after their kingdom, Judah – returned to Canaan, reorganized religious life under the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, and reconstructed the Temple. Some of the features of the renewed faith included the observation of holidays, “kosher” laws, rabbis, and synagogues.

Jewish rabbis – the word *rabbi* means “teacher – developed traditions of biblical interpretation that were eventually written in the multi-volume Talmud. After the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70, Jews were scattered throughout the Middle Eastern and European worlds. They retained their culture through close study of the Scriptures and preservation of the Talmudic traditions. Never a majority in any country, Jews survived in Islamic and Christian kingdoms. The Kabbalah, a strong tradition of Jewish mysticism, developed in Europe during the late medieval era.

Jews were often persecuted, however, and forced to convert to Christianity. They were falsely accused of crimes. Many people blamed Jews for the Black Death in the 1300s. Jews were often expelled from countries in which they lived. Spain drove them out in 1492. Eastern European Jews included descendants of Jews expelled during earlier centuries from England and Germany.

The Nazi extermination of 6 million Jews was unique among Jewish persecutions for its technological efficiency and for the horrors inflicted on Jews, as well as the pervasive indifference, both in Europe and abroad, to the genocide. From the first time since the Roman conquest, Jews reestablished a homeland in Palestine and declared the independence of Israel in 1948.²

- **Imagine the extermination of one-third of all Christians from the earth!**

Scriptures

Jewish Scripture is called the *Tanak* (sometimes *Tanakh*) or simply the Hebrew Bible. Christians call this material the Old Testament. It is essentially the same material, but it is arranged in a different order partly because early Christians read Greek versions like the Septuagint, a translation from Alexandria, Egypt. The word *Tanak* is an acrostic for the three words *Torah*, *Nevi'im* and *Ketu'vim*. These words represent three different types of material that in English, are also called Instruction, Prophets, and Writings.

¹ Paul Stroble, *What Do Other Faiths Believe? A Study of World Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 21-22.

² *Ibid.*, 22-24.

For Jews the Torah, the name for the first five books, is the most important part of the Bible. The Torah laws include the well-known Ten Commandments and many other commandments traditionally numbered at 613. Some of the laws are no longer applicable, such as the specifications for the Tabernacle and the laws governing sacrifice. Other laws dealt with civil cases that would have arisen when the Israelites were an independent society. Some laws, such as the dietary laws are still observed by many Jews.³

- **Do you consider the Old Testament Law to be important? How do you determine which are and which aren't?**

Several Ways of Keeping the Torah

Just as Christianity has many denominations, Judaism has several branches. *Orthodox* is the most conservative branch of Judaism, keeping the commandments very literally, yet also struggling to understand them and to be obedient to them. In orthodox worship, men and women do not sit together in worship. Orthodox Jewish men will sometimes grow their beards and side hair in literal obedience to Scripture (Leviticus 19:27) *Conservative* Jews are more “moderate” in their observance and in their scriptural interpretation. Many keep the dietary laws, but do not consider all the Torah laws applicable for today. In Conservative and Orthodox worship, men wear a *kipa* (plural *kipot*) a small head covering signifying humility to God. In *Reformed* worship, *kipot* are dispensed with and the Torah teachings are observed, especially in light of social justice needs, in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets.

Contrary to views of many conservative Christians, Jews do not believe you have to keep perfectly all Torah laws in order to be spiritually blessed. Likewise, Jews believe that righteous Gentiles, who do not have the Torah laws, will have a share in “the world to come.”⁴

- **Do you consider yourself a liberal or conservative interpreter of Scripture? What biblical teachings challenge you? How do you think a reader can discern the difference between the eternal truths in some Scriptures and the teachings that reflect first-century culture?**

The Messiah

Although Christians claim Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, most Jews disagree, although many will acknowledge that Jesus’ teachings are deeply indebted to ancient Hebrew teachings. They point out that the Messiah is supposed to bring a reign of peace and redemption, both for Jews and non-Jews, and Jews do not see this happening with the life of Jesus. Furthermore, Christians have often hated and persecuted Jews, often because of the New Testament’s hostile attitude toward Jews, undercutting the claim that Jesus is the promised king of peace. Similarly, Christians combine two ideas, Messiah and Atonement, in a way foreign to messianic theology. In other words, the Messiah is supposed to be a bringer of peace, not a sacrifice for sin.⁵

- **Read Isaiah 52 and 53. Why do you think Christians find these Scriptures helpful as they try to understand Jesus? How would they be helpful to Jewish people who heard these words centuries before Jesus was born?**
- **Pretend that you are a Jew coming to Christianity for the first time. What about Christianity would seem familiar objectionable, or strange?**

A Jewish View of Other Faiths

What is the Jewish view of other faiths? “Maybe it’s because we’re nearly always a minority, you have to respect other faiths! Nobody has captured the corner on religion,” says Prof. Silverman. “I respect every religion,” says Mr. Salzman. “The only thing I don’t respect is when someone tries to convince me that their religion is better than mine. You should live your life according to the basic principles of monotheistic religion. There is so much similarity, for instance among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam You have to have faith to believe.”⁶

- **What are some similarities of faith between Judaism and Christianity?**

³ Ibid., 24-25.

⁴ Ibid., 24-25.

⁵ Ibid., 26-27.

⁶ Ibid., 32.

Serving the World

Do Jews believe in an afterlife? Some do, some do not; the Tanakh has comparatively little to say on the matter. Ms. Foster noted the biblical concept of *sheol*, a shadowy abode of the dead that may or may not be a literal place. According to her “there is very little emphasis in Judaism on the afterlife. At one particularly grim time in history, coincidentally, about the time Christianity started, Jewish theology began to flirt with this idea. Christianity took the concept and ran with it. It has never been an important concept for Judaism, except when Jews have lived among other dominant religions so it rubs off on us...Because the concept of afterlife is not emphasized,” says Ms. Foster, “the focus is here and now.”⁷

- **What is the Christian view of an afterlife? How does the Christian view affect one’s ethical approach to daily life? At what points do the ethics of the Christian view and Jewish view coincide? At what points do they differ?**

“In modern Jewish thinking,” says Mr. Salzman, “we are not so much looking toward a messiah but to a messianic age – a time when people get together, get people together, without the hatred we have today. That’s the modern interpretation. An age where people will live together and enjoy their days and peace will reign. People will live in good, high standards.

“A human life takes precedence in Judaism,” he continued. “To save a human life, regardless of who it is, is like saving the whole world. If it is Saturday or Yom Kippur, and there is an emergency, you use whatever means of transportation to get them to the hospital. Shabbat is not for God. The Shabbat is to get your mind clear and your body rested.”⁸

- **Does this view differ from what your perception of Jewish thought? If so, how?**

EVANGELISM

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Christian Scriptures (New Testament), John 14:6. That passage has been a prime motivator of Christian evangelical activity towards Jews and other non-Christians⁹

HOMOSEXUALITY

The attitude of Jewish groups on homosexuality tend to mirror those of Christian denominations. What matters is not primarily the religion itself, but where the group lies on a continuum from the most conservative to the most liberal:

- The liberal wings of both religions (e.g. Reform Judaism and the United Church of Christ) generally accept homosexuality as a part of what a person is. They view it as a normal, natural sexual orientation for a minority of adults. Although they revere their holy texts, they also integrate the findings of scientific religion into their understanding of God's will. They acknowledge that the Scriptures do condemn certain male homosexual behavior, but liberal theologians argue that this criticism is only for certain same-sex behaviors: notably the raping of strangers, homosexual prostitution for financial gain, and homosexual ritual sex in Pagan temples. None of that applies to committed, consensual same-sex partners who wish to marry. They emphasize the importance of equal "*justice and liberty for all*" in religious and civil law.
- The more conservative wings of both religions (e.g. Orthodox Judaism and the Southern Baptist Convention) typically view homosexuality as what one does. They often view it as abnormal, unnatural, and condemned by God. They view their Scriptures as forbidding all homosexual behavior as a grievous sin, irrespective of the nature of the relationship of the participants.

There are other similarities between Jewish and Christian groups. For example, many conservative Christian and Orthodox Jewish denominations do not recognize liberal faith groups as being part of their religion.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 30-31

⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹ Religious Tolerance, “Current Attempts to Convert Jews to Christianity,” http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_jcon.htm, 7/19/04.

ABORTION

Within Christianity, Judaism, Humanism and other religions and ethical systems, the morality of abortion is grounded in the precise belief of the nature of the fetus. There is a general consensus in North America that when the fetus becomes a human person, then abortions should be severely limited. Most would confine abortions at that stage to situations that threaten the life of the pregnant woman; a very few would eliminate access to abortions totally. The problem that generates so much controversy is that no consensus exists in society over the point, between conception and birth, when personhood begins.

Halacha (Jewish law) does define when a fetus becomes a nefesh (person). "...a baby...becomes a full-fledged human being when the head emerges from the womb. Before then, the fetus is considered a 'partial life.'" In the case of a "feet-first" delivery, it happens when most of the fetal body is outside the mother's body.

Jewish beliefs and practice not neatly match either the "*pro-life*" nor the "*pro-choice*" points of view. The general principles of modern-day Judaism are that:

- The fetus has great value because it is potentially a human life. It gains "*full human status at birth only.*"
- Abortions are not permitted on the grounds of genetic imperfections of the fetus.
- Abortions are permitted to save the mother's life or health.
- With the exception of some Orthodox authorities, Judaism supports abortion access for women.
- "...each case must be decided individually by a rabbi well-versed in Jewish law."

Some Jewish authorities have asserted that if the fetus placed its mother's life at risk, then the mother should be permitted to kill the fetus to save herself, even if the "*greater portion [of its body] had already emerged*" from the birth canal.¹¹

¹⁰ Religious Tolerance, "Policies & Teachings about Homosexuality in Judaism," http://religioustolerance.org/hom_judaism.htm, 7/19/04.

¹¹ Religious Tolerance, "Jewish Beliefs about Abortion," http://religioustolerance.org/jud_abor.htm, 7/19/04.

ISLAM: No God but God

A Study of Other Faiths

Session 2

“Islam” means “submission” to God – it is related to the word for “peace” – and a Muslim is one who has “submitted” to God. Islam is the only major world religion established since the beginning of Christianity. In numbers Islam ranks a close second behind Christianity, with more than a billion adherents in the world.¹

- **What words come to your mind when you think of submission or surrender? Are they positive or negative images? Is submission to God a positive image?**

Allah

Allah is the Arabic word that translates into “the God,” and it carries the understanding that God is the one and only God. God is the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians. God is not “Father” but is our Sovereign and Lord. As the Qur’an begins, “Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek.”

There are ninety-nine “beautiful names” of God in the Muslim tradition. Some are positive, loving names: Compassionate, Merciful, Source of Peace, Protector, Creator, Forgiver, Gracious, Generous, Liberal, Wise, Praiseworthy, Amply Beneficent, Acceptor of repentance, Kindly, Enricher, and Patient. Other names warn of God’s righteousness: Judge, Just, Reckoner, Abaser, Avenger, and Depriver. God is the Great in Majesty, Most High, Giver of life and Giver of death, All-Knowing, Guide and Director. All these are preceded with the definite article “The” emphasizing the supremacy of God.²

- **Make your own list of God’s names, either biblical names or names that describe God’s attributes. How do these names clarify God’s nature for you?**

God’s Nature

“Allah is not human, thus He is neither male nor female in the human sense. However, He refers to Himself in the Qur’anic text in the masculine form. None has come before Him, and none will come after Him.

“Engaging in acts that are forbidden, or *harram*, are sins. We know what is *harram* from what Allah has revealed to us in the Qur’an and from what the Prophet Muhammad has taught us through his speech, actions, and opinions. Every sane human becomes accountable for their sins once they reach puberty. Children, and those who have no control over their minds, are exempt from judgment. Everyone has two angels accompanying him or her at all times, one on each shoulder. The angel on the right shoulder records one’s good deeds, and the angel on the left shoulder records one’s bad sins.

“Allah’s scales are clearly imbalanced, in favor of humans. For every good deed committed, God will multiply its worth from anywhere between 10 to 700 times. Even if one plans to do a good deed, but for some reason they don’t, they will get the reward of their intentions.

“Sins are not multiplied and are recorded at face value. One has not committed sin if they contemplated doing something bad, but didn’t actually do it. Thus Allah is truly the Most Merciful because if we apply this to the human justice system, there is no such leniency.”³

- **What do you think of this concept of mercy?**

Prophets and Messengers

For Muslims, Jesus is a prophet miraculously born of a virgin. The Qur’an honors Mary, Jesus’ mother, as an example of great faith. Jesus, however, was not crucified; another man substituted for him. They believe that he ascended into heaven. Muslims believe Jesus is a prophet, but not divine

¹ Paul Stroble, *What Do Other Faiths Believe? A Study of World Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 34.

² *Ibid.*, 34-35.

³ *Ibid.*, 35.

or a Son of God. Muslims believe Jesus will return to earth to lead the righteous and destroy the false prophet.⁴

The Qur'an

The Qur'an is the final message from God to help humankind conform to God's will; it offers "the straight path." The Qur'an is about the length of the New Testament; it consists of 114 "suras," which basically means sections. The Qur'an is written in a highly literary style. How do we know the Qur'an is God's word? Muhammad, God's last prophet, was a man of integrity; he was also illiterate. The Qur'an is written in extremely fine Arabic and indeed is a model of Arabic language, far better, Muslims believe, than could have originated from mere human authorship.

Muslims respect Jews and Christians as "people of the Book" – a positive Qur'an expression that indicates that Jews and Christians (1) believe in one God and (2) believe that God has been revealed verbally and God's words can be read and heeded. Muslims recognize no other religion than Islam as true, however.⁵

Muhammad and the Origins of Islam

Muhammad is God's final prophet. He was born about A.D. 570 in Arabia to a prosperous family. Orphaned at a young age, he was raised by relatives. He married and had four daughters but no sons who lived beyond infancy. During one of his solitary retreats to the desert and mountains, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and demanded that he recite. Beginning in 610 and for the next twenty-two years, Muhammad received revelations from God that were subsequently written down by his companions.

Muhammad received poor treatment from the people of his hometown, Mecca. In 622, Muhammad led other Muslims to a different city, Medina. Year 1 of the Muslim calendar is 622, the year of the migration to Medina. In Medina, the Prophet first established Islam law. By 630 the Muslims returned to Mecca in triumph. Muhammad established a government according to God's laws. He led the Muslims until his death in 632.

In the decades following Muhammad's death, the faith spread quickly through a process of evangelization and military conquest. By the middle of the 700s, Arabia, Palestine, and North Africa had become Muslim. Because Muhammad named no successor and had no son, Muslims split between two "factions." The Sunnis elected the leader, who was called the Caliph, according to the tradition established immediately after the Prophet died. The Shi'ites desired the Muslim leadership to stay within the Prophet's family. Today Shi'ites account for about 10% of all Muslims and primarily live in Iran, Iraq, and some other countries. Sunnis believe that God's revelation, the gift of prophetic teaching, ended with Muhammad. Shi'ites believe that certain special teachers are divinely endowed special interpreters of God's world.

Islam's "classical period," the seventh through the thirteenth centuries, featured tremendous growth west and east, development of Islam law and theology, and the growth of the mystical Sufi movement. Eventually, though, events such as the Crusades and the Mongol invasions disrupted important Muslim areas.⁶

Muslim Beliefs

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is open to many interpretations, and expect that it should be interpreted and struggled over. The only unforgivable sin is polytheism, or associating others with Allah. In addition to repentance, there are many ways that Muslims seek forgiveness for their sins. Performing the *Hajj* with sincere intentions will wipe away all one's sins. Fasting the entire month of Ramadan will also do it.

Muslims have five Pillars of Islam: (1) to declare that there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is His messenger, (2) to perform the five daily prayers, (3) to pay the annual *zakat*, or

⁴ Ibid., 36-37.

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Ibid., 38-39.

2.5% of one's wealth to charity, (4) to fast the holy month of Ramadan (if able), and (5) to perform the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca at least once (if physically and financially able).⁷

- **What are your "pillars of faith"? In other words, what supports your religious life and growth? How many pillars do you have?**

The spiritual acts of worship are: (1) to believe in the oneness of Allah, (2) to believe in all of Allah's prophets, from Adam to Muhammad, including Moses and Jesus, (3) to believe in Allah's revealed books (the Torah, Psalms, Gospels, and Qur'an, though Muslims follow the Qur'an as the final text), (4) to believe in Allah's angels, (5) to believe in the Day of Judgment, and (6) to believe in destiny, and Allah's power to exert His will freely.

Many Muslims, in addition to practicing the five pillars, abstain from pork and alcohol. Muslims differ as to whether deviation from the five pillars removes one, at least temporarily, for the Muslim "community."

Islam demands that you constantly engage in the internal personal struggle of *jihad*, in order to overcome weaknesses in faith that may lead one to cheat, lie, fornicate, or even disbelieve.

When one dies, one enters the second phase of life, so to speak, and one's soul enters the grave. The grave gives one a good indication of what his or her ultimate fate might be like. For one who committed many unforgiving sins, the grave will be a torturous and wretched place. For a righteous person, the grave will be a part of heaven, and the waiting period to the Day of Judgment will go quickly. All humans will stand before God on the Day of Judgment and be held accountable for their actions in the human life based on what they knew of right and wrong. If their sins outweigh their good deeds, their fate will be hellfire for a set time or perhaps even forever. If one's good deeds outweigh the sins, then his or her fate is eternal paradise.

One Muslim says, "Many people worship in order to get to heaven or to avoid hell. But some people say, 'No, I'm not interested in going to hell or interested in being in heaven. I want to know God for the love of God, for knowing God in love, for spreading love.' Tome, it is a more accurate way to worship God, through love rather than through fear."⁸

Muslim Law

A Muslim notes, "Islam defines your freedom – even where your freedom stops and the other person's starts. Islam defines how respect is built in between your wife, your neighbor, your parents, even how the society is structured. If you break laws, this is the consequence. So the whole society is connected, like one body, so that if one person behaves badly, this is the punishment. You have your freedom, but there is a limitation to your freedom."⁹

- **What defines a Christian's freedom? Read Galatians 5:16-24; Romans 8:1-27; Romans 13:6-7; and Ephesians 4:17-5:20. For Paul, what is a Christian's guide for ethical behavior? What "safeguards" does a Christian have to know that he or she is actually following the Spirit? What are the bases not only for individual morality but also a just and righteous society?**

HOMOSEXUALITY

The Qur'an and homosexuality: There are five references in the Qur'an which have been cited as referring to gay and lesbian behavior. Some obviously deal with effeminate men and "*masculine women*." The two main references to homosexual behavior are:

"We also sent Lut : He said to his people : "Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds." Qur'an 7:80-81

"What! Of all creatures do ye come unto the males, and leave the wives your Lord created for you? Nay, but ye are forward folk." Qur'an 26:165

⁷ Ibid., 39-40.

⁸ Ibid., 40-41.

⁹ Ibid., 42.

The Hadith and homosexuality: The Hadith are collections of sayings attributed to Muhammad. Many Hadiths (ahadith) discuss liwat (sexual intercourse between males). Two examples are:

"When a man mounts another man, the throne of God shakes."

"Kill the one that is doing it and also kill the one that it is being done to." (in reference to the active and passive partners in gay sexual intercourse)

There is at least one mention of lesbian behavior mentioned in the Hadith:

"Sihag (lesbian sexual activity) of women is zina (illegitimate sexual intercourse) among them."

Statement by the Islamic Society of North America:

Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi of the ISNA said: *"Homosexuality is a moral disorder. It is a moral disease, a sin and corruption... No person is born homosexual, just like no one is born a thief, a liar or murderer. People acquire these evil habits due to a lack of proper guidance and education."*

"There are many reasons why it is forbidden in Islam. Homosexuality is dangerous for the health of the individuals and for the society. It is a main cause of one of the most harmful and fatal diseases. It is disgraceful for both men and women. It degrades a person. Islam teaches that men should be men and women should be women. Homosexuality deprives a man of his manhood and a woman of her womanhood. It is the most un-natural way of life. Homosexuality leads to the destruction of family life."¹⁰

¹⁰ Religious Tolerance, "Islam and Homosexuality," http://religioustolerance.org/hom_isla.htm, 7/19/2004

HINDUISM: *Different Streams Toward One River*

A Study of Other Faiths

Session 3

Hinduism has been called a “decentralized” faith because of its lack of a founder and a single authority. It is also very syncretistic (Syncretism: combining different beliefs and practices from different sources). Thus one finds wide varieties of Hindu belief and practice but without the vying claims for higher truth found, for instance, among Christian denominations.¹

Historical Origins

Hinduism began about 4,000 years ago among the people of the Indus River Valley. Eventually this civilization merged with Aryan people. *Aryan* designates a particular people originating in central Asia who subsequently migrated to India.

The chief Hindu scriptures emerged about 1500 B.C. Developing from Aryan and Indus valley traditions, the *Vedas* (pronounced VAY-dahs) are hymns in honor of gods, songs for sacrifices, and hymns for other religious occasions. The word *Veda* means “knowledge.”²

Worldview

For nearly all Hindus, reality is explained by the interrelated, spiritual and moral concepts of *dharma*, *karma*, *samsara*, *moksha*, and *Brahman*. *Dharma* refers to a person’s social duties and responsibilities. In traditional Indian thinking, persons are obliged to have children. Persons are obliged to eat particular foods and abstain from others. Hindus do not eat beef, for instance. Persons should also work in their job in an honest, honorable manner.

Dharma is tied with the notion of *karma*. *Karma* is the moral law of cause and effect. Every action has repercussions on both the physical and the spiritual world. The consequences of our actions follow us as our souls are reborn following the death of our physical bodies. “Bad” karma ties us to the cycle of rebirth and thus delays our return to God. “Good” karma brings us closer to liberation from rebirth. Works of *dharma*, worship, and in some cases renunciation can bring us closer to liberation.³

- **Christians speak of liberation from sin, and of Jesus “taking away” sin. How do you understand these ideas? What similarities or differences do you see between them and the Hindu concepts of karma and dharma?**

The realization that our purpose is to be with *Brahman* is *moksha*, or liberation. Ultimately Hindus believe that is their goal: to achieve liberation from the fact of *karma*, to realize and recognize one’s identity with the universal spirit.

Samsara refers to the cycles of rebirth in the universe.⁴

- **How do the ideas of cycle, of rebirth, and reincarnation compare to the Christian notion of the soul?**

When one achieves *moksha*, one returns to the universal spirit or *Brahman*. *Brahman* is the sacred, eternal spirit outside time and space. *Brahman* is not a personal God, nor a “being” with attributes, but rather is the source and power of the cosmos manifested in the phenomenal world. Rather than saying our souls are some personal spiritual quality, some Hindus believe our souls are already one with God. Other Hindus differentiate the soul from the Supreme Spirit.

Drawing parallels between Hinduism and Christianity, one might say that “sin” is not only deviation from *dharma*, as well as indifference to karmic cycles, but also a failure to recognize that

¹ Paul Stroble, *What Do Other Faiths Believe? A Study of World Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 46.

² *Ibid.*, 47-48.

³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

all reality is actually one. “Forgiveness” is tied in with one’s karma as well, not as a slate being wiped clean, but of a closer proximity to one’s ultimate moksha.⁵

Death and Life

Says one Hindu, “There is nothing that is not God – that is what most Hindus today believe. Really only God is; the rest of it is manifestation of the spirit that totally pervades everything. Personally I feel very much a part of the universe. I feel literally connected all the time. I’m not just an identity but also a part of that universal spirit. I feel very connected with the cosmos.”⁶

- **How do you feel connected to the cosmos? What things help you feel close to God’s world? to God?**

“The very fact of coming back to life and coming back through the various aspects of life – trauma, pain, and so on – that in itself is something Hindus want to rise above. Thus the effort is to break the cycle of return to the phenomenal world. How to break the cycle becomes an important activity. One of the ways is to do the right actions. The path of action. Another might be the path of realization. One path might be more suitable for one kind of individual than another; a contemplative individual might be more apt to follow the path of realization while a more practical individual might be more apt to follow the path of action. There are many other paths. It is possible, following a particular path, ultimately to recognize one’s identity with the universal spirit.”⁷

- **Compare the ideas of dharma, karma, and moksha with the Western religious ideas of sin, forgiveness, hell, and heaven. What are the similarities and differences?**

Striving Toward Moksha: God, Ethics, and Worship

Hinduism offers several particular paths believers may follow. One is simply the path of dharma. Hindus may approach the universal spirit through carrying out one’s social responsibilities.

Some Hindus approach the universal spirit through yogic practices. *Yoga*, which means “yoke,” consists of paths or ways, practices like physical exercises and breathing control, that help us recognize our identity with God. The physical exercises are the best-known kinds of yoga, but yoga can also be selfless action performed as a duty. Through meditation one can achieve knowledge of oneness with God, and yoga helps one “tune out” distractions in order to concentrate on Brahman.

Many Hindus approach the universal spirit through devotion to a particular incarnation of god. Brahman has many incarnations, including *Devi*, *Siva* (sometimes spelled *Shiva*), and *Vishnu*.

There are many Hindus who do not worship the universal spirit through the icons. They think of God as totally beyond attributes, and so God cannot be encompassed in any one of our adorations or definitions. Because they regard God in that way they regard God as an abstract principle. It is harder to focus upon God in the abstract, but many Hindus prefer that way.⁸

Hinduism recognizes a fact that many Christians forget or do not realize: everyone has his or her own spiritual type. In other words, we learn faith and grow spiritually in different ways. Corinne Ware’s book, “Discover Your Spiritual Type,” discusses four broadly defined spiritual types:

- **“Head” Spirituality.** This person thinks through religious ideas and appreciates good sermons, good books, writing, and other activities involving logical thought.
- **“Heart” Spirituality.** This person experiences spiritual reality in a more emotional way: through such activities as music, testimony, and spontaneous rather than liturgical services.
- **“Mystic” Spirituality.** This person experiences spiritual reality in nonverbal, contemplative ways: through meditation, intuitive insight into God’s reality, or a simple lifestyle.
- **“Kingdom” Spirituality.** Such a person finds spirituality in action, work, social justice, and striving for a vision.

⁵ Ibid., 50-51.

⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁸ Ibid., 52-54.

How do you see the various paths of Hinduism fitting into Ware's schemes? How does the fact that Hinduism recognizes several spiritual paths, without competition among them, help you better appreciate various Christian pathways?⁹

Many Paths

Because it is a complex religion with many noncompeting paths within its theological and devotional traditions, Hinduism not surprisingly accepts the views of other faiths. Says one Hindu, "That is one thing that seems to be continuous in Hindu thought. Sometimes, though it makes it difficult to accommodate with other religions that would make their own path the exclusive path. That makes it difficult – and difficult to understand!"¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰ Ibid., 55.

BUDDHISM: *The Path to Freedom*

A Study of Other Faiths

Session 3

Rather than beginning with conventional religious questions like, “Who is God and how can I know God?” Buddhism starts with the fact of human disquiet and suffering and offers both a diagnosis and a cure. Like Hinduism, Buddhism springs from beliefs in *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksha*. But it has developed into a religion that can be practiced alongside other faiths as well. The Buddhist principles are generalizable to anybody. As originally conceived, the religion is very practical because it does not deal with esoteric teachings or realities taken on faith. The religion is based on not being selfish and egotistical and self-centered. It’s a very hopeful, practical, and usable religion. The religion is not an easy way to follow, but the basic principles are easy to understand.¹

- **If you were being interviewed as to the essential principles of Christianity, what would you say? How useful are those principles? are they “generalizable to anybody” or do they apply to certain people? Explain.**

Siddhartha

Siddhartha Gautama was born about 563 B.C. in the Himalayan foothills to a wealthy family. And although Siddhartha married and had a son and lived life of luxury, he still questioned the meaning of his life. One day he rode into the countryside and saw an elderly man, whereby he learned of old age. Next he saw a sick person, whereby he learned of disease. Next he saw a dead person, whereby he learned of life’s impermanence. Finally he saw a monk who had given up all his possessions; and Siddhartha decided to also renounce the world as a possible religious path to insight. He tried traditional yogic practices and harsh self-denial. He nearly starved himself and never bathed. He achieved some insight, but nothing like he was hoping for. One day while meditating under a tree, he experienced a vision of karma and the cycles of rebirth, and finally understood the reason for suffering, as well as the path to happiness.²

- **Have you ever felt like a religious seeker but could not find what you were looking for? What was your experience?**

Siddhartha began to teach the basics of Buddhism. He died in 483 B.C., and the faith spread through India and eventually into China, Tibet, Nepal, Southeast Asia, and Japan. It developed into two branches of Buddhism: *Theravada*, which is strong in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka; and *Mahayana*, which integrated into it the qualities of faiths around Asia. Theravada approaches Buddhism as a set of philosophical and psychological teachings and practices. Mahayana incorporates more “religious” tenets such as enlightened beings called *bodhisattvas*, and prayers.

Mahayanist sects include Pure Land, which emphasizes the god Amitabha. Zen is another Mahayana branch which aims at insight gained through meditation, riddles called *koans*, and even startling students into enlightenment. *Nichiren Shoshu*, another branch, emphasizes a particular scripture, the *Lotus Sutra*, as key to truth. Tibetan Buddhism is related to Mahayana, but is categorized as separate. It is a complex sect that uses formulas, manuals, and prayer wheels. All these Buddhist forms aim at the same insight-experience: overcoming suffering through *nirvana*.³

Four Truths and a Path

Siddhartha taught “the four noble truths” that formed the basis of Buddhist doctrine:

1. Life is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* means suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by desire.
3. In order to end suffering, end desire.
4. To end desire we must follow the Eightfold Path.⁴

¹ Paul Stroble, *What Do Other Faiths Believe? A Study of World Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 58.

² *Ibid.*, 58-59.

³ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

- **Read Luke 10:27. How does Jesus' teaching about love of God, neighbor and self compare and contrast with the four noble truths of Buddhism?**

The Eightfold Path is a disciplined set of practices aimed at achieving inner freedom. In Buddhist teaching, the Eightfold Path helps you reach *nirvana*, or the state wherein you are above suffering.

1. Right understanding means understanding reality via the Four Noble Truths.
 2. Right thought means dealing with our emotional “baggage” and bringing our inner self into peace and harmony.
 3. Right speech means getting rid of foolish conversation, gossiping, lying, swearing, and replacing such things with positive talk.
 4. Right action means doing good and avoiding evil.
 5. Right livelihood means avoiding those occupations that hurt and exploit other people.
 6. Right effort means working toward the goal of inner harmony, understanding that the way may not be easy.
 7. Right mindfulness means developing the mind to reach liberation.
 8. Right meditation means developing practices that calm the mind.⁵
- **Try to think of an example of right livelihood and right mindfulness. Do you think any of these things conflict with Christianity? Could they be integrated into Christian living easily or with difficulty?**

The path to enlightenment (a point in which you are above the world of pain), curbs attachment and desire and also eliminates aversion or hatred, which is the opposite side of the same thing. If you look at what causes pain or suffering, it's very, very difficult to think of any instance that is not your craving or desiring something you can't have, or your hating something that you do have. Basically everything falls into those categories. People's ignorance of this fact often keeps them in a continuous cycle of suffering.

Karma is what you do now that affects your life in the future. A person in a Buddhist country might say it affects your future lives, not just your life in the future. But even if you take reincarnation out of the picture, what you say and do and even what you think has ripple effect. You can have a positive impact on persons by verbalizing appreciation, doing them a favor, and helping them. You can also have a negative impact on persons by speaking negatively, criticizing their work, and thinking pessimistically.

Thus, in Buddhism, sin does not consist of bad choices, bad actions, and the forgetfulness of God. Sin, to use that “Western” term, is the self-centeredness that causes one to cling to the phenomenal world of suffering and selfishness. Redemption comes from the insights, and the resulting actions, that come from one's realization of the noble truths. Sin is attachment, while freedom is nonattachment.⁶

Rank these things according to how much they give you a sense of inner peace and self-worth. Omit ones that do not apply to you. What other things can you think of?

- **My vehicle**
- **My parents**
- **God's love for me**
- **My income/savings accounts**
- **My spouse**
- **My children**
- **My collection of _____**
- **My service to others**
- **My education**

⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁶ Ibid., 62-63.

- **My friendships**
- **My prestige and reputation**
- **My job**
- **People's approval**
- **My looks**
- **My house and lawn or garden**
- **My membership in organizations**

Interrelatedness and Compassion

Buddhists believe that you should live a life as fully as possible with compassion and love for all beings, with love and kindness, and most of all sensitivity to any being that has any amount of consciousness. When Tibetan monks build a new temple they dig down into the soil carefully so as not to hurt the worm and they replant the worm.⁷

- **Do you feel much connection with the nonhuman world? How does the idea of noninjury to the animal and insect world seem to you?**

Some see that excessive involvement with ego or self leads to the need to control. They feel Westerners have such a strong desire to hold on and control things, that it dominates our lives. We put so much time and energy into it that we become competitive, sometimes aggressive, and ultimately isolated from other people. “You can’t simultaneously be one with others and connected with others and also control your own space and boundaries, focused on gaining something for yourself.”⁸ **Do you agree?**

Meditation

One kind of Buddhist meditation is *vipassana*, wherein one calms the mind by first concentrating upon one’s breathing. Vipassana also includes “walking meditation,” during which one concentrates on the movements of one’s body. *Zazen* is another kind of meditation wherein one sits in a prescribed posture for a period of time in order to calm the mind and make the mind open to insight.⁹

- **Two very famous Christian Scripture passages are John 15:11 and Philippians 4:7. What are the sources of Christian peace and joy? How do you cultivate peace and joy? How might prayer and meditation help you cultivate them?**

God

Siddhartha emphasized the path over an idea of God. Most Buddhist view the world without one all-powerful being who is the best or the only one. They believe that we don’t have to claim something as the best or the only one, even if it is God. Belief in God can be another form of attachment. The stronger the attachment, the more problems arise. And even God falls into that category.¹⁰

- **What is your response to the statement that we do not have to claim something as the best or the only one, even if it is God, because that’s another form of attachment? How does this view compare with a Christian view of God?**

Buddhist Views of an Afterlife

One religion expert writes, “All forms of Buddhism that I’m aware of, which is not all of them, believe in the ‘afterlife,’ or more accurately reincarnation and enlightenment. But there is no ‘heaven’ per se. When you die your consciousness enters the universal consciousness/energy, and if you haven’t attained enlightenment (nirvana) you are reincarnated back into the world of samsara (suffering). In Mahayana Buddhism, the goal is to be enlightened but to come back to earth to help

⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁹ Ibid., 66.

¹⁰ Ibid., 66.

others attain enlightenment. This person is called a *Bodhisattva*. The Dalai Lama is the ‘Bodhisattva of Compassion’ because he keeps ‘coming back’ in human form to help others reach enlightenment.”

Clearly, Buddhism would tend to be very noncompetitive toward other faiths. One might say that, instead of offering doctrinal truth, it offers practical truth: a path to freedom and compassionate living.¹¹

- **Many people are familiar with the “serenity prayer.” What are the similarities and differences you see between Buddhist teachings of nirvana and nonattachment and this prayer?**

**“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.”**

¹¹ Ibid., 67.

BAHA'I: *Sun Shining in a Mirror*

A Study of Other Faiths

Session 4

A New, Yet Ancient Faith

Baha'i is the newest major faith in the world. About six million people in over 300 countries worldwide profess to the Baha'i faith. Although Baha'i is much smaller in numbers, the faith is second only to Christianity in worldwide distribution. About 140,000 Baha'is live in the United States.

Baha'i began the mid-nineteenth century in Iran, then called Persia, where Shi'a Islam is the dominant religion. Shi'ites honor the prophet Muhammad's family as the rightful heirs to his authority. "Twelver" Shi'ites believe that the twelfth successor (imam), who disappeared during the 800s, will return someday as the leader of God's people.¹

- **Why do you think it is important for some religions to express hope in a future leader to come? Christians believe, for instance, in Jesus' second coming. How does that belief function in your life?**

In 1844, a Persian man named Mirza Ali Muhammad announced that he was the new successor to the Prophet. He called himself the *Bab*, which means "gate," that is, the gate of faith. He taught new revelations from God, set about reforming Muslim practices, and taught the coming unity of all religions. A new, yet greater prophet, he said, would shortly appear, who would set up God's dominion. He gathered a large number of disciples called *Babi*. But because his teachings aimed at reforming Muslim law, and because his teachers were said to supersede even the Qur'an, the Persian leadership cracked down on the Babi. Many were executed or imprisoned; the Bab himself met his death by a firing squad in 1850.²

- **Some religions have beliefs in persons who "open the gate" to faith. Many Buddhists believe in bodhisattvas, or "saints," who help persons reach nirvana. Roman Catholic Christians have saints who intercede for people. What is the difference between a "gate" and the destination itself? What does the image of a door or a gate say to you about the faith?**

The Bab's message spread, however. Several years later, a devoted Babi named Mirza Husayn Ali (1817-1892), who had faced incarceration and torture then finally exile for his beliefs, had a revelation that he was himself the promised, greater prophet. Called Baha'u'llah, which means "the splendor of God" or "the glory of God," Babis followed him during the course of his subsequent ministry.

Following Baha'u'llah's death in 1892, he was succeeded by his son. After his death in 1921, his eldest nephew continued the leadership until he died in 1957. Although the faith has no "church" or rituals or priests, it has elected groups called assemblies and worldwide administration. The US national assembly is headquartered in Wilmette, Illinois, and the faith's world center is located in Israel at Mount Carmel.³

God

What do Baha'is believe about God? Because God is transcendent, one cannot know God directly. The essence of God is unknowable, even through prayer and mediation. Nevertheless, God's blessings and qualities are known through the Manifestations.⁴

- **How do you think about doctrines such as the Trinity or the incarnation? Do you think these are mysteries that we cannot really describe adequately in words, or do you think doctrines quite adequately express the nature of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit? Explain.**

¹ Paul Stroble, *What Do Other Faiths Believe? A Study of World Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 75-76.

² *Ibid.*, 76.

³ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

The knowledge of God's Manifestations is the knowledge of God since God's goodness and glory are made apparent in the Manifestations. Baha'is often use the analogy of the sun shining in a mirror. In a mirror one can see, not the sun itself, but the reflection of the sun. Similarly, these Manifestations are like mirrors and reflect the divine attributes of God, but are not God.⁵

- **How do our doctrines of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit compare with the idea of Manifestations?**

- **Which statement below best describes how you might think when you look in a mirror?**
 1. I look pretty good!
 2. I wish I hadn't _____.
 3. When did I get this old?
 4. Am I always this grouchy looking?
 5. Hey, I earned these wrinkles!

Do you think mirrors (1) reflect the whole truth, (2) only show the outside, (3) can be deceiving, (4) other?

What are "Manifestations"? They are the prophets who have come to educate people in different times and cultures. All major religions are one in essences. Baha'is believe any of these are the path to God. As God is a unity, so are God's prophets. Baha'is consider Abraham, Buddha, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah as God's Manifestations. Although their laws differ according to the needs of particular times, their message is basically one. Similarly, the different scriptures of these religions are of divine origin for the benefit of people of different times and places. The purpose of God's Manifestations and scriptures is the same: that people might reach God and gain God's blessedness following death.⁶

- **How does this idea of God's Manifestations and scripture compare with our idea of Jesus?**
- **Discuss the concept of "many paths, one God." Do you subscribe to this concept?**

The unity of God and God's prophets implies the unity of all persons. As reflected in Baha'u'llah's own attitude toward his persecutors, Baha'is teach harmony among persons. The faith teaches human oneness, universal peace, equality of women and men, and end to prejudice. Compulsory education for all, a common international language, redistribution of wealth in order to end poverty, the harmony of science and religion – these and other principles are core values of Baha'i.⁷

- **Read John 17:21-23, wherein Jesus prays for the unity of his followers. Think about things that divide religious people. How does Christianity compare with Baha'i in this area?**

These principles include a high degree of individual willingness to forgive and to seek God's help. Baha'is feel they should all forgive enemies as well as friends. They ask God for forgiveness, and they also ask forgiveness for those they've harmed. They believe that souls make farther progress after death, and people still on earth can pray for them, since this world and the spiritual world are connected. Similarly, though they pray to God, they can ask the Manifestations to intercede for them.⁸

- **What makes forgiveness easy or difficult for you? How do the Baha'i and Christian ideas about forgiveness compare?**
- **Do you think people can be prayed for after their death? Why or why not?**

Sin and Evil

⁵ Ibid., 78.

⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁸ Ibid., 79.

What is sin and evil according to Baha'i teaching? God's creation is good, and sin is the absence of God. Thus evil is not a reality as such but is a construct that depicts things and actions other than God and God's will. When we hold on to human constructs such as class, race, gender, and others, we stress divisions among people rather than concentration upon our true self, which is our spiritual nature. In turn, we sin when we act according to our human constructs – and thus according to our ignorance of God – instead of recognizing our true natures and God's will for us.⁹

- **How do these ideas about “real self” compare and contrast with Christian ideas?**

Afterlife

As far as the afterlife is concerned, Baha'is do not believe in literal places of blessedness or torment or in a personal devil. Evil is not a “thing” but is the absence of good. A similar view was held by certain Christian theologians such as St. Augustine. Baha'i believes that heaven and hell are not places but conditions of the soul. The soul, which is the reality of humankind, is eternal and in continuous progress. When the soul is near to God and God's purposes, that is heaven; when the soul is distant from God, that is hell.¹⁰

- **What is your reaction to the Baha'i concept of heaven and hell?**

Baha'i Faith and Homosexuality

The Baha'i Faith teaches beliefs about homosexuality that are quite similar to those of many conservative religions. They teach that:

- The only acceptable form of sexual expression is between a heterosexual couple after marriage.
- Homosexual feelings and behavior are improper, and in opposition to God's plan for humanity.
- Homosexuality as a disability for the individual to overcome. Through prayer, medical treatment, counseling, and much personal effort, they believe that a homosexual can become “straight.”
- Unless gays or lesbians can convert their sexual orientation to bisexuality or heterosexuality, and enter a marriage with a person of the opposite gender, they are expected to remain celibate.

Persons with homosexual, bisexual or transsexual orientation are all welcomed as members of the Baha'i Faith. As stated by a draft FAQ approved for distribution by the US National Spiritual Assembly:

“To regard homosexuals with prejudice and disdain would be entirely against the spirit of Baha'i Teachings. The doors are open for all of humanity to enter the Cause of God, irrespective of their present circumstances; this invitation applies to homosexuals as well as to any others who are engaged in practices contrary to the Baha'i Teachings.”

“Associated with this invitation is the expectation that all believers will make a sincere and persistent effort to eradicate those aspects of their conduct which are not in conformity with Divine Law.”⁴

Any Baha'i member in good standing can be elected to any office within the Faith, regardless of their sexual orientation. However, gays and lesbians might be declared to be not in good standing if they flagrantly display their homosexuality. They are expected to make “sincere and persistent effort” to remain celibate.

A fundamental belief of the Baha'i Faith is that true science and religion cannot be in conflict. Sexual orientation continues to be studied by human sexuality researchers. In the West, a social and scientific consensus is being developed that

- homosexuality is a natural, normal, and acceptable variation of human sexuality for a minority of adults, and
- an adult's sexual orientation is unchangeable or can only rarely be changed.

⁹ Ibid., 79.

¹⁰ Ibid., 80.

There seems to be a conflict within the Baha'i Faith over homosexuality as is seen in other religions:

- Some define "*homosexuality*" as a behavior. Homosexuality is what a person **does**, sexually. An individual is no longer a homosexual if they lead a celibate life. A bisexual orientation, in which a person is sexually attracted to both men and women, is rarely considered. A bisexual who abandons a sexual relationship with a same-sex partner and pursues only relationships with the opposite sex are seen as having "*controlled and overcome*" their "*handicap*."
- Some define "*homosexuality*" as an orientation. Homosexuality is what a person **is**. A person with a homosexual orientation who is celibate remains a celibate homosexual. Her or his sexual orientation is unchanged. In fact, it cannot be changed.¹¹

Divisions within the Baha'i Faith

There are several faith groups in the world who claim to be the "true" Bahá'í Faith. All have been declared covenant breakers by the *Universal House of Justice*:

- The *Bahá'í World Faith* is followed by the vast majority of believers.
- *Bahá'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant*
- The *Orthodox Bahá'í Faith* who follow Joel Marangella
- The *Orthodox Baha'i Faith Under the Regency*, who follow Rex King
- The *Charles Mason Remey Society*
- A dissident group organized around *The Friends Newsletter*
- Another group teaches that a Third Manifestation is coming in the immediate future -- not delayed for 9 centuries or so, as current mainline Baha'i teaches.¹²

¹¹ Religious Tolerance, "The Baha'i Faith and Homosexuality," http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bah.htm, 7/19/04.

¹² Religious Tolerance, "The Baha'i World Faith," <http://www.religioustolerance.org/bahai.htm>, 7/19/04.