



Comparative Religion


Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Goal for the four-part series

- Enhance inter-faith understanding, dialogue and collaboration with one small step, asking what lies at the core of a religion?
 - Or rephrased, what is the “truth” that is the foundation of a particular religion?
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World-wide religious followers

- 2.3 billion Christians
 - 1.8 billion Muslims
 - 1.1 billion Hindus
 - 520 million Buddhists
 - 20 million Taoists
 - 14 million Jewish
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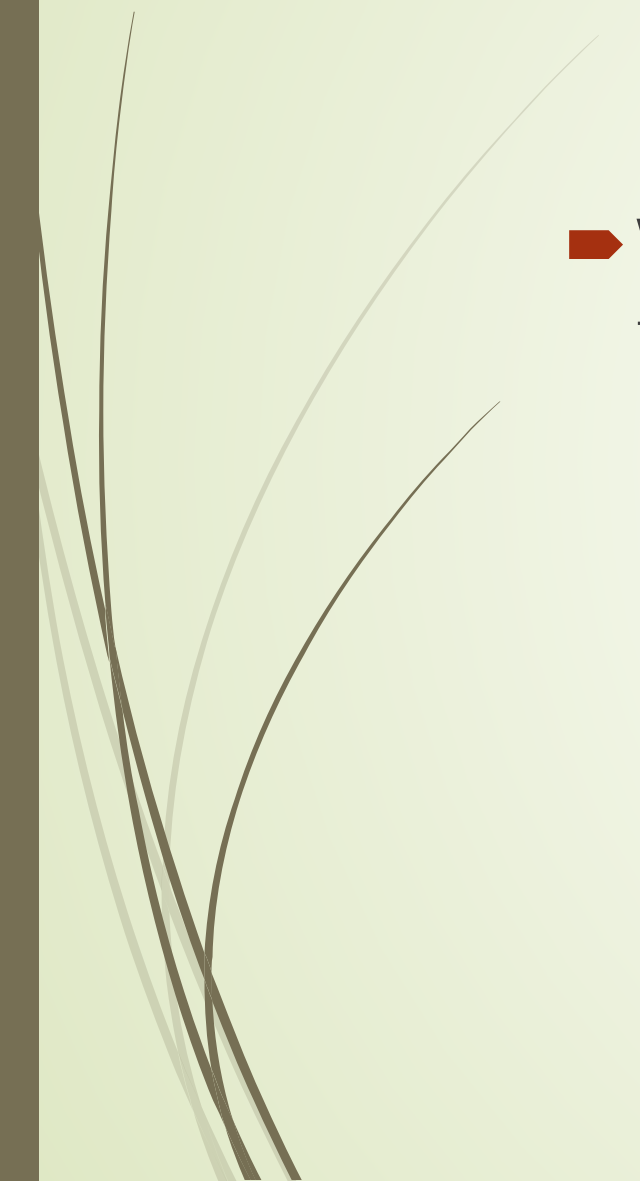


Review: At the heart of the religious quest is a longing and an awareness of transcendence

- There is a much greater and higher reality beyond and within us



Sources of knowledge

- What is the basis for a claim that something is true? Possible foundations for such claims:
 - scientific investigation
 - tradition
 - authority
 - experience
 - revelation
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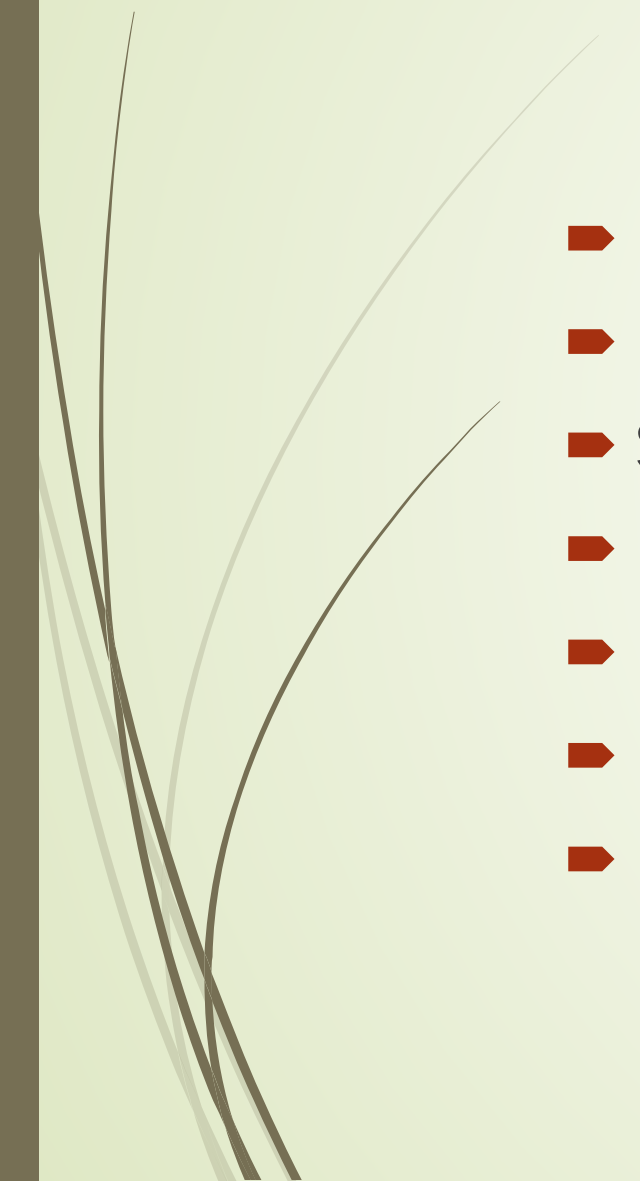
Religion is easily hijacked

- Nationalism
- Tribalism
- False prophets
- Social control

“All faiths in their extreme form carry the possibility of tyranny.” Nick Cohen, *What's Left: How Liberals Lost Their Way*, 361



Components of religion

- Narrative and mythic
 - Rites and Rituals
 - Social and organizational
 - Material (property, finances)
 - Ethical and legal
 - Experiential and emotional
 - Doctrinal and philosophical
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Doctrinal Comparisons and Contrasts

A commonality:

- Revelation as the primary source of religious insight

Differences:

- Concepts of time and history
- Nature of the self: individualism and self-realization vs self-absorption into a higher and more comprehensive reality
- Embodied and disembodied souls
- Conception of the nature of life after this one: permanence or impermanence of oneself



The Problem/The Solution

Problem

- Ignorance
- Shadow existence
- Aimlessness
- Lost
- Quiet desperation
- Meaningless lives
- Chaos
- Despair
- Bondage (enslaved)
- Darkness

Solution

Wisdom
Reality
Direction
Found
Tranquility
Purposeful lives
Order
Hope
Liberation
Light



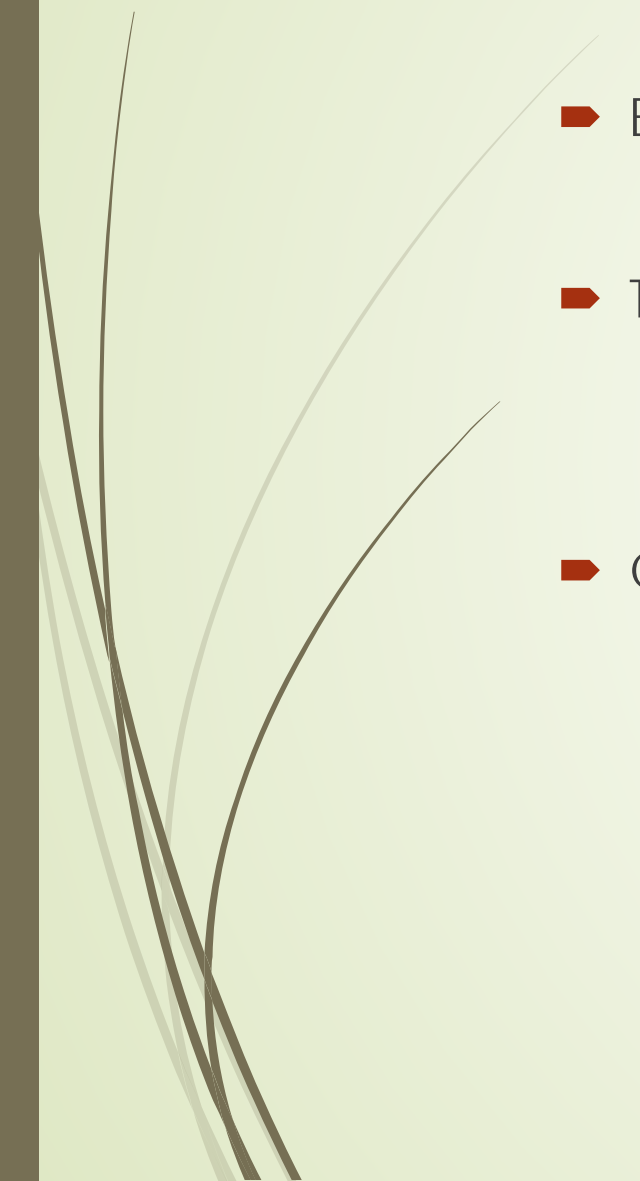
HINDUISM




- The problem:
 - Ignorance, tread mill existence
 - Ignorance is the result of an impure heart and not the lack of intellectual prowess
- The solution:
 - Wisdom. Dharma, is obtained through meditation that purifies the heart
 - Liberation from repeated cycles of births and deaths. "Lead me from the unreal to the real."
 - Ultimate goal: Bliss [that which is considered worth living (and dying) for]




Three Core Beliefs of Hinduism

- Belief in a Supreme Being [Brahman]
 - Brahman does not interact in human lives and takes 3 forms
 - The authority of the Vedas and the Upanishads
 - “Veda” in Sanskrit means “knowledge”
 - The Upanishads are the “revealed” part of Hindu literature
 - Commitment to the concept of dharma [KARMA]
 - What we are today is the result of our actions in the past
 - Each being has its own dharma consistent with its nature
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The Hindu Concept of the Supreme Being

- An ineffable, universal, timeless spirit from which all comes and to which all returns
- The Supreme Being is three in one
 - The Creator: Brahma's main function is to create
 - The Sustainer: Vishnu sustains the created universe
 - The Destroyer: Shiva destroys evil and brings about the next cycle of creation in an endless cycle



Six temptations that keep us in a state of ignorance with an impure heart

- Lust and desire for material possessions
 - Anger
 - Greed
 - Delusion through unrealistic attachment to things, people and power
 - Egotistic pride
 - Jealousy
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The path to knowledge and liberation from repeated cycles of births and deaths

- Recognition that there are no beginnings and no endings. Time is simply a continuum
- The soul is neither created nor destroyed. It is pure, perfect, and holy and takes on various embodiments [transmigration]
- A body is a mere medium. Only the body dies, never the soul
- One must aim to live a dharmic life in order to avoid rebirths so that the soul can merge with the Supreme Soul [Brahman]
- The ultimate goal is to end the suffering and bondage of karma no matter how many lives it takes




The Hindu debate concerning the role of effort in obtaining wisdom and bliss


- The **Cat School**: Requires no effort on the devotee's part. Everything depends upon the Supreme Being. Simply surrender through meditation
- The **Monkey School**: Effort on the part of the devotee is a prerequisite for liberation from ignorance and attaining bliss. Essential to have spiritual discipline and practice

Explanation as to the origin of the labeling of the two schools: two ways baby kittens and baby monkeys are transported by their mothers.

- A kitten is picked up by its mother
- A baby monkey clings tightly to its mother as they both move along branches and trees.



Four Types of Humans According to Function

- Spiritual/priestly
 - Warrior
 - Trade and agriculture
 - Manual labor
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BUDDHISM



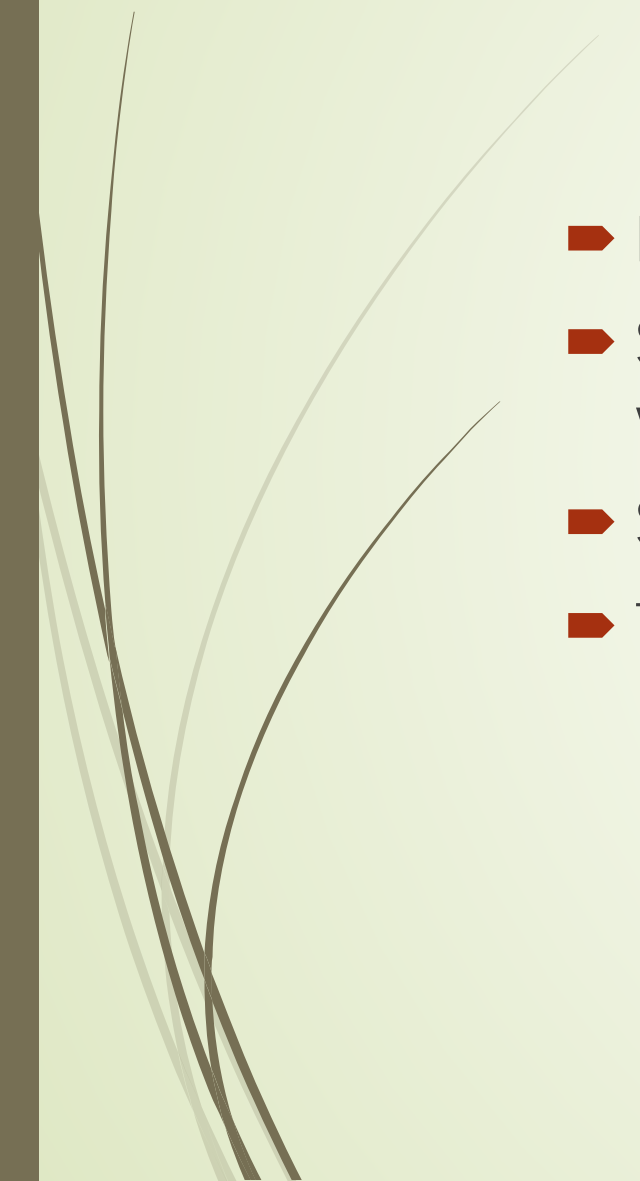
- The problem:
 - Suffering and desire
 - We are deluded to think that the sensory pleasures we seek will bring happiness
- The solution:
 - Apathy and letting go. "Let It Be"
 - Meditation is the means by which one can move from a warped picture of reality that results in a warped approach to life to one that transcends ignorance, greed, and false outlooks

The problem is misery or suffering

- Suffering is caused primarily by desire.
- Seeking sensual pleasure ends in dissatisfaction. Always want more
- The Buddha says that we are powerfully drawn to sensory pleasure. Sensory pleasures are fleeting at best. Pleasures we seek evaporate quickly and leave us thirsting for more.
- We are deluded into thinking that the sensory pleasures we seek will bring happiness.
- We are caught on the "hedonic treadmill."

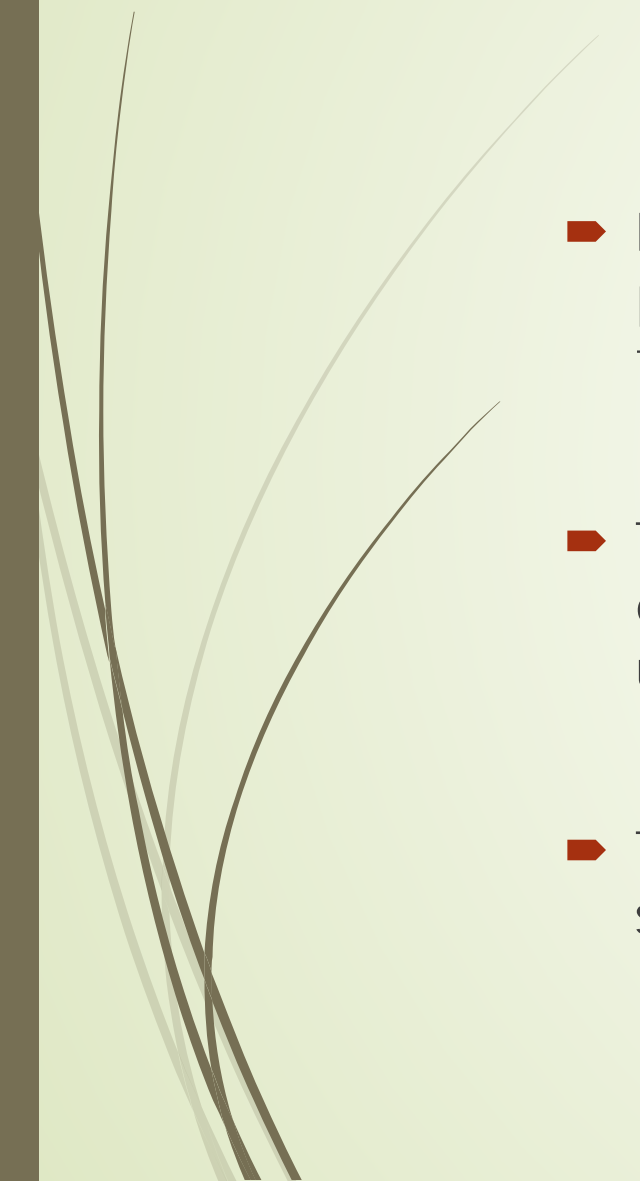


Four Noble Truths:

- Life is suffering
 - Suffering is caused by craving (desire, craving acts like wood fueling a fire)
 - Suffering can have an end
 - There is a path that leads to the end of suffering
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The Path to Enlightenment and Nirvana

- Meditation is the **means** by which one can move from a warped picture of reality that results in a warped approach to life to one that transcends ignorance, greed, and false outlooks
 - The **path** is one that takes us from a life of greed, hatred and delusion to one of non-attachment, benevolence and understanding
 - Through meditation one comes to see that things are not as they seem. [We move from mere **Appearance and Reality**]
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The Buddhist concept of the self


- ▶ The self [thought of as a kind of CEO in control of thoughts and actions over time] is **an illusion**

The BUDDHA's challenge:

- ▶ What do we mean if we refer to you as a self?
 - ▶ Is it your physical body?
 - ▶ Is it your basic feelings?
 - ▶ Is it your perceptions?
 - ▶ Is it your thoughts, habits, decisions?
 - ▶ Is it your consciousness?
- ▶ The Buddha says it is none of the above. There is no self



The Eightfold Path to Enlightenment

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- Right View (appearance and reality)
 - Right thoughts (kind and positive thinking)
 - Right speech (avoid hate speech or gossip)
 - Right conduct (act peaceably, benevolently and compassionately)
 - Right livelihood (don't be exploitative or harm others for personal gain)
 - Right effort (persist in pursuit of enlightenment)
 - Right mindfulness (cherish and reflect upon pure thoughts)
 - Right meditation (concentrate your mind on the Buddha, his life and teaching)



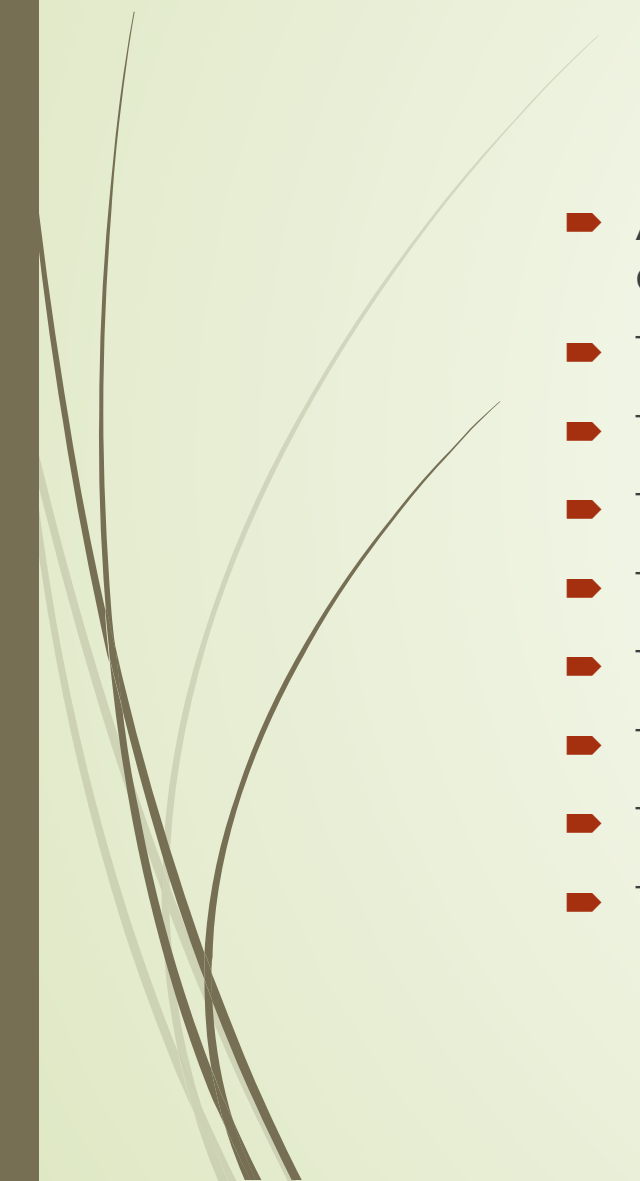
Anti-Dogma

- "The religious life does not depend on dogma."
- "...there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation misery, grief and despair, for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing."
- The wrong types of questions:
 - Is the world eternal or not eternal?
 - Are the soul and the body one and the same?
- Consider the analogy of the man wounded by an arrow. He'd be stupid to say he must know the class status of the person who wounded him before he will accept treatment.





The blind men and the elephant

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- And those blind men who had felt the head of the elephant, said: "An elephant, Sir, is like a large round jar."
 - Those who had felt its ears, said: "It is like a winnowing basket."
 - Those who had felt its tusks, said: "It is like a plough-share."
 - Those who had felt its trunk, said: "It is like a plough."
 - Those who had felt its body, said: "It is like a granary."
 - Those who had felt its feet, said: "It is like a pillar."
 - Those who had felt its back, said: "It is like a mortar."
 - Those who had felt its tail, said: "It is a like a pestle."
 - Those who had felt the tuft of its tail, said: "It is like a broom."



Discussion



- What, if anything, do you find attractive about the fundamental approaches of Hinduism and Buddhism?
- What, if anything, do you find objectionable, misguided, unappealing or simply baffling about Hinduism and Buddhism in their fundamentals and/or as practiced?
- Do the analyses of the problem [ignorance or suffering] ring true?
- Does meditation seem to you to be an effective means to the question of how to live [e.g., meaningful life, oneness with the Ultimate, bliss, tranquility]
- Is the solution offered (Hinduism: wisdom or Buddhism: apathy) one that strikes you as a worthy and satisfying ultimate goal?