



The Investigator's Gospel

Session 18 – Chapter 17 – The Faith of a Foreigner

Luke 7:9 (Jesus, regarding a Roman Centurion): “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.”

Luke 17:18-19 Jesus asked, ‘Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?’ Then he said to him, ‘Rise and go; your faith has made you well.’

Acts 10:1-4 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly... The angel answered, ‘Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.

Passages such as these – and there are many more – indicate to us that those of other religions are sometimes portrayed as possessing faithfulness worthy of praise. This is true in the Old Testament as well; one example would be Moses’ father-in-law Jethro (Exodus 18), described as a “priest of Midian.” Our modern secular society often considers all religions as “more or less the same,” and “differing but equal paths to the same God.” But are they? Below is a (very) brief overview of the major world religions.

Hinduism

Origin: India, about 2500 B.C. to 1500 B.C.

Founder: No single person

Adherents: Worldwide: 825-850 million

United States and Canada: Estimated 2.3 million

Scriptures: Vedas, Upanishads, The Epics, Puranas, and The Bhagavad Gita

Overview: Hinduism is the world’s oldest living organized religion. It is a complex family of sects whose copious scriptures, written over a period of almost 2,000 years (1500 B.C.-A.D. 250), allow a diverse belief system. Hinduism has no single creed and recognizes no final truth. At its core, Hinduism has a pagan background in which the forces of nature and human heroes are personified as gods and goddesses. They are worshiped with prayers and offerings.

Worship: Hindu worship has an almost endless variety with color symbolism, offerings, fasting, and dance as integral parts. Most Hindus daily worship an image of their chosen deity, with chants (mantras), flowers, and incense. Worship, whether in a home or temple, is primarily individualistic.

Hinduism can be divided into Popular Hinduism, characterized by the worship of gods, through offerings, rituals, and prayers; and Philosophical Hinduism, the complex belief system understood by those who can study ancient texts, meditate, and practice yoga.

God - God (Brahman) is the one impersonal, ultimate, but unknowable, spiritual reality. Hinduism personalizes Brahman as Brahma (creator, with four heads symbolizing creative energy), Vishnu (preserver, the god of stability and control), and Shiva (destroyer, god of endings). Most Hindus worship two of Vishnu's 10 mythical incarnations: Krishna and Rama. On special occasions, Hindus may worship other gods, as well as family and individual deities. Hindus claim that there are 330 million gods. In Hinduism, belief in astrology, evil spirits, and curses also prevails.

Creation - Hindus accept various forms of pantheism and reject the Christian doctrine of creation. According to Hinduism, Brahman alone exists; everything is ultimately an illusion (maya). God emanated itself to cause the illusion of creation. There is no beginning or conclusion to creation, only endless repetitions or cycles of creation and destruction.

Humanity - The eternal soul (atman) of humans is a manifestation or "spark" of Brahman mysteriously trapped in the physical body. Samsara, repeated lives or reincarnations are required before the soul can be liberated (moksha) from the body. An individual's present life is determined by the law of karma (actions, words, and thoughts in previous lifetimes). The physical body is ultimately an illusion (maya) with little inherent or permanent worth. Bodies generally are cremated, and the eternal soul goes to an intermediate state of punishment or reward before rebirth in another body. Rebirths are experienced until karma has been removed to allow the soul's re-absorption into Brahman.

Sin - Hindus have no concept of rebellion against a Holy God. Ignorance of unity with Brahman, desire, and violation of dharma, (one's social duty) are humanity's problems.

Salvation - There is no clear concept of salvation in Hinduism. Moksha (freedom from infinite being and selfhood and final self-realization of the truth), is the goal of existence. Yoga and meditation (especially raja-yoga) taught by a guru (religious teacher) is one way to attain moksha. The other valid paths for moksha are: the way of works (karma marga), the way of knowledge (jnana marga), or the way of love and devotion (bhakti marga). Hindus hope to eventually get off the cycle of reincarnation. They believe the illusion of personal existence will end and they will become one with the impersonal God.

Buddhism

Founder: Siddhartha Gautama, a prince from northern India near modern Nepal who lived about 563-483 B.C.

Scriptures: Various, but the oldest are compiled in the Pali Canon.

Adherents: 500,000,000 worldwide; over 3,000,000 in the United States, over 600,000 in Canada

General Description: Buddhism is the belief system of those who follow the Buddha, or the Enlightened One, a title given to its founder. The religion has evolved into three main schools:

1. Theravada or Southern Buddhism (38%) is followed in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia (Kampuchea), and Vietnam.
2. Mahayana or Eastern Buddhism (56%) is strong in China, Korea, and Japan.
3. Vajrayana, or Northern Buddhism (6%) is rooted in Tibet, Nepal, and Mongolia.

Theravada is closest to the original doctrines. It does not treat the Buddha as deity and regards the faith as a worldview—not a type of worship. Mahayana has accommodated many different beliefs and worships the Buddha as a god. Vajrayana has added elements of shamanism and the occult.

Historic Background - Buddhism was founded as a form of atheism that rejected more ancient beliefs in a permanent, personal, creator God (Ishvara) who controlled the eternal destiny of human souls. Siddhartha Gautama rejected more ancient theistic beliefs because of difficulty he had over reconciling the reality of suffering, judgment, and evil with the existence of a good and holy God.

Core Beliefs - Buddhism is an impersonal religion of self-perfection, the end of which is death (extinction)—not life. The essential elements of the Buddhist belief system are summarized in the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and several additional key doctrines.

The Four Noble Truths affirm that (1) life is full of suffering (dukkha); (2) suffering is caused by craving (samudaya); (3) suffering will cease only when craving ceases (nirodha); and (4) this can be achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path - right views, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation. Other key doctrines include belief that nothing in life is permanent (anicca), that individual selves do not truly exist (anatta), that all is determined by an impersonal law of moral causation (karma), that reincarnation is an endless cycle of continuous suffering, and that the goal of life is to break out of this cycle by finally extinguishing the flame of life and entering a permanent state of pure nonexistence (nirvana).

Worship – worship can be individual or in a temple with others. Forms of worship are largely based on personal meditation, seeking a release from self, and a dedication to the Noble Truths and Eightfold Path. Chanting is often a characteristic of Buddhist meditation. Works of charity – particularly in the form of donations to a shrine or to monks – and religious pilgrimage – particularly to shrines containing a relic of the Buddha – are also important. Some forms of Buddhism believe in the existence of gods, while others do not; some believe Buddha was a god, while others do not. Prayers and offerings to Buddha or other gods vary between the main groups.

Jesus in Buddhism: In recent years, as interaction between Buddhism and Christianity increase, comparisons are sometimes drawn between Jesus and Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, an incarnation of the Buddha who hears the prayers of the needy.

Buddhism in PEI: The “Great Enlightenment Buddhist Institute Society” (GEBIS) is a branch of the Vajrayana Buddhism sect. The Moonlight Academy is an educational arm. Insofar as it

venerates several Buddhas as Deities, it is very much a religion as opposed to merely a philosophy of life. Among the venerated deities are several Buddhas (often considered at different stages in his path towards enlightenment), female Buddhas known as Dakinis, and fierce deities seen as protectors. They also venerate many Bodhisattvas, which are important figures that achieved a very high level of enlightenment and look for the benefit of those around them.

Judaism

Founder: Abraham and Moses (approx. 2000-1250 BC)

Scriptures: The Old Testament

Adherents: 16 million; 6.1 million in Israel; 5.7 million in US; 350,000 in Canada

Overview: The great Jewish teacher Maimonides (1000 AD) described 13 main tenets of Jewish faith: 1. God exists; 2. God is one and unique; 3. God is incorporeal; 4. God is eternal; 5. Prayer is to God only; 6. The prophets spoke truth; 7. Moses was the greatest of the prophets; 8. The Written and Oral Torah (Law) were given to Moses; 9. There will be no other Torah; 10. God knows the thoughts and deeds of men; 11. God will reward the good and punish the wicked; 12. The Messiah will come; 13. The dead will be resurrected.

Worship: There are several main branches of Judaism, from casual cultural observations (liberal) to intense following of custom and tradition (ultra-orthodox). Worship involves ritual practice in the home and in the Synagogue, often involving prayers, Torah reading, teaching and song.

Jesus and Judaism: Jesus was a Jew. He and his followers claimed he was the long-awaited Messiah, or deliverer of the Jewish people from political persecution and spiritual suffering. Jews consider Jesus to be not the Messiah, but a Rabbi whose followers made false claims regarding his Resurrection and Messiahship. Jews reject Jesus as in any way divine; they continue to await the coming of the Messiah.

Judaism and Israel: Israel, the traditional homeland of the Jewish people, is believed to have been promised to them by God. 75% of Israeli citizens are Jewish (40% of whom are secular), 20% Arab (mostly Moslem) and 4% mainly Christian.

Islam

Founder: Muhammad (A.D. 570-632)

Date of Its Establishment: A.D. 622

Scriptures: The Qu'ran, authored by Muhammad

Adherents: Worldwide: Estimated 1.6 billion; 69 percent live in South and Southeast Asia; 27 percent in Africa; 4 percent other; United States: Estimated 4 million; Canada: est. 1,000,000

Overview: Islam is the world's youngest major world religion. It claims to be the restoration of original monotheism and truth and thus supersedes both Judaism and Christianity. It stresses submission to Allah, the Arabic name for God, and conformity to the “five pillars” or disciplines of that religion as essential for salvation. Within one century of its formation, most often using military force, Islam had spread across the Middle East, most of North Africa, and as far east as India. While God is, in the understanding of most Muslims, unknowable personally, His will is believed to be perfectly revealed in the holy book, the Qur'an. The Qur'an is to be followed completely and its teachings form a complete guide for life and society.

Muhammad is believed by Muslims to be the last and greatest prophet of God—“the seal of the prophets.” It was through him that the Qur'an was dictated, thus according him the supreme place among the seers of God. A native of Mecca, Muhammad was forced to flee that city in A.D. 622 after preaching vigorously against the paganism of the city. Having secured his leadership in Medina, and with several military victories to his credit, Muhammad returned in triumph to Mecca in A.D. 630. There, he established Islam as the religion of all Arabia.

The Qur'an is the sacred book of Islam and considered the perfect word of God for the Muslim. It is claimed that the Qur'an was dictated in Arabic by the angel Gabriel to Muhammad and were God's precise words. As such, it had pre-existed from eternity in heaven with God as the “Mother of the Book” and was in that form uncreated and coeternal with God. Islam teaches that it contains the total and perfect revelation and will of God. The Qur'an is about 4/5 the length of the New Testament and is divided into 114 “surahs” or chapters. It is believed to be most perfectly understood in Arabic and it is a religious obligation to seek to read and quote it in the original language.

The Five Pillars of Islam are the framework for the Muslim's life and discipline. Successful and satisfactory adherence to the pillars satisfies the will of Allah. They form the basis for the Muslim's hope for salvation along with faith and belief in Allah's existence, the authority of Muhammad as a prophet, and the finality and perfection of the Qur'an.

1. The Confession of Faith or Shahada: It is the declaration that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. Sincerity in the voicing of the confession is necessary for it to be valid. It must be held until death and repudiation of the Shahada nullifies hope for salvation.

2. Prayer or Salat: Five times a day, preceded by ceremonial washing, the Muslim is required to pray facing Mecca. Specific formulas recited from the Qur'an, along with prostrations are included. Prayer is, in this sense, an expression of submission to the will of Allah. The five times of prayer are before sunrise, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and prior to sleep.

3. Almsgiving or Zakat: The Qur'an teaches the giving of two and one-half percent of one's capital wealth to the poor and/or for the propagation of Islam. By doing so, the Muslims' remaining wealth is purified.

4. The Fast or Sawm: During the course of the lunar month of Ramadan, a fast is to be observed by every Muslim from sunrise to sunset. Nothing is to pass over the lips during this time, and they should refrain from sexual relations. After sunset, feasting and other celebrations often occur.

5. Pilgrimage or Hajj: All Muslims who are economically and physically able are required to journey as a pilgrim to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. The pilgrim's required simple dress stresses the notion of equality before God.

The Doctrines of Islam

God: He is numerically and absolutely one. God is beyond the understanding of man; only His will may be revealed and known. He is confessed as the "merciful and compassionate one."

Sin: The most serious sin that can be ascribed to people is that of considering God as more than one. Humankind is considered weak and forgetful but not as fallen.

Final Judgment: The world will be judged at the end of time by God. The good deeds and obedience of all people to the five pillars and the Qur'an will serve as the basis

Salvation: It is determined by faith, as defined by Islam, as well as by compiling good deeds primarily in conformity to the five pillars.

War: The term jihad or "struggle" is both external and internal, both physical and spiritual. The enemies of Islam or "idolaters," states the Qur'an, may be slain "wherever you find them." Paradise is promised for those who die fighting in the cause of Islam. Moderate Muslims emphasize the spiritual dimension of jihad and not its political element.

Diet and Food: Muslim dietary codes forbid the eating of pork and the use of alcohol. Other meats may be eaten from animals slaughtered by devout Muslims.

View of Heaven: Muslims believe that on the day of resurrection God will hold every human, Muslim and non-Muslim, accountable for his or her deeds. Islam views paradise as a place of joy and bliss. Heaven is described as place of physical pleasures, sometimes interpreted literally, sometimes allegorically.

Sharia Law: the principle of treating other people justly according to Islamic teaching. It encompasses things like marriage, divorce, inheritance and punishments for criminal offenses. By modern standards, the principles and penalties, from the 7th century, are harsh. The goal of Islam is the universal acceptance of Sharia under a single Islamic government, or Caliphate. Interpretations of Sharia vary from moderate to extreme.

View of Jesus: Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet, a messenger of God. He was born of a virgin, and worked miracles. Muslims do not believe Jesus was killed on the cross then resurrected. "They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did." (Quran 4:156) "God lifted him up to His presence. God is Almighty, All-Wise" (Quran 4:157). Muslims strongly deny that Jesus was in any way divine, the Messiah, or the Son of God.

World Religion in the Days of Jesus

Jesus' world was very much like our multi-faith world today. In addition to Judaism, the faith from within which Christianity was founded, there were many other religions:

Cults of the Roman State - The Roman state cults were adopted from the Eastern pattern of deifying emperors and honoring the gods of individual cities. The cult of the emperor, which began with Augustus, was organized by the state and used primarily to reinforce and test political loyalty. Statues of Augustus were erected and rituals were developed to honor him, but the cult generated little religious feeling or personal belief.

Mystery Religions - The pagan mystery religions are so named for their focus on secret knowledge and rituals available only to initiates. Mystery religions had become quite widespread by the time of Christ, but their characteristics are not entirely known due to their secretive nature and the lack of writings associated with them. What is known of the mystery religions has primarily been deduced from artwork, remains of temples and other archaeological discoveries.

Greek Philosophy - especially of the Platonic and Stoic varieties. Hellenistic thinking would become a significant influence on Christian thought, for most of the early church fathers were Greek-speaking Gentiles who had been trained in classical philosophy.

Jesus and Other Faiths

Jesus' response to people of other faiths was to treat them with respect, while at the same time calling them from their religion to follow and believe in him. The early Christians followed the same practice, as illustrated by Paul, in his visit to Athens and his appeal to those who worship The Unknown God (Acts 17:16-31) to turn to the Resurrected Jesus as the only path to the only true God.

The Christian Mission and Other Faiths – Living Faith 9.2

Some whom we encounter belong to other religions and already have a faith. Their lives often give evidence of devotion and reverence for life. We recognize that truth and goodness in them are the work of God's Spirit, the author of all truth. We should not address others in a spirit of arrogance implying that we are better than they. But rather, in the spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found, we point to life in Christ.

We witness to God in Christ as the Way, the Truth, the Life, and invite others to accept from him the forgiveness of God. We are compelled to share this good news.

What Society Says: *It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere.*

What Jesus Says: *(Matthew 28:19) Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

What the Bible says: *(1 John 3:23) And this is God's command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*

What Living Faith says: *(9:1.1-9:1.3) As God sent Christ to us, so Christ sends us into the world. We are here to proclaim Christ in word and deed.*

Mission is evangelism, *the offer of salvation to all people in the power of the Holy Spirit, to be received through faith in Christ. It asks people to repent of their sins, to trust Christ, to be baptized, and to enter a life honouring Jesus as Lord.*

Mission is service, *a call to help people in need and to permeate all of life with the compassion of God.*

From the sermon of February 9 – Zion Presbyterian

The positive examples set by those of other faiths can often challenge us to do better, to try harder, to deepen our commitment. Sometimes, it is the example within the family of faith which can inspire us: the way a neighbour or friend from another Christian denomination practices their faith can cause us to think about how our Presbyterian expression of faith can be enriched...

Through the faith of others, may God both inspire and challenge us to be stronger disciples, and faithful followers of Jesus.