



# COMPARATIVE RELIGION

**WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH**

**NOVEMBER 17,  
2019**

**JAMES  
MUYSKENS**





1.8 billion Muslims (one-fifth of humanity)



More parents around the world name their children Muhammad than any other name



Two major branches of Islam:

Sunni = 85%

Shi'a = 15%

# TODAY'S FOCUS IS ON ISLAM

# APPEARANCE AND REALITY

- SENSE PERCEPTION: bent stick in water
- PHYSICS AND CHEMISTRY: what appears to us to be solid and unmoving is in fact molecules moving rapidly
- PLATO'S CAVE ANALOGY: we are living in the shadows
- RELIGIONS AFFIRM THAT IN ADDITION TO THE SOCIAL AND NATURAL WORLD OF ORDINARY EXPERIENCE **THERE IS A MUCH GREATER AND HIGHER REALITY BEYOND AND WITHIN US**

# THE PROBLEM/THE SOLUTION

## Problem

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

## Solution

Wisdom  
Reality  
Direction  
Found  
Tranquility  
Purposeful lives  
Order  
Hope  
Liberation  
Light  
Harmony

# 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]

# 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

# 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?

# 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



# BACKGROUND

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The founder of Islam is Muhammad (570 CE – 632 CE).

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Muhammad lived in Mecca, a city of traders and financiers who profited from the caravans that stopped for water from its underground spring.

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In Mecca and along the trade route, adherents of many religions [including Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism] engaged in trade and conflict,.

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Islam rejects polytheism and the basic tenets of all three of these religions.

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Muhammad recognizes that peace will come only if an order can be established that calls for allegiance beyond the tribal.



Map of Arabia showing places at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an (610-32 CE), most located along the north-south trade route between Aden and Damascus.

# ZOROASTRIANISM

## Problem:

- Keep chaos at bay
- How can we account for the fact that bad things happen to good people?

## Solution:

- Good and Evil have existed from the beginning and are in eternal battle [Cosmic dualism]
- Only one God is worthy of worship [monotheism]
- Although not omnipotent, over time God will conquer evil
- Human action can contribute to the ultimate victory of Good over Evil

# JUDAISM

## The problem:

- Alienation and the Babylonian exile [bondage in Egypt]
- Sense of powerlessness
- Longing for home [yearning to feel at home]

## The solution:

- One God [Yahweh]
- God acts in history: The arc of history bends toward justice
- A covenant: Chosen people
- Adhere to the laws of the Lawgiver

CHRISTIANITY

The Problem??

The Solution??

# CHRISTIANITY

## The problem:

- Guilt, sin, a sense of unworthiness
- No matter the effort, we fall short

## The solution:

- Love (agape) [God becomes man (Jesus) as atonement for sin]
- Grace and gratitude. [Paul and Reformers version]

# ISLAM

## The problem:

- Greed, strife, tribal competition and war
- We must navigate through a cacophony of religious beliefs

## The solution:

- A faith that transcends human division and frailty
- “There is no god but God; Muhammed is the Messenger of God.”
- Obedience: The word Islam means submission to God
- Radical monotheism [God’s sovereignty]

# MUHAMMAD

- Both a **mystic** touched by God on a mountaintop AND a canny **political and social reformer**.
- At age 40, Muhammad declared he had been seized by a terrifying force and commended by God to recite scripture.
- As Muhammed, who was illiterate, recited new passages, believers wrote them down. The compilation became the Quran.
- Muslims believe that it is God who speaks in the Quran – not Muhammad.



# FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE QURAN

- God's oneness and uniqueness – the sovereignty of God
- God is the originator and sustainer of the universe
- Individuals survive their deaths and enter paradise or hell [The Day of Judgment looms large]
- Living faithfully requires self-surrender to the will of the Supreme Being and worshipping Him alone.
- A life of surrender to God is one of compassion and justice, of sharing one's wealth and good fortune, and doing one's part to see that the poor and vulnerable are treated with respect
- "Islam" in Arabic means self-surrender to God
- The word "Muslim" refers to one who surrenders himself or herself

# THE PILLARS OF ISLAM

- Declaration of faith – monotheism [Muhammad is the messenger who completes revelation]
- Prayer – 5 times throughout the day
- Purification – annual contribution of 2.5% of an individual's wealth (safety net)
- Fast of Ramadan – dawn to sunset no food or drink [The purpose of the fast is to promote reflection on human frailty and dependence upon God]
- Pilgrimage or hajj to Mecca

# ISLAM EMBRACES AND REJECTS KEY DOCTRINES OF ZOROASTRIANISM, JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

- Islam is embedded in the monotheistic traditions of Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity.
- Islam accepts Moses and Jesus (as well as Muhammad) as Messengers of God and is a religion based on Scripture. [All messengers are prophets but not all prophets are messengers]
- Islam has no doctrine of original sin.
- Jesus is a prophet but not God incarnate.
- Its strict view of monotheism rejects Zoroastrian dualism and the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation, Atonement and Resurrection.
- Muhammad is the mouthpiece of the divine will which is communicated to him by Gabriel.
- Muhammad received God's FINAL revelation.

# CHALLENGES FOR DIALOGUE

- Islam rejects key doctrines of Christianity
- Widely different views on how to read and interpret scripture
- Differing views on the proper relationship between "church and state" [Often it is hard to distinguish Islam as a religion from Islam as a political ideology]
- 9/11 and other Islamist terrorism
- Visceral reactions to words like **jihad** (struggle or holy war) and **fatwa** (legal ruling)
- Fear and misunderstanding of **Sharia law**
- Islam's struggle with modernity