

A Tapestry of Faith

A Comparative Look at World Religions:

Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam

By Elijah Levy, Ph.D.

All religions must be tolerated, for every man must get to heaven in his own way
--Frederick the Great

Religion is a great force—the only real motive force in the world, but you must get at a man through
his own religion, not through yours
--George Bernard Shaw

When a man is freed of religion, he has a better chance to live a normal and wholesome life
--Sigmund Freud

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What is religion?

Religion is an institution of shared beliefs and practices that were created by humans; primarily in response to physical and social forces beyond rational understanding; and that gives ultimate meaning to their lives. So, as human beings are we seeking meaning and purpose in life and how does religion infuse our lives with ultimate meaning and purpose?

Sociologists define religion as an institution that provides meaning through a set of beliefs, rituals, practices and celebrations of life cycle events. Many of these rituals and practices are deemed sacred.

How does religion function in your life and what does it do for a society?

Religion helps us deal with the unknown; supplying some measure of certainty in an otherwise seemingly uncertain world. Remember—there are a number of things we cannot explain, where logic and rationality is insufficient in explaining why tragedies occur in the world. Religion enables us to adapt to situations by providing a sacred, supernatural deity to order and explain the unknowable to us.

Andrew Greeley suggests religion has its origin in the propensity to hope; that in the face of life's disappointments hope needs to be renewed; that a variety of experiences can renew hope and that religion is a collectively created phenomenon that renews hope. This definition and interpretation of religion emphasizes what religion does for us rather than what it is.

Religion provides us with a frame; a perspective or viewpoint—a way of seriously looking at the world; it provides a value orientation as to how the world ought to be which in turn gives meaning to our lives. Religion can be prescriptive in that it is an ethical prescriptive for how to conduct our lives; for how to lead value driven lives where our deeply held values and norms serve as a guidepost to life.

William James, the great philosopher and psychologist stated “in its broadest terms, religion says that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in its relations to it.”

Our National Religion

In America informal practices from patriotism and religion are combined to create a sort of national or civil religion. Doing so increases American pride and it reinforces the culture bound values Americans honor in their daily lives. Examples of our National Religion can be drawn from songs and ceremonies that attest to G-ds presence in our great country—singing the National Anthem before a ball game. Other songs illustrating civil religion include “G-d Bless America, America the Beautiful and My Country Tis of Thee.

The functions of religion

Supportive Function:

Religion provides its followers with consolation, reconciliation, relief and compassion from others. Through prayer followers may reduce discomfort, anxiety and fear related to losing work, aging or death.

Faith has a consoling effect on people and religion can reconcile and help us understand who are vulnerable, why they are vulnerable and how to forgive those who have sinned against us.

Social Conformity Function:

Religion performs several social conformity functions by strengthening and rewarding conformity to societal norms and conventions in the following ways:

- a) Religion makes sacred the norms, values and conventions of society through the honoring of the 10 Commandments admonishing us not to steal, be dishonest, etc. Religious people may be less likely to violate these laws because they are interpreted to be laws of G-d. A few sociologists claim that religious participation inhibits crime, delinquency and deviant behavior.
- b) Religions encourage good, friendly and cooperative behavior such as through honoring the Golden Rule and being a Good Samaritan.

Prophetic Function:

Religions have leaders and in some, the prophetic function is acquired through leaders challenging unjust political practices and institutions that may oppress or discriminate against a people. For example, in the late 1950's and 1960's, Martin Luther King, Jr. drove the resistance against racial discrimination and unequal civil rights. In the 1980's Desmond Tutu led the fight for the Black's struggle against a White racist government in South Africa.

Identity Function:

Religion may enable followers to know who they are, what they are and what the meaning and purpose to their lives represents. In modern society we have many interpersonal relations, and so much diversity that some may become confused with regard to which norms and values to conform to. The identity function of religion provides a consistent self-identity which some people need. Without a stable self-identity some people are vulnerable and fall into an existential vacuum; feeling that their life is meaningless and without purpose.

A caution about over identifying with your faith: A percentage of individuals may identify too strongly with their faith – where it becomes an intense obsession and social conflicts emerge because these individuals believe that their faith is the only true religion and they become intolerant of other religions—claiming the other religions are false.

Can we at least agree with the following statements?

Most religions and their followers agree that their core precepts are timeless—meaning they are not new or recently written by someone.

The majority of religions acknowledge humanity is connected to an entity that is eternal; and that logic alone is not sufficient for understanding divine truth.

Think about these things

Remember—there are generally two methods to the pursuit of truth, knowledge and wisdom, and they are science and religion.

Scientists and social researchers develop a body of knowledge and objective data about the social physical world.

Scientists use rational thinking, deductive and inductive reasoning to attain truth. Theories developed through the scientific method allows us to better predict and control the outcome of our lives; in addition to predicting the

probability that events will occur in the social and physical world. The other methods include intuition, meditation, prayer, visions, dreams, revelations from G-d, magic, prophecy and a faith in which the final proof of truth comes from a transcendental experience.

The G-d phenomenon is beyond the realm of physical sensation; G-d is beyond time and space; beyond all conditions that set the limits of human sensation.

The human being's most powerful urge is not sex—but to survive and avoid death; it may be about striving for heroic significance and immortality. For some, religion is the avenue of love for others—for love conquers hate and battles death. Religion is the social cement—it lets humans live in a community of harmony.

One can assert that of all human behavior that religion seeks to influence or control, the most important one is human aggression; our aggressive impulses to conquer new lands and subsequently dominate other human beings. Do you agree?

The cynic may argue the following:

- a) The death of G-d may be the reality of our age
- b) I think G-d is obsolete, where is he if he's around? And it's just not fashionable to be a believer because I'm too sophisticated now for G-d.
- c) Listen, we don't need G-d to console us
- d) We need to focus more on science and technology to solve human problems, not G-d.

Think about this ...

Do you think religion in American society is equally as important as it was 25 or 50 years ago?

Will it become more or less important in the future?

Do recent events suggest that secularization is becoming more widespread or less? Secularization refers to the removal of religious control over social life.

Does modern life tend to undermine or cause us to neglect our spiritual life?

A percentage of people believe that the most accurate method to discovering truth is through science and that the other method is through theology. Do you agree?

How does religion act as a powerful social force?

How to begin studying other faiths:

Remember that as we study other major world religions we'll be looking at their core precepts and asking ourselves how these guidelines for living a righteous life compare to our abiding faith. The potential for disagreements arise when we take on attitudes that prevent us from acknowledging the contribution each faith makes to humanity and when we assert that our faith is religiously superior to other faiths.

Let's look at these perspectives:

- 1) Exclusivist - in this position one asserts that his/her religion is the only truth.
- 2) Inclusivist - in this view, one states that his/her religion is true for him/her and your religion is true for you; this is a relativistic position and is also a tolerant view.
- 3) Pluralist - this is a desired view where one asserts that every religion has something true to tell all of us.

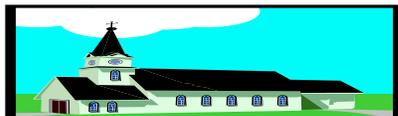
What do you make of this fable by Lincoln Steffens:

A man climbed to the top of a mountain and, standing on tiptoe, seized hold of the truth. Satan, suspecting mischief from the upstart had directed one of his underlings to tail him; but when the demon reported with alarm the man's success—that he seized hold of the truth—Satan was unperturbed. Don't worry he yawned. I'll tempt him to institutionalize it.

The following elements are commonly found in religions:



symbols



places of worship



rituals practiced by worshippers

There are two subtypes of theism:

Monotheism – the belief in one G-d Polytheism – the belief in more than one G-d

Christianity, Judaism and Islam are monotheistic faiths

Christianity is the world’s largest faith with followers divided into 3 groups:

- 1) Roman Catholic
- 2) Protestantism
- 3) Eastern Orthodoxy

All three denominations share a belief in G-d as the creator of the world and in Jesus as its savior.

Islam is the world’s second largest faith and was established by the prophet Mohammad in the 7th century AD

Judaism worships one G-d, the G-d of the Old Testament as the creator of the universe and teaches that He chose the people of Israel as witness to His presence.

Ethical Monotheism can mean the following:

- 1) There is one G-d from which emanates one morality for all humanity.
- 2) G-ds primary demand of people is that they act decently toward one another.

Now—if all people subscribed to this simple belief, which does not mean leaving, or joining any specific religion or giving up national identity—the world would experience far less problems.

World religions can also be classified into the following categories:

Theism – a religion that centers on the worship of a G-d or G-ds

Ethicalism – a spirituality that emphasizes moral principles as guides for living a righteous life.

Animism – the belief in spirits capable of helping or harming people

Monotheism

The three most influential monotheistic religions originated in the near east and each influenced the other. These faiths include:

Judaism: originated well over 3,000 years ago and is anchored by a portion of the Tenakh or holy scriptures known as the Torah (five books of Moses)

Christianity: began as a sect of Judaism and developed into a political power when it was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire after 300 years of persecution.

Islam: began with the prophet Mohammed and emphasizes unconditional submission to the will of Allah (G-d), the Islamic scriptures are known as the Koran.

Religions of the Far East

Hinduism: Hinduism is the oldest of the major religions still in existence and it is polytheistic and very diverse. Most Hindus accept the doctrine of reincarnation.

Buddhism: Buddhism was begun by Siddharta Gautama (a Hindu Prince) who taught that the cycle of reincarnation was escaped by renouncing the selfish desires which bind us to the world.

Confucianism: A Chinese system of teachings (not so much a religion) which emphasizes strict ethical norms and devotion to ancestors.

Taoism: This is similar in many ways to Confucianism, but stresses nonviolence and meditation as a means to a higher life.

Classifications of Religions

Nature Religions

The nature religions are considered among the most primitive of religious beliefs and are considered to be the earliest religious systems developed by human beings.

Revealed Religions

Also commonly described as law-giving religions, the revealed religions are typically symbolic, containing revelations given by a G-d or G-ds. These revelations usually constitute the religions scriptures which were disseminated to the people by a prophet or G-d.

Salvation Religions

Salvation religions are typically founded by a prophet or religious leader who establishes doctrine guiding people on how to achieve salvation. The legitimacy of the prophet usually depends on how charismatic they are and their ability to perform miracles which reflects their divine status.

Sacramental Religions

A sacramental religion emphasizes the idea that the divine is present in some form in physical objects, or in the mystery-laden ceremonies which believers participate in. Contact and communication with the divine is sought through those objects and ceremonies.

Prophetic Religions

A prophetic religion is strongly associated with revealed religion and they may seem interchangeable. There is however a difference. In a prophetic religion, the role of prophets is given a special status. The prophets exist to guide and warn human beings when they falter; - thus, they are thought to play an ongoing and dynamic role which the static text of a revelation cannot readily achieve.

Mystical Religions

A mystical religion is one in which mystical experiences play the most important role in terms of understanding nature, learning about the divine, and becoming a religiously devout person. At times, it excludes all other concerns with life, society, and fellow believers.

What is Atheism?

The most commonly accepted definition of an atheist is one who does not believe in a deity. He/she may claim that they are unaware of the existence of a deity and that there is no supreme, all powerful, eternal entity in any form.

Atheists may have reached their conclusion after conducting their own studies and are unconvinced due to insufficient evidence. Thus, the atheist claims the evidence for the existence of G-d isn't convincing enough. Further, an atheist may assert that the idea of a G-d that exists is illogical. Finally, an atheist can state that there is evidence against the existence of G-d. The evidence used for this argument is that if an all powerful, benevolent G-d existed, then why is there evil and suffering in the world? So, since there is evil, hunger and suffering in the world, then G-d isn't all good or all powerful.

The following are usually accepted as the basic tenets of atheism:

- 1) There exists no supernatural, spirit or deity named G-d
- 2) Miracles are not possible.
- 3) Morality, ethics and values are relative.
- 4) Science enables us to study our materialistic world.

What is Agnosticism?

An agnostic is someone who claims that we cannot prove or disprove, based on current scientific methodology, the existence of G-d. The critical element needing to be understood here is that an agnostic denies the existence of knowledge to prove or disprove the existence of G-d. The agnostic is however willing to consider the existence of G-d if we can prove with evidence that such a deity exists. The challenge here is to prove to the agnostic, using logic and empirical evidence that G-d exists.

Christianity

Christianity includes the following divisions:

- 1) Roman Catholicism
- 2) Eastern Orthodoxy
- 3) Protestantism

Christianity is said to be a historical religion based on actual, historical events surrounding the life of a Jewish carpenter who was born in a stable, lived until the age of 33 and who was baptized. According to some historians, Jesus is referred to as the most influential historical figure in Western civilization. Jesus taught that G-ds greatest attribute was compassion and the social barriers distinguishing common people at the time was an affront to this principle. In his life, Jesus fulfilled acts of goodness and he manifested “divine goodness.” Jesus’ followers believed that he was G-d in human form—but not until after his death and resurrection. Following the crucifixion it is believed that his followers were convinced that death did not prevent him from rising – and that beginning with Easter Sunday he revealed himself to the people.

Jesus was now revered as G-d and could be known and experienced by anyone anywhere. Although the human form of Christ departed from the physical world he would continue to reveal himself to humanity through the Church. The word Christ is actually a description, deriving from the Greek word “Christos” which means “the anointed one.” The Doctrine of the Incarnation declares that in Christ G-d assumed a human body—it affirms that Christ was G-d Man; being both G-d and man. For Christians Jesus was G-d incarnate.

He advocated to see things differently and was encouraged that people of the time would change and become compassionate. Jesus taught to resist evil behavior by any means and to love our enemies. His ministry reached out to sinners and the marginalized—and he was known to challenge religious authorities; he preached tolerance love and faith. Jesus was known to define himself as the Messiah and as a result—he made enemies in his time. He emphasized G-ds overwhelming love of humanity and the need for people to accept that love; to let it transform our lives and let it transmit to others. Jesus declared that the kingdom of G-d was within man—and that the most noble and worthy mission for humanity was to love all; to have compassion for the sick and poor—to repent for our sins and seek salvation for our soul. Jesus himself experienced G-d as infinite love. For Jesus, G-d loves human beings absolutely; without evaluating their human worth. Remember that Christianity is a linear faith—meaning that followers are socially obligated to perfect humanity through performing kind deeds for humanity. Jesus lived a life of humility and absolute self-giving. Followers of Christianity believe that good will ultimately overcome evil.

Roman Catholicism

The Church is seen as the teaching authority and G-d appeared to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ to teach humanity the way to salvation. Eventually this formed the concept of papal infallibility and understanding of the pope as the head of the Church. The pope is considered infallible in faith and morals—and does not suggest that he possesses the answer to every complex or difficult question. The Roman Catholic Church is structured as an authoritative hierarchy—with the Pope being the head of the Roman Catholic Church—and who lives in Rome at the Vatican. Cardinals are appointed by the pope and they constitute the advisory board of the Church. At the passing of a pope, the College of Cardinal elects his successor.

It is understood that the apostles of Jesus established the early Christian Church, and in 313 the Roman Catholic Church was officially recognized by the Roman Emperor Constantine. In 380 it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. In terms of population, Roman Catholics represent the largest group among Christians; with over one billion followers worldwide living in Central and Southern Europe, Latin America and Ireland.

In 1054 the Eastern Orthodox Church separated itself from the Roman Catholic Church. This schism emerged because the Eastern Orthodox Church’s refusal to confirm the primacy of the Pope. The other schism surfaced in the sixteenth century with the Protestant Reformation.

Beliefs and Practices

The basic beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church can be summarized in the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became a man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

There are other basic Christian doctrines that Roman Catholics honor, including the Trinity of G-d: with the trinity consisting of G-d, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Further, Roman Catholicism is anchored in faith “what moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason; we believe because of the authority of G-d himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.”

According to Roman Catholicism the concept of original sin means that human beings are inherently sinful--- thus man needs to be saved. Original sin derives from the story of Adam and Eve in the Old Testament Book of Genesis. Jesus Christ died on the cross atoning for our sins—thus assuring Roman Catholics an eternal life with G-d in heaven. Salvation is gained through G-d’s grace--- and the sacraments are a vehicle for sustaining grace. The seven Sacraments are: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Marriage.

Protestantism

Approximately two-thirds of Christians are considered Protestants and the Protestant faith separated itself from the Catholic Church in Europe in the 16th century. Reportedly, the Protestants objected to the practice of seeking a pathway to G-d through the Pope – declaring that each human being was responsible for creating his/her own relationship with G-d without passage through the Pope and the Catholic Church. Eventually the Protestants created denominations within Protestantism which included Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and the United Church of Christ.

Protestants believe that each individual, and not the Church is the significant element in religious life. The European Protestants reinforced this belief—acknowledging that no single Church or entity is necessarily the entity everyone needs to attend and worship. Interestingly, one can consider this understanding to be the precursor to the separation of Church and state.

Common Elements in Protestantism

In all of the Protestant denominations the one prevailing idea that has influenced American culture is the value of self-improvement. Given that human beings sin, one may seek forgiveness from G-d. Further, the Protestant Work Ethic began to be deeply imbedded into American culture with its focus on achieving prosperity through self-discipline and hard work. In part, America owes the birth of the Industrial revolution to hard working Americans. Protestants considered all forms of work performed by Americans as worthy and holy. Protestants expect their followers to be humanitarian by donating money to charitable organizations and sustaining the poor and disenfranchised.

Denominations of Protestantism

The common thread across the Protestant denominations is respect for individual experience and group autonomy. Thus, the expression “the priesthood of all believers” honors this credo which asserts that all people, the farmer, factory worker and lay public have equal access to G-d.

The Methodist Church was founded by the English cleric John Wesley and this faith emphasizes repentance and individual faith, in addition to holding followers responsible for improving society. Methodism is one of the largest Protestant denominations in America.

Baptists are the largest Protestant denomination in America—and as a faith it places much emphasis on New Testament passages that direct attention on the importance on being “born again” and they treat Jesus as Savior.

The Major Christian Holidays

The following represents a brief description of Christian rituals and celebrations; reviewing what the holiday means and how it is observed.

Lent

The season of Lent offers one the opportunity to repent and fast—serving as spiritual welcoming of Easter. The first day of Lent is observed on Ash Wednesday—marked as the seventh Wednesday before Easter. Christians ritually smudge ashes on their forehead to remind humanity of our mortality and acknowledgment of dust to dust.

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday marks the last Sunday before Easter where Christians reflect on the suffering Jesus experienced.

Good Friday

The death of Jesus is remembered on the Friday before Easter. One may observe this day by fasting or other penitential practices such as meditating on the stations of the cross.

Easter

The most important holiday for Christians is Easter—where one celebrates the resurrection of Jesus following his crucifixion; and asserting one’s rebirth by his/her connection with the risen Christ.

Christmas

Christmas is celebrated on December 25th, before Epiphany and it represents the birth of Christ. Christians exchange gifts during this holiday—and the observance of Christmas did not begin until about the 4th century C.E.

Christmas is also celebrated as a secular as well as religious holiday. As a religious holiday, Christians practice generosity, gratitude and kindness during this time.

Epiphany

Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th and it symbolizes the Wise Men visiting the newborn Jesus—and this story is in the Gospel of Matthew. Epiphany has also been described as an encounter between a gentile and Jesus.

Judaism is a religion which prescribes through a set of doctrine how Jews should live their lives. With regard to whether the Jews are a race, it is generally agreed that Jews are not a race. Most Jews identify their Jewishness in terms of a culture or ethnic group.

The Bible states that human beings were created in the image of G-d. To avoid any misunderstanding, humanity was not created in the physical image of G-d because for Jews G-d is incorporeal—having no physical appearance. The word image as it is used to describe humanity refers to the essence and or nature of something. Further, G-d created in man two impulses which are goodness and evil. The impulse to do good is driven by the moral conscience and the impulse for evil is driven by our selfish desires to indulge and ignoring how our behaviors affect others. In Judaism Satan did not create evil. The good and evil impulse are internal to an individual meaning that one who behaves in an evil way cannot blame an external agent for their unacceptable, evil behavior.

In Judaism the existence of G-d is a logical necessity for the existence of the universe; thus concluding that the universe is evidence of the existence of G-d. Jews hold that there is only one Almighty G-d who created the world. G-d is a single, indivisible entity without any human attributes and is infinite. G-d has no body and Jews are forbidden to create statues or other objects intended to represent G-d. For Jews, G-d is omnipresent—in all places at all times and he is available and near to us at all times. The G-d of the Jews is the G-d for all humanity. G-d is also omnipotent—meaning he can do anything and he is omniscient; knowing all of the past, present and the future. Jews also view G-d as eternal, meaning that he transcends time; has no beginning and end. Finally, G-d knows what human beings are thinking all the time.

There are three elements that make Judaism a living religion: G-d, Torah and Israel. The G-d of Judaism is the one and only G-d who created heaven and earth and who gave the Torah to Moses; who directs our lives; infusing it with the capacity for mercy and justice. For the Jews, Torah refers to G-ds revelation to the holy people of Israel, through Moses at Mount Sinai when he received the Torah. Judaism holds that the Torah was revealed by G-d not just in written form but also in oral form. The oral tradition refers to the teachings transmitted from sage or master to student or disciple—from Moses to Joshua and to other great students. A famous sage named Hillel lived around the time of Jesus is credited for crafting a form of the Golden Rule: “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to anybody else” Judaism proposes some theological dogma such as: the belief that the Torah was revealed by G-d, G-d is manifest in the Torah and that G-d wants humanity’s love expressed as “You will love the Lord your G-d with all your heart.” Jews believe that man was not self-created—meaning that humankind derived from an entity other than itself and that man’s power is limited.

The Jewish people are credited with establishing monotheism—the belief in one G-d because they could not divide their loyalties between more than one G-d. With regard to attaining meaning in life, the Jews believed that this journey toward meaning could only be fulfilled through enduring life’s challenges and leading righteous lives through performing commandments to perfect humanity. Like Christianity Judaism obligates its followers to perform acts of kindness to repair the world—which is termed “Tikkun Olam” in Hebrew. So, Judaism is a faith of progress—a linear one making each adherent responsible for perfecting ourselves and the world.

The G-d of Judaism revealed himself to mankind through action—although it was also in words; it was primarily in action beginning with leading the Jews out of bondage in Egypt and protecting his people. For the Jews, G-ds goodness and ultimate power is expressed through the Ten Commandments. Israel is defined as the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. With regard to practices and rituals, Judaism incorporates these elements like other religions to assist its followers through life’s difficulties—with the focus being on the process; evident in sayings/adages such as “ashes to ashes” and “dust to dust.”

The Messiah

The Jews are considered an expectant people—because of their historical struggles and ultimately prevailing over their oppressors; they are waiting for the Messiah. The word Messiah means “the anointed one.” According to the Torah references, the Messiah will be a great political leader who is a descendant of King David (Jeremiah 23:5). One can expect that the Messiah will be a righteous human being who understands Jewish law, is observant and who fulfills G-ds commandments. The Messiah may also be a military leader or a great judge. He will not however be a G-d or a supernatural human being. How do we know when the Messiah has arrived? It is difficult to predict when the Messiah will appear on earth. Scholars believe that G-d has a date in mind for when the

Messiah will come. The Messiah may come when humanity loses hope that conditions can improve—such as when sin and war prevail on earth the Messiah will come to alter these conditions. With regard to the treatment of Jesus, Jews do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Denominations in Judaism

In Judaism there are denominations: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist and Humanistic

Reform Judaism emerged in mid-19th century Europe and, of the three denominations is considered to exercise the greatest autonomy when interpreting the Torah. In contrast to Orthodox Judaism and its absolute, literal and fundamental interpretation of the Torah, the Reform movement rejects strict adherence and interpretation of the dictates of the laws of Torah. Reform Jews believe that the Torah was not only written by G-d but by other sources and it remains an inspiration to all Jews. In sum, the Reform movement attempts to retain Judaic life by modifying their meaning and practice in contemporary times.

Conservative Judaism strikes a balance between the Reform and Orthodox movements. Although these Jews do not strictly adhere to tradition, they retain a strong commitment to honor past practices and halakhah (Jewish Law), and when necessary they adapt law to contemporary times.

Orthodox Judaism is the literal, fundamental practice of their faith. These Jews are unswerving to the written law and Torah. Orthodoxy is strongly committed to preserving rituals and doctrine, and not taking liberty to reinterpret law in efforts to adapt to contemporary culture. Thus, Orthodox Judaism is uncompromising in relation to its degree of conformity to Torah and halakhah.

Reconstructionist Judaism believe that Judaism is a faith that continually evolves. These Jews reject the idea of a personified deity and that Jews are G-ds chosen people. Reconstructionist Jews observe Jewish rituals and practices because of their cultural importance and less so due to their religious meaning.

Humanistic Judaism, created in 1963 by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine in Michigan is a nontheistic approach to Jewish life. These Jews lead a meaningful Jewish life in a secular way and emphasize humanistic elements such as pursuing their fullest, creative and unique human expression rooted in their secular Jewish roots.

The Jewish Holidays

Yom Kippur

The holiest holiday for the Jewish people is Yom Kippur. On this day of atonement, Jews refrain from work and attend synagogue services. Yom Kippur means “Day of Atonement” and it is a day Jews atone for sins they have committed in the past year, to repent and ask G-d for forgiveness. On this day, one fasts for 24 hours, not eating or drinking. For some Jews, they also refrain from bathing, wearing leather shoes, using cosmetics and engaging in sex. In some cases, these restrictions do not apply should someone’s health status be compromised.

Rosh Hashanah

The holiday Rosh Hashanah means “Head of the Year” and is commonly known as the Jewish New Year. In contrast to the American New Year, it is not celebrated in the same way by staying up until midnight and enjoying a party. For Jews, it is a time to reflect on the past year and look to modifying one’s life in a positive way in the new year. In the synagogue for services, a shofar is blown to symbolize a call to repentance. The shofar is a ram’s horn which is blown like a trumpet. On Rosh Hashanah, Jews are prohibited from working. Jews do not fast for this holiday and a common tradition is to eat apples dipped in honey to symbolize having a sweet new year. Another common practice during this holiday is called Tashlikh which means “casting off” our sins. Jews usually find a river, lake or flowing water on the afternoon of the first day of the holiday and empty their pockets in the body of water. It is a gesture to symbolize the casting away of our sins.

Passover

Passover is probably one of the most observed Jewish holidays. It contains primarily historical and agricultural significance because it represents the beginning of the harvest season in the land of Israel. The historical significance is related to the exodus of the enslaved Jewish people from Egypt. The name Pesach means “Pass Over” or to spare.

In biblical history, it means G-d passed over the houses of the Jews when he slayed the first born of the Egyptians. In Hebrew Passover is spelled Pesach and it also refers to the sacrificial offering of a lamb that was made in the Temple during this holiday. During this holiday, Jews remove leavened items from their home. The significance of this procedure is to remind us when the Jews left Egypt they did not have time to allow their bread to rise. On the first night of Passover, we have a special meal called a Seder, which carries much significance in terms of the food items placed on the Seder plate. Passover lasts seven days during which time we eat Matza unleavened bread.

Rambam's 13 Principles of Faith

Rambam was a physician born in Moorish Cordoba and lived from 1135 to 1204 C.E. He lived in Spain, the Middle East and North Africa. He is credited with writing the Mishneh Torah, a book of the codes of Jewish law.

1. G-d exists
2. G-d is one and unique
3. G-d is incorporeal
4. G-d is eternal
5. Prayer is to be directed to G-d alone
6. The words of the prophets are true
7. Moses was the greatest prophet, and his prophecies are true
8. The Torah was given to Moses
9. There will be no other Torah
10. G-d knows the thoughts and deeds of men
11. G-d will reward the good and punish the wicked
12. The Messiah will come
13. The dead will be resurrected

The Ten Commandments

1. I am the Lord your G-d
2. You shall not recognize the G-d of others in My Presence
3. You shall not take the Name of the Lord your G-d in vain
4. Remember the day of Shabbat to keep it holy
5. Honor your father and your mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. Do not give false testimony against your neighbor
10. You shall not covet your fellow's possessions

Differences Between Christianity and Judaism

- 1) In Judaism G-d is pure spirit, eternally transcendent and there exists no notion of corporeality. Christianity asserts that G-d became man in the form of Jesus.
- 2) Judaism is committed to ethical monotheism. Christianity subscribes to the belief in the Trinitarian nature of the Divine Being; the belief in and worship of G-d, Son and Holy Spirit.
- 3) The Christian Doctrine of Original Sin suggests that sin rules man and in Judaism man rules sin. Although Jews admit that sin exists and the Torah recognizes that man is inherently tempted to sin—
- 4) man can resist temptation to sin and sin does not rule man. Christians believe that to gain liberation from Original Sin a special act of grace is needed—of the sort given by Jesus' sacrificial death which atoned for the sins of mankind. Judaism teaches that G-d infused in man the capacity for being good and evil; and that without freedom to sin there would not exist the freedom to act ethically or righteously.
- 5) Judaism declares that G-d is available and near every human being and Christianity teaches that G-d is reached through Jesus the Son of G-d.

Educating our children about religion can be challenging because of its abstract nature. However, one of the principle ideas parents must convey to their children is that different culture and ethnic groups have their own name for G-d. It may be a unique image of G-d, where their G-d can be found, and their own understanding of how human beings communicate with G-d. The overarching idea here is that experiencing G-d may be a highly personal, sacred process different than our own.

Science and Religion

As you know, we have a great understanding of the physical world, the world we can see, touch and smell, and to a lesser extent, an attitude or understanding of the not so visible world which we call the ineffable; the world beyond what we can see. This understanding naturally leads to the comparison between science and religion. We need to teach children the difference between science and religion. The enterprise of science is the practice of gathering objective data/facts, knowledge and developing theories to help humans control and predict the outcome of their lives, and the occurrence of social events in the social world. Science is an experimental process, a rational process for understanding the mysteries of the world. What we do not understand suggests that there are limits to science.

Religion, in comparison, needs to be explained to Jewish children as being an essential element in their lives. It is sort of needed for human survival and it serves a vital function in their lives. Children need to be taught that it isn't an issue of believing in religion or science; rather it is an opportunity to harmonize science and religion; to develop an understanding that can accommodate both revelation and the truth of science. The tendency is to polarize things in the world; meaning it has to be one or the other. As parents we need to stress that accepting both is the preferred attitude to adopt. We can explain that science teaches us how the world works and Judaism (our faith) teaches us how to act, determine what is and isn't important and what to hope for in the world.

The Sociological Attitude Toward Religion

Religion is an institution which provides meaning through a set of beliefs, practices, and rituals that are defined as sacred. It is an institution of shared beliefs and practices created by human beings as a response to forces that they cannot understand rationally and that they believe give ultimate meaning to their lives. Parents need to explain to their children that Judaism is their culture group and that it unites them as a vital, proud people sharing a common heritage, history, and G-d. In addition, a whole system of belief is available to them to honor and practice which inspires them to do good in the world. The essential element conveyed here is that Judaism is a faith of action—and that our G-d is a G-d of action who performs miracles.

Another emphasis parents must convey is that Judaism compels us to ask how does my religion function in my life. Judaism functions to provide us with certainty in an uncertain world; it provides us with the propensity to do good, to hope, pray, experience consolation, feel inspired and renewed, and it provides us with compassion and hope as we face life's disappointments. This explanation of the function of Judaism focuses on what religion does for the child/individual rather than what religion is. I am not suggesting that we de-emphasize educating our children about what Judaism, but educating our children about both aspects of their faith is the desired objective.

Children may struggle accepting that despite having an all loving, caring, understanding and everpresent G-d, there still exist uncertainties in the world. Again, human beings cannot explain why certain tragedies and unspeakable events occur in the world. Our reliance on science may explain why physical events such as a tsunami or earthquake occurs and thousands of lives may be lost. However, we're more at a loss justifying explanations for why bad things happen to good people. Children need

to understand that Judaism provides us with ways for dealing with the unknown and that we need to sustain our faith and belief in an all loving G-d. We undoubtedly learn and come to painfully accept that we don't understand everything. Other examples of events we cannot understand include untimely deaths or evil in the world.

Helping Children Develop a Belief in G-d

The sustainability of our child's belief in G-d comes from parents reinforcing that what we believe about G-d affects how we live our lives, how we view ourselves, others, and the world. Children must be taught that as Jews, we need to model through our behaviors our Jewishness; activating our desire to help the less fortunate, to be charitable, do acts of kindness, be trustworthy, faithful, and honor the Ten Commandments. By doing so, we demonstrate to our children our trust in the goodness of the world and in how each of us can make a difference in the world. It demonstrates to children that we are not alone, that G-d commands us to behave in this honorable way. It also consistently reminds our children that life happens at the level of individual movement—right, ethical action creates goodness. The cultural glue uniting all Jews is their duty to action—which reinforces we all belong and are anchored to our Judaism. By aligning our values and attitudes with G-d's expectations of us, we are reminding our children that Judaism obligates us to socially conform to G-d's precepts to lead a righteous life. All of these elements remind children that they are significant instruments of change in the world; that they matter to others and they have the power to make others feel like they matter. Parents need to remind their children that they are never alone in the world; that G-d is and will always be present in their life and that G-d loves them absolutely.

Another parental role includes parents sharing that they themselves have an absolute and unwavering belief and confidence in the existence of G-d. We start by describing how this wonderful world, with all of its grand design and order could not have come to be without a master Creator. Here, we can begin explaining that some scientific evidence may exist for explaining how the world came to be, and we can offer other theories accounting for the advent of humanity and civilization (Darwinism, the Big Bang Theory, etc.) It's perfectly fine to introduce competing theories explaining the origins of humankind. However, reinforce that Jews believe that G-d created us in his image and that it represents acceptance with unwavering faith. Faith is what drives Jews to be good; to be moral and challenged to do commandments. Parents need to teach children to be good, and to believe in G-d means to believe in a G-d who asks us to be good to one another.

As parents, we need to teach and inculcate in our children the belief that what we do in this world and in their lifetime is the real measure of a righteous life. By teaching our children how to behave morally, to fulfill commandments and help the needy we instill in them feelings of worthiness, security, and we help them develop a positive self-image. Furthermore, as parents we must remind our children that they were created in the image of G-d. Being created in the image of G-d does not mean that G-d has a body. As difficult as it may seem, we need to explain to our children that being created in G-d's image means that they are unique human beings; it speaks to their particularities, their unique and creative talents, their special and unduplicated private self, that special spark and gem that contributes to their total unique being and identity, to that special soul within them. The Baal Shem Tov said "There are no doubles" and G-d intended it to be that way—no two human beings are alike.

It may be difficult convincing young children of the observable, concrete and physical presence of G-d. In other words, we cannot get our telescope and look far into the heavens and find G-d, with a long, gray beard, righteous and sitting in a large armchair pondering things. According to Judaism, G-d is nonphysical. This however does not mean or should it suggest that G-d is invisible. G-d is not invisible because invisible implies that G-d has a body which we cannot see. The preferred thinking is that G-d is intangible, without form. Further, G-d is neither female or male. To be male or female suggests a body, and remember, G-d is nonphysical; G-d has no body. One way you can begin to explain this concept to your children is to use the following analogy. Ask your child where love is. He/she may not be able to point to love. All we know is that love is also intangible. We can feel it and know it is a powerful force in our lives; but it isn't located in any one area. So, G-d, like love, works through all of us

The goal is to help your children focus on what G-d does—how he is a G-d of action and Judaism is a faith of movement. With regard to questions such as where did G-d come from, parents can respond with G-d has no parents. G-d was not created but is the chief architect-- Creator; and that G-d always was and always will be present in the world. In Judaism G-d has always been, G-d is, and G-d will always be.

Buddhism developed in India in response to opposition to Hinduism because it rejected the caste system which was authoritative. Despite this division both faiths share similar beliefs such as reincarnation, karma, Nirvana and the notion of absolute liberation. The word “Buddha” is a title meaning “one who is awake.” It was ascribed to Siddhartha Guatama in Nepal about 2,500 years ago. Buddha did not identify himself as a deity or G-d, just as human being who became enlightened; fully and deeply understanding life.

Buddhism is described as a practice of meditation leading to spiritual insight and a path to the true nature of life. The ultimate goals of meditation are to change oneself to become more kind, aware and attain wisdom. The path toward these goals can be viewed as attaining Enlightenment or Buddhahood.

Buddhism has no conception of a deity or G-d and for this reason it is commonly not viewed as a religion.

The tenets of Buddhism include the understanding that nothing is fixed or permanent, all human actions have consequences and that change is possible. In terms of population, there are approximately 350 million in Buddhists in the world and the number of Buddhists in the Western world is increasing.

In the 6th century B.C.E. Siddhartha Guatama was born. He was the son of a wealthy and powerful ruler of a kingdom near the Indian-Nepalese border and he was a member of a royal family. History says that an old sage foretold that this prince would one day become either an ascetic or a supreme monarch. Siddhartha’s father protected him from unfavorable influences and expected him to become a great warrior. Thus, the father isolated Siddhartha in the palace and nurtured him, providing him with ultimate luxury in living accommodations. The father desperately wanted his son to be a supreme monarch.

Siddhartha eventually married at age 29 and became a father. One day he left the palace and while on his journey he discovered old age, illness and death. Siddhartha wanted to become a wandering holy man in search of the truth. This experience revealed to him that other common people suffered. During his journey in his chariot, he asked his chariot driver why a man was smiling, looking content and peaceful. The chariot driver responded that the man they saw was a holy man, one who had achieved complete liberation. Following this experience, Siddhartha realized he had been living luxuriously and desired to reject his lifestyle—realizing he was leading an empty, distorted, non-spiritual existence. Siddhartha decided to become a holy man himself and he pursued a life of deprivation and asceticism. He subsequently left the palace and his family to search and gain liberation. Siddhartha began to fast and practice physical deprivation. He decided to learn and practice meditating and chose to become an ascetic. He became so austere and almost died once. After realizing this practice would not lead to enlightenment and true, deep understanding, he decided to abandon this path and become more introspective and self-reflective.

One day while sitting under a Bodhi tree he decided not to move until he had achieved genuine liberation. After forty days he became enlightened and following this experience he declared that all human beings can achieve enlightenment. This experience of total enlightenment did not come to him through divine revelation but through self-discovery resulting from deep, genuine meditation. During his life the Buddha traveled through northern India teaching to achieve Enlightenment. Buddhism encourages people to liberate themselves from their distorted perceptions about their life—from habitual patterns of living that result in faulty and irrational lifestyles; and from disowning habits such as anger, desire and ignorance.

The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha taught these four noble truths:

- 1) Life is suffering—that the very nature of human existence is painful; given that the cyclical nature is composed of death and rebirth and that death does not end suffering
- 2) The understanding that suffering has a cause which is craving and attachment—suffering derives from our selfish craving which derives from our ignorance of what we need in life.

- 3) Craving and attachment can be overcome when we transcend our cravings and desires through entering a state of Nirvana-- this is when suffering will end.
- 4) The journey toward ending craving and attachment is an eightfold one or the Middle Way:
 - a) Right Understanding
 - b) Right Thought
 - c) Right Speech
 - d) Right Action
 - e) Right Livelihood
 - f) Right Effort
 - g) Right Mindfulness
 - h) Right Concentration

The reason the above are described as the Middle Way is because doing so avoids the polarity or two extremes of indulgence. According to Buddhism human it is only when human beings are not leading lives of self-indulgence that they can master clarity of the mind in their search for truth. The pursuit of the Middle Way consists of developing virtue, meditation and wisdom.

Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood represent training in virtue and morality. To achieve these virtues Buddhists honor these five precepts and avoid:

- 1) deliberately causing the death of any living organism
- 2) taking someone else's property for your own
- 3) sexual misconduct; including committing adultery
- 4) lying and not honoring promises made to others
- 5) ingesting alcohol or other substances which pollute and compromise mindfulness

Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration constitute the practice of meditation. According to the Buddha, meditation purifies the mind and leads to breakthrough experiences; moments of deep insight and awareness; empowering human beings to truly capture the meaning and purpose of their lives.

Buddhist Quotes and Aphorisms to Interpret

The greatest achievement is selflessness
 The greatest worth is self-mastery
 The greatest quality is seeking to serve others
 The greatest precept is continual awareness
 The greatest medicine is the emptiness of everything
 The greatest action is not conforming with the world's ways
 The greatest magic is transmuting the passions
 The greatest generosity is non-attachment
 The greatest goodness is a peaceful mind
 The greatest patience is humility
 The greatest effort is not concerned with results
 The greatest meditation is a mind that lets go
 The greatest wisdom is a mind that lets go
 The greatest wisdom is seeing through appearances -- by Atisha

You can explore the universe looking for somebody who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and you will not find that person anywhere.

--- The Buddha

In what is seen, there should be just the seen;
 In what is heard, there should be just the heard;

In what is sensed, there should be just the sensed;
 In what is thought, there should be just the thought.

He should not kill a living being, nor cause it to be killed, nor should he incite another to kill. Do not injure any being, either strong or weak in the world.

--- The Dhammapada

Things are not what they appear to be; nor are they otherwise.

--- Surangama Sutra

The beauty of life is, while we cannot undo what is done, we can see it, understand it, learn from it and change so that every new moment is spent not in regret, guilt, fear or anger but in wisdom, understanding and love.

--- Jennifer Edwards

Islam is considered the world's second largest faith and the majority of the world's one billion Muslims are Asian and African. The largest Muslim communities are in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Central Asia and Nigeria. Muslims admit that biblical prophets such as Moses and Jesus existed, and that they received revelations from G-d. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam had its birth in the Middle East where Moses, Jesus and Mohammad were born. Islam spread throughout the world and it embraces people from many races.

The word Islam means "peace" and "submission" to G-d. Muslims believe in practicing peace and compassion; and from an early age children are reared to understand these virtues. Muslims perform daily prayer, are concerned and assist the poor, and they assign an importance to being with community and family. Islam reflects a way of life and every Muslim is considered a members of a world community of believers called the "ummah" – and are collectively held together by their common faith in G-d and his prophets.

As in Judaism and Christianity Islam has denominations such as the Sunni Muslims who compose 85% of Muslims and the Shii (Shiite) who compose 15% of the Muslim world. Despite their differences, all Muslims share a common faith in Allah (G-d and the teachings of Mohammad). Muslims hold that Mohammad held special messages for the people and he revealed G-ds will to the people. This message is in the form of their scripture called the Koran. Muslims believe in the notion of one creator, G-d who is the sustainer and judge of all. Muslims assert that G-ds will was revealed to many prophets and messengers like Adam, Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jesus—and then to Mohammad who is considered the last prophet.

Mohammad was born in Mecca and lived from 570 – 632 C.E. Mecca was a cultural and commercial center in Arabia at the time. He was an orphan raised by his uncle, and he worked as a caravan manager. Mohammad traveled quite a bit and eventually met and married a woman named Khadjia. He is considered to have been happily married and was respected as a successful business man in the community—known for his honesty. Mohammad was sought by others in the community to settle disputes. At times, he was seen meditating and reflecting on meaningful issues. At the age of 40 he had a powerful experience that would alter his life forever. He was alone one day reflecting and meditating when he heard a voice commanding him to "Recite." Mohammad was confused, not knowing where the voice was originating from. He responded that he had nothing to recite. The angel Gabriel again insisted he recite.

Finally, the words came—recite in the name of your Lord who created man out of a germ cell; recite for your Lord is the Most Gracious One Who revealed to man what he was blind to. This experience would later affect the lives of millions of people in the world. Mohammad advised everyone to repent their sinful ways, seek out and worship the one true G-d. Mohammad received these messages for 22 years before his death at the age of 62. Mohammad was said to have served as the moral conscience of his community, cautioning everyone that G-d would judge people for practicing social injustices. Islam has no Church and their religious scholars are called Ulama. Man either receives eternal reward in heaven or received punishment in hell; depending on whether one adhered to G-ds laws.

All Muslims share the basic beliefs called the Five Pillars of Islam

The First Pillar

In this pillar one must proclaim their faith: "There is no G-d but G-d and Mohammad is the prophet of G-d" Mohammad was G-ds messenger. Similar to Jews and Christians Muslims believe that G-d communicates to man through prophets. The Koran was revealed to Mohammad and it contains the final, absolute message from G-d.

The Second Pillar

This pillar is worship, which is termed Salat. Muslims worship five times daily—at designated times throughout the day and night they stop to face Mecca and worship G-d. Muslim may pray alone or in a group and prayer consists of reciting prayers from the Koran.

The Third Pillar

Almsgiving, which is called Zakat is a social obligation Muslims practice that reinforces the virtue of community and responsibility. Islam holds that since G-d is the creator of the world—all wealth belongs to him. Human beings are

considered caretakers and interested in earning wealth which can be offered as charity. Charity is encouraged and anyone financially able should donate to the less fortunate.

The Fourth Pillar

If physically able, once a year Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan. It is a time designated for personal reflection and to exercise discipline. It is also a time to thank G-d for his blessings, to repent and atone for one's sins—to discipline the body and strengthen moral character. For one month each day. From dawn to dusk Muslims abstain from eating or drinking. At the conclusion of Ramadan, the 27th day there is a Feast of Breaking the Fast where worshippers eat and exchange gifts.

The Fifth Pillar

The last pillar is to make a pilgrimage or "Haji" to Mecca. Every Muslim is obligated to make the pilgrimage once in a lifetime. It is considered to be a dream or mission of one's life. Muslim arrive in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, and during this time they visit the sacred sites. The pilgrimage ends with a great feast and Muslims visit the mosque and tomb of Mohammad in Medina.

During the first half of the 20th century many Blacks converted to Islam. The most prominent of these was Elijah Mohammad who founded the Nation of Islam. He combined the virtue of hard work and a strict moral code—often times asserting Black separatism which was the mission of the Nation of Islam. This denomination established mosques and temples in many undeveloped and poor communities in urban neighborhoods.

After learning of the Nation of Islam Malcolm X converted and in the 1960's he began making pilgrimage to Mecca where he firsthand experienced Islam. However, he returned from these experiences rejecting the notion that the White race was evil. Consequently, Malcolm X broke with Elijah Mohammad and in 1965 he was assassinated at a religious rally. Two members of the Nation of Islam were subsequently charged and convicted of his murder. A number of African-American Muslims, under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan retain the Nation of Islam and its separatist outlook.

Hinduism is considered to be at least 4,000 years old and has about 800 million followers around the world. The unique situation with Hinduism is that it has no specific founder. Hinduism can be said to be quite diverse in its practices—and might be considered an eclectic system or compilation of religions. It has been considered monotheistic, polytheistic and pantheistic. It also is absent of a unified system of beliefs and can be experienced as abstract and metaphysical. Early on some of the nature deities in Hinduism included the sun, moon, Mother Earth, fire, water, river, air, mountains and plants. For sure, it professes honoring moral ideals such as non-violence, truthfulness, friendship, compassion, self-control, purity and generosity. Hinduism can also be defined as a way of life derived from the teachings of ancient sages and scripture. The name Hindu means “Indian” and this faith focuses on achieving freedom from the observed world; on appreciating the diverse ways one can experience the divine.

Hinduism was given birth to about 1,500 years before the time of Jesus. In what is known as Pakistan today, a region named Indus was inhabited by a people that eventually became known as the Indus Valley Civilization. Between 1500 and 1200 B.C.E. the Rig Veda, considered the earliest holy scriptures of Hinduism, was written. In it the idea of heaven and hell was articulated with the understanding that the virtuous would ascend to heaven. At a later time though, Hindus professed that a human spirit, as it pursues perfection, returns several times in differing forms after each death of the physical body. This is referred to in Hinduism as reincarnation. The circle of life referred to reincarnation and it placed importance on one’s individual spiritual development—to earn release from the cycle of birth and death. Interestingly, the Hindu faith asserts that the forces of good and evil contend for man’s soul. The Laws of Manu are the Hindu Ten Commandments which guide social behavior—including customs for marriage and family life, duties of women, norms for daily living how to lead a life of goodness and virtue; which Hindus refer to as Dharma or the right path to virtue. Dharma represents the moral laws of Hinduism—prescribing the do’s and don’ts for living right.

Hinduism early on emphasized the worship of natural entities such as rivers, mountains and animals. These forces were endowed with spiritual powers and the Ganges River held the most sacred power. The Hindu Bible, referred to as Vedas identifies the worship of one Supreme Being, Brahman—the source of all life in the universe. Brahman is unseen—and represents an unknowable, supreme G-d; an abstract concept which is difficult for us to comprehend. The other major deities in Hinduism are Vishnu and Shiva. Vishnu saves and protects man. Shiva is the creator of life; the source of fertility, health and who protects man from his enemies. Man’s soul is termed Atman and it seeks to achieve its highest level after death by suffering and experiencing a number of births and rebirths until the soul reaches moral perfection and is prepared to be with Brahman in heaven. For Hindus the greatest goal in life is for our soul to be released from the daily tribulations and pain of life—which is termed Moksa. Moksa represents the absolute goal of Hindus; the return of the soul after death to Brahman. The concept of Karma refers to the record one accumulates on earth; either good or bad and unlike Christianity, there is no merciful G-d in Hinduism to repent to for our sins. Thus, karma represents the total record of one’s life, including life from earlier reincarnations. The goal is for man to earn more good than bad karma. In one is rewarded with good karma then their soul will likely avoid the cycle of birth and rebirth—and rise to an elevated plane where cycles aren’t present. On the flip side, bad karma send the soul to endless cycles of reincarnation and possibly being reincarnated as a lower animal or lowly insect.

What is heaven? Where is heaven? Our immediate image of heaven include the sky, a celestial sphere and that it is our final destination—our afterlife where we experience eternal happiness. Our conceptions of heaven of course depends on our faith; what it says about the afterlife. Some religions profess heaven contains angels, heroes, demons and G-ds. In Christianity, heaven may represent the place of pre-fallen man where humanity is reunited with G-d in perfect existence. For some religions, gaining entry into heaven is conditional—meaning one has to earn it. If one falls short of leading a virtuous life as defined by their faith, they go to hell for punishment. In some Christian denominations, entrance into heaven is not necessarily conditional on leading a good life—but in believing and accepting G-ds offer of salvation.

In Catholicism, heaven is the plane of G-d the Father, Christ the Son, His Mother, the angels and the Saints. Heaven, according to Catholicism is described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as “Those who die in G-ds grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live forever... This perfect life with G-d... is called heaven. It is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest of human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.” Following death the soul is in a state of “the particular judgment” while the afterlife location is determined. The soul may ascend to heaven after purgatory, directly to heaven or to hell. No individual who dies in state of sin can enter heaven because it is exclusively for the pure. It is commonly believed that most individuals who enter heaven do so through purgatory—where they are purified. Among Protestants, salvation is attained by the grace of G-d and it can be unearned favor. By professing faith in Christ; and not necessarily through leading a virtuous, righteous life one can ask G-d to be forgiven for their sins and be granted eternal life.

Traditional Judaism understands that death is not the final, end of human existence and offers some thoughts on the afterlife. It is understood however, that within Judaism there is no systematic, well defined writings for Jews to grasp the concept of heaven, and thus is open to personal interpretation. In the Torah, it is little mentioned and referenced. One reason is because Judaism is primarily focused on the here and now—on our immediate and current lives. The after life in Hebrew is termed “Olam Ha-Ba. Rabbinic scholars assert that notions of the afterlife developed late in Jewish history and that in the Torah, there are references that those who lived as righteous, virtuous life will be reunited with their loved ones. Individuals who were wicked will not be reunited with their loved ones. Judaism also believes in the resurrection of the dead and it is one of Rambam’s 13 principles. According to Judaism, that the resurrection of the dead will occur during the Messianic age, which is referred to as the World to Come. At the arrival of the Messiah, the dead will be resurrected and the wicked will not. The resurrected will be rewarded by living in a world of peace which they helped to create during their virtuous life.

For the Eastern religions, heaven is de-emphasized and the concept of reincarnation is emphasized. In Buddhism, individuals who carry good karma are reborn in heaven but will not remain in heaven for eternity because after their good karma leaves, they will be reincarnated again. Thus, heaven is not their eternal resting place because they will experience another rebirth and be reincarnated into a different heaven. In Buddhism, heaven is thus a temporary resting plane—and one must escape the cycle of rebirth and achieving enlightenment, which is referred to as Bodhi.

In Islam the concept of heaven is referenced in the Koran as an afterlife in Eden for the righteous; for individuals who fulfilled good deeds in their life. Islam rejects the concept of original sin and believes human beings are pure at birth.

The Hindus believe in reincarnation and they de-emphasize heaven. For Hindus, heaven is a temporary plane until the next rebirth and the desired, permanent state to be achieved is Moksha where the soul is ultimately liberated from the cycle of life and death. It is then possible while in the state of Moksha for one to be reunited with G-d. Entrance into heaven or hell is determined by Yama, the Lord of Death and Chitragupta the karma recorder. Good and bad deeds contribute to either good or bad karma in one’s lifetime.

Do you believe in the theory that human beings are born basically good? If you do are you oversimplifying your conception of humanity by exercising wishful thinking? Perhaps you're holding this theory because it enables you to be comforted knowing we are innately good and don't have the propensity for evil.

If you believe that human beings are basically good, then behavioral expressions of good and evil are prompted by an external or social force. These external or social forces could be described as originating from environmental or economic agents, the negative influence of parents, school, television or other forms of media.

If you believe that human beings are basically well meaning and good, how much expression of evil must one show to shake your faith in humanity's basic goodness? In other words, how many thousands or hundreds of thousand of innocent people need to be murdered?

A percentage of people, such as teachers and parents espouse the belief that human beings are basically good and don't necessarily feel the urgent need to train and teach children how to be decent, good, respectful and obedient children. The rationale here consists of the following proposition: Why teach and train children what comes naturally to them—what they are innately programmed to express?

A percentage of individuals hold that evil derives from an agent external of people—again, from a social force. These individuals identify institutions or social forces in the environment that exert negative influences on individuals and attempt to modify how they pull for undesirable behaviors in individuals rather than focusing on modifying the values and attitudes leading to behavioral patterns characterized as evil—meaning we intervene at the individual level of analysis and seek help for the individual.

Why People Aren't Concerned With Good and Evil

- 1) We don't like reflecting on moral issues because doing so compels us to confront and do something about evil. Remember, once you know someone is evil you may be obligated to do something about it or live with a guilty conscience. Essentially, confronting evil is unpleasant.
- 2) As soon as we confront evil and assume an ethical position we must follow through with a moral judgment/evaluation of the behavior of others. Doing so carries the following unavoidable consequences:
 - a) You subject yourself and are vulnerable to moral scrutiny by others.
 - b) You may be obligated to oppose others people's immoral behavior.

So, to avoid being scrutinized and evaluated by others because we oppose evil and immoral behavior we don't make moral judgments about the evil behavior of others.

The Theological Views of Evil

In our modest attempt to deepen our understanding of good and evil, we must begin by admitting that goodness and evil are abstract concepts that are not absolute. Our eternal anguish connected to living with horrendous evil and accepting that it exists derives from humanity's fundamental need to control our world. The sobering realization for mankind is that evil was inserted into the world by human disobedience of Gods admonishment to not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

We begin by admitting that goodness tends to be behavior that is morally positive and evil is behavior that is morally negative. John Stuart Mill's theory of utilitarianism declared that good is that which provides the greatest happiness for the greatest number. For example, the psychologist Eric Fromm offers the following on good and evil:

Good is all that serves life, evil is all that serves death. Good is reverence for life, and all that enhances life. Evil is all that stifles life, narrows it down, cuts it to pieces. (Fromm, *Creators and Destroyers*)

Further, there is usually no consensus that goodness is intrinsic to human nature—meaning that goodness needs to be socialized through loving parents, the influence of religious teachings, school, etc. In theological terms, one may assert that evil is the result of an imperfect human condition, and that it is an aberration from culture specific norms.

It is unlikely that humanity will ever truly understand or resolve the conflict regarding why an all loving, merciful G-d permits evil. One must concede that although G-d is all loving and powerful, it is not implied that He can do the unimaginable. As much as each of us would like to rewind life and undo past tragedies or unfavorable life events, G-d cannot undo history. It would be out of character for G-d to similarly lie, sin or tempt one to sin. G-d did create humanity in His own image and scripture says that "with G-d all things are possible" (Mt. 19:26). If G-d eliminated evil from the world, He would not be able to achieve His other goals for mankind. Enabling each of us to exercise the freedom to choose to be in a personal, meaningful and loving relationship with Him would not be possible unless He endowed us with free will. If we elect to commune with G-d, we must be free to choose this personal relationship without coercion. In the end, one concludes that human individuals must be free to either love or turn away from G-d—to love or reject Him. Human beings who reject, disobey or act against the will of G-d are capable of committing evil and imposing suffering on others.

A distinction should be made between evil resulting from the actions of free individuals and evil resulting from natural disasters. Human beings are free agents in a world containing laws forbidding the violation of individual rights, and individuals disobeying laws could commit evil acts. Natural catastrophes such as earthquakes or tsunamis inflicting mass loss can be considered evil acts of nature. In some instances, both conditions occur. For example, flooding and loss of life occurs when contractors disregard building codes/regulations and construct homes that falter during a flood or earthquake.

The Christian Perspective of Evil

According to Christianity, G-d is the creator of all. It follows logically then that since evil exists, G-d inserted evil into humanity. Following His creation, G-d was satisfied, appreciating that "all that he had made was very good" (Genesis 1, 31). One can also logically deduce however, an inconsistency. If G-d is all good, He should eliminate evil from the world. It is said G-d is omnipotent, so He has the power to stop it. One can conclude that since G-d doesn't stop evil or remove it from the world, He isn't all good and is unable to stop evil. It is this dilemma that needs to be reconciled in each of us.

For Christians, evil originated from the world of angels who were created by G-d and who were endowed with a free will. The angel Lucifer was one of G-ds cherubs who was indifferent to G-ds demands. In the book of the prophet Ezekiel is a parable about Lucifer:

You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of G-d, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings (Ezekiel, 28, 15-17).

G-d transforms Lucifer into Satan, along with the other angels who rebelled against G-d, and expelled them from heaven. It is said that Lucifer's fall resulted from his desire to be independent of G-d, to disobey and rebel against G-d. Lucifer was a free agent with choice, and since he chose to turn against G-d, it represents the origin of evil. One then deduces from this parable that evil was not created by G-d, but by Satan exercising his free will for the purpose of disobeying G-d. G-d expected his creation to exercise free will to deepen obedience and love for Him. For G-d to be pleased with his creation, He needs to see that humanity chooses to love Him and fulfill his expectations by freely choosing to do so.

In addition, the Apostle Peter warned Christians about Satan, admonishing them to:

"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5,8).

Although it is understood that Satan introduces evil into the world, it is propagated in the world by human beings through sin. Human beings sin because they have not used the freedom of choice granted them by G-d toward ends that are good. Humanity can resist the impulse to transgress and commit evil, but we do not and evil occurs. Further, if G-d extinguished evil individuals from the world, they would not receive the opportunity to repent and reconcile their relationship with G-d. In Ezekiel (33,11) G-d refuses to witness "the death of the wicked" and wants "that they turn from their ways and live." If G-d extinguished evil, He would contradict his professed eternal love for His creation, mankind.

In the Parable of the Weeds, Jesus expresses G-d's attitude toward evil (Matthew 13, 24-43):

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed seeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, "Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?" "An enemy did this," he replied. The servants asked him, "Do you want us to go and pull them up?" "No," he answered, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn"

The commentary on this parable shows that G-d permits the weed to grow next to the wheat, and at the proper time, when the weed can be distinguished from the wheat, it will be pulled out of the ground. In relation to human beings, weeds represent the evil doers who are given the opportunity to change their ways and become wheat. Converting from weed to wheat requires the evil doer to repent and return to G-d.

Let's begin by defining religion as an institution with sociological and psychological functions. I am not writing a persuasive paper, meaning I'm not assuming a position for or against religion or science. I am a mature adult and I know better. Is mature a euphemism for know better? Just read with an open, expansive mind.

So, let's start with a definition of religion. In sociological terms, religion is an institution that provides meaning to our lives through adherence to beliefs, morals, rituals, and practices. Now some of these things are treated as sacred. It appears that these beliefs and practices were created by human beings in response to social forces that they could not comprehend. It was mostly about believing in a reality beyond the perceptible facts in our ordinary life and human experience. I call it a sort of intuitive knowledge or faith because it cannot be verified by conducting an experiment leading to empirical evidence. Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology defined religion as:

"a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, ... which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those that adhere to them."

I suspect that humans created the institution of religion, much like the institution of family, out of a need to impose meaning in their life. If enough mysteries exist in our lives, we need to respond to this unknowable reality. So, religion provides us with ways for dealing with the unknown, invisible reality. Religion can create a sense of certainty in an otherwise uncertain reality. The uncertain reality could be things in our lives we cannot explain, such as the untimely loss of loved ones and the certainty of death. Religion also enables us to give up our despair, fear, and anxiety to a transcendental supernatural deity. This understanding ultimately contributes to our life orientation, or faith consisting of a world beyond what we can see. I call this the ineffable.

Now, let's examine what science does for us. The realistic, objective assessment of our reality is what science so nicely provides for humanity. Science, as an enterprise, allows us to achieve a great understanding of the physical world, the world we can all see, touch and smell. As a model for creating predictability in our lives, science is wonderful. Science is the practice of gathering objective data and facts and generating theories to help us control and predict the outcome of our lives, and the occurrence of social events in the world. Science is an experimental process, a rational, methodical practice for understanding the mysteries of the world. I believe that what we do not understand suggests that there are limits to science or limits to man's intelligence. It's that ineffable thing again. With regard to science and religion, I think this matter needs to be approached in a way that harmonizes both disciplines. In other words, the compelling thing is to assume a view that accommodates revelation and science. Now wouldn't that be a real nice goal? I think some of us will resist integrating both because we have a need to polarize things in the world; meaning it has to be one or the other. In our culture some individuals rely less on religion to create meaning in life while science and rationalism makes great discoveries in our world. Let me summarize this issue with the following: science teaches and explains how the world works and religion teaches us how to act, how to be moral, kind and loving human beings, how to determine what is and isn't important and what to pray for in the world.

I suspect that all religions, from the Western to the Eastern world represent man's search for meaning in life. The majority of the world's faiths attempt to understand a new spiritual reality which they named G-d, Allah or any other sacred name. I like the theory that the creation of religion is a universal phenomenon. An anthropologist named Bronislaw Malinowski, about 80 years ago studied the tribal customs of the Trobriand Islanders, in addition to other tribes on a South Pacific Island. He noticed that different religious activities were performed by the tribes. For example, one tribe practiced lots of magical rituals while others performed little magic. Malinowski realized that one of the tribes was near a calm lagoon where lots of fish were caught. So, his explanation for why this tribe performed fewer magical rituals was because of the plentiful fish and there was no need for rituals to protect the fishermen when they went out to sea. The other tribe, sadly enough, sent out their fishermen only to return with no fish. Malinowski concluded that the tribe having difficulty catching fish performed magical rituals to help them gain some control over uncertain natural forces. So, what's all of this interesting stuff supposed to mean for us? I think it suggests that when life is safe and predictable we are less anxious, fearful and there is less of a need for magic. In other words, as humans become more knowledgeable and develop and master skills to predict the outcome of their life, there is less reliance on magic.

So, it looks like religion or faith provides humans with ways of dealing with the unknown. Do you think religion is essential for human survival? Think about it now. You don't have to agree with me of course. Think about the functions of religion again. The most important ones are the social conformity and identity functions. Social conformity refers to honoring norms, values and morals of society. You know, the virtuous behaviors like not lying,

stealing and harming others. I think research demonstrates that individuals who are religious are less likely to violate laws. In other words, they are not likely to commit crimes and get into trouble with the law because religion encourages it's followers to be kind, moral and to obey the Golden Rule. The identity function enables us to feel connected to a faith that defines who we are as people united by common, shared beliefs and values. The identity function is a real important one because in today's modern society you can easily be identityless. I made up that word. Everyone needs an identity that they can strongly connect with to draw inspiration, meaning and purpose in life. Now there is a supportive function religion plays in our lives. This type of support refers to the consolation, and relief from fear and anxiety at times in our lives. I notice that I become less worrisome and anxious when I pray. How about you?

Alright, well I hope this article enriched your understanding about the functions of religion and science, and how they can be harmonized rather than polarized. As a discipline, science has enabled us to enjoy great advances in medicine, technology and various other fields. In addition, science lets us exercise increased control and predictability in our lives. Religion is just as essential as science for human survival, providing us with purpose and meaning in life, in addition to obligating us to adhere to beliefs and morals to create a more loving and kind world.

