

We all want to make it through life with some degree of success, some sense that we did it right. And if others think they know a way for life to be satisfying, even meaningful, it's at least worth checking out. What about the world's major religions? Is there anything we can find there that would give our lives greater stability and value?

The following is an opportunity to look into these major world faith systems... Hinduism, New Age, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity.* Here you will find a brief description of each, the distinguishing characteristics of these spiritual ways, and what a person can gain from them.

*Each of these religions has sects with differing beliefs. The description given here focuses on the heart of that religion.

Hinduism

Most Hindus worship a multitude of gods and goddesses, some 300,000 of them. These various gods all converge into a universal spirit called the Ultimate Reality or Brahman. Brahman is not a god, but more of a term for ultimate oneness.

Hindus see their position in life as based on their actions in a previous life. If their behavior was evil, they might experience tremendous hardships in this life. A Hindu's goal is to become free from the law of karma...to be free from continuous reincarnations.

There are three possible ways to end this cycle of karma: 1. Be lovingly devoted to any of the Hindu gods or goddesses; 2. Grow in knowledge through meditation of Brahman (oneness)...to realize that circumstances in life are not real, that selfhood is an illusion and only Brahman is real; 3. Be dedicated to various religious ceremonies and rites.

A personal benefit of Hinduism is that a person has the freedom to choose how to work toward spiritual perfection. Another plus is, Hinduism has an explanation for the suffering and evil in the world. In Hinduism, the suffering anyone experiences, whether it is sickness or starvation or a disaster, is due that person because of their own evil actions usually from a previous lifetime. Only the soul matters which will one day be free of the cycle of rebirths and be at rest.

New Age

New Age promotes the development of the person's own power or divinity. When referring to God, a follower of New Age is not talking about a transcendent, personal God who created the universe, but is referring to a higher consciousness within themselves. A person in New Age would see themselves as God, the cosmos, the universe. In fact, everything that the person sees, hears, feels or imagines is to be considered divine.

Highly eclectic, New Age presents itself as a collection of ancient spiritual traditions. It acknowledges many gods and goddesses, as in Hinduism. The Earth is viewed as the source of all spirituality, and has its own intelligence, emotions and deity. But superseding all is self. Self is the originator, controller and God of all. There is no reality outside of what the person determines.

New Age teaches a wide array of eastern mysticism and spiritual, metaphysical and psychic techniques, such as breathing exercises, chanting, drumming, meditating...to develop an altered consciousness and one's own divinity.

A benefit of New Age is that anything negative a person experiences (failures, sadness, anger, selfishness, hurt) is considered an illusion. Believing themselves to be completely sovereign over their life, nothing about their life is wrong, negative or painful. Eventually a person develops spiritually to the degree that there is no objective, external reality. A person, becoming a god, creates their own reality.

connecting
with
the
DIVINE
connecting

every
student's
choice

Buddhism

Buddhists do not worship any gods or God. People outside of Buddhism often think that Buddhists worship the Buddha. However, Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) never claimed to be divine, and Buddhists reject the notion of any supernatural power. The universe operates by natural law. Life is seen as consisting of pain: pain in birth, sickness, death, and continuous sorrow and despair. Most Buddhists believe a person has hundreds or thousands of reincarnations, all bringing misery. And it is the desire for happiness that causes a person's reincarnation. Therefore, the goal of a Buddhist is to purify one's heart and to let go of all desires. A person must abandon all sensuous pleasures, all evil, all joy and all sorrow.

To do so, Buddhists are to follow a list of religious principles and intense meditation. When a Buddhist meditates it is not the same as praying or focusing on a god, it is more of a self-discipline. Through dedicated meditation a person may reach Nirvana — "the blowing out" of the flame of desire.

The personal benefit of Buddhism is something true of most religions: Buddhism provides disciplines, values and directives for the person to live by. Some of these Buddhist guidelines are: Do not destroy any living creature; abandon all sensual pleasures; abandon all evil qualities, and both joy and sorrow.

Islam

Muslims believe there is the one almighty God, named Allah, who is infinitely superior and distant from humankind. Allah is viewed as the creator of the universe and the source of all good and all evil. Everything that happens is Allah's will. He is a powerful and strict judge, too great to be approached by people. So it is impossible for individuals to have a relationship with Allah or know much about him.

Though a Muslim honors several prophets, Muhammad is considered the last prophet and his words and lifestyle are that person's authority. To be a Muslim, one has to follow five religious duties: 1. Repeat a creed about Allah and Muhammad; 2. Recite certain prayers in Arabic five times a day; 3. Give to the needy; 4. One month each year, fast from food, drink, sex and smoking from sunrise to sunset; 5. Pilgrimage once in one's lifetime to worship at a shrine in Mecca. At death — based on one's faithfulness to these duties — a Muslim hopes to enter Paradise, a place of sensual pleasure. If not, they will be eternally punished in hell.

The benefit of being a Muslim is that it matches many people's expectations about religion and deity. Islam teaches that there is one supreme God, who is worshiped through disciplined religious rituals. He is seen as a powerful God vastly remote from humankind, who does what he pleases. Then after death a person is rewarded or punished according to their religious devotion.

Christianity

Christians believe in a loving God who has revealed himself and can be personally known in this life. In Christianity the person's focus is not on religious rituals or performing good works, but on enjoying a relationship with God and growing to know him better.

Faith in Jesus Christ himself, not just his teachings, is how the Christian experiences joy and a meaningful life. In his life on earth Jesus did not identify himself as a prophet pointing to God or as a teacher of enlightenment. Rather, Jesus claimed to be God in human form. He performed miracles, forgave people of their sin and said that anyone who believed in him would have eternal life. He made statements like, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."¹

Christians regard the Bible as God's written message to humankind. In addition to its being an historical record of Jesus' life and miracles, the Bible reveals God's personality, his love and truth, and how one can have a relationship with him.

The benefit of Christianity is that whatever circumstances a Christian is dealing with in their life, they can confidently turn to a wise and powerful God who genuinely loves them. They believe that God answers prayer and that life takes on meaning as they live to honor him.

CAN A PERSON CONNECT WITH GOD IN THIS LIFE?

The answer is yes. Not only can you connect with God, you also can know that you are fully accepted and loved by God. God is not naive, he's aware of your sin (the bad things you do, and the good things you don't do). Yet he is willing to relate to you according to his kindness, rather than judgment. No other religion suggests that humankind can relate to the Creator of the universe like this.

Hinduism, New Age, Buddhism, Islam all place the individual on their own, striving for spiritual perfection. Buddha never claimed sinlessness. Muhammad also admitted that he was in need of forgiveness. "No matter how wise, no matter how gifted, no matter how influential other prophets, gurus, and teachers might be, they had the presence of mind to know that they were imperfect just like the rest of us."²

Jesus Christ, however, never alluded to any personal sin. Instead, Jesus forgave people of their sin and he wants to forgive you of your sin also. We all are aware of our faults, the areas of our lives that may cause others to think less of us, areas that we ourselves wish were not there...maybe it's an addiction, a bad temper, impurity, hateful remarks. God loves us but hates sin, and he has said that the consequences for sin is death...eternal separation from him. But God provided a way for us to be forgiven. Jesus, the Son of God in human form, took all of our sin on himself, suffered on a cross, and willingly died in our place. The Bible says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us."³

God is offering you complete forgiveness because of Jesus' death for you. This means forgiveness for all our sins...past, present and future sins. Jesus paid for them all. Have you ever been forgiven by someone, and then find they are avoiding you after that? That's not God's type of forgiveness. God, who created the universe, loves you and wants to be in a relationship with you. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."⁴

Is there a difference?

In looking at these major belief systems and their views of God, we find tremendous diversity:

- Hindus believe in 300,000 gods.
- Buddhists say there is no deity.
- New Age followers believe they are God.
- Muslims believe in a powerful but detached God.
- Christians believe in a God who is loving and approachable.

Are all religions worshiping the same God? Apparently not! New Age wants everyone to come to center on a cosmic consciousness, but it would require Islam to give up their God, Hinduism to give up all their gods, and Buddhism to establish that there is a God.

The world's major religions (Hinduism, New Age, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity) are each quite unique. And of these only one affirms that there is a personal, loving God who can be known, now in this life. Only Christianity talks about a God who welcomes us into a relationship with him and comes along side us as a comforter, counselor and powerful God who loves us.

In Hinduism a person is on their own trying to gain release from karma. In New Age a person is working at their own divinity. In Buddhism it is an individual quest at being free from desire. And in Islam, the individual follows religious laws for the sake of paradise after death. Only in Christianity do you see the person in relationship with God.

What other religion offers us real freedom from our sin and guilt? All the others leave a person's failures on their shoulders, with a dim hope of becoming a better person tomorrow. Of all the religions known to humanity, only in Christianity will you see God reaching toward humanity, providing a way for us to know him. "For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life."⁵

God wants us to know him.

We were created by God to live in relationship with him. Jesus said, "He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty...and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."⁶ Jesus called people not only to follow his teachings, but to follow him. He said, "I am the way, and the truth and the life."⁷ "In claiming to be the truth, Christ goes beyond the prophets who simply said they were speaking the truth."⁸

Jesus identified himself as equal to God, and even gave proof. Jesus said that he would be crucified on a cross and that three days after his death, he would come back to life. He didn't say he would reincarnate someday into a future life. (Who would know if he actually did it?) He said three days after being buried he would show himself alive to those who saw his crucifixion. On that third day, Jesus' tomb was found empty and many people testified that they saw him alive again. He now offers eternal life to us.

It's a two-way relationship.

Many religions focus on a person's spiritual efforts. Christianity is a two-way interaction between you and God. He welcomes us to go to him. "The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth."⁹ You can communicate with God, who will answer your prayer, give you greater peace and joy, provide direction, show you his love, and transform your life. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly."¹⁰ It will not mean that life will become perfect and free of problems. But it means that in the midst of life, you can relate to God who is willing to be involved in your life and faithful in his love.

This is not a commitment to a method of self-improvement like the Eight Fold Path or the Five Pillars, or meditation, or good works or even the Ten Commandments. These seem clear, well-defined, easy-to-follow paths for spirituality. But they become a burdensome striving for perfection, and connection with God is still distant. Our hope is not in following laws or standards, but knowing a Savior who fully accepts us because of our faith in him and his sacrifice for us.

Would you like to be totally forgiven and personally come to know God's love for you?

BEGINNING A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

You can begin a relationship with God right now. It is as simple as asking God for his forgiveness of your sin and inviting him to enter your life. Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door [of your heart] and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him."¹¹

Would like to begin a relationship with the God who created you, who deeply loves you? You can do so right now, simply by telling him your heart's desire: "God, I ask you to forgive me and invite you to enter my heart right now. Thank you Jesus for dying for my sins. Thank you for coming into my life as you said you would."

The Bible tells us that "as many as received him (Jesus), to them he gave the right to become children of God."¹² If you asked God to come into your heart just now, you have begun a personal relationship with him. It is like you have just met God and he wants to help you grow to know him better, to know his love for you, to guide you with wisdom in whatever decisions confront you. The gospel of John, in the Bible, is a good place to read to learn more about your relationship with him. Perhaps you might want to tell someone else about the decision you have made to ask Jesus into your heart.

In other religions a person has a relationship with teachings, ideas, paths, rituals. In Christianity a person can have a relationship with the loving and powerful God. You can talk with him and he will guide you in this life now. He doesn't just point you to a path, a philosophy. He welcomes you to know him, to experience joy, and to have confidence in a loving God in the midst of life's challenges. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."¹³

1. John 8:12 2. Erwin W. Lutzer, *Christ Among Other Gods* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 63
3. 1 John 3:16 4. 1 John 4:9 5. John 3:16 6.
John 6:35 7. John 14:6 8. Lutzer, p. 106 9.
Psalms 145:18 10. John 10:10 11. Revela-
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