



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 20: Analyzing World Faiths



The application of foundational principles to the analysis of the religious claims of different faiths can help us to identify for further study which faiths may have a plausible claim to truth, while eliminating those which may not. The brief summaries below are not intended to be comprehensive, as a full analysis would fill volumes. Nor will every person weigh the advantages and disadvantages of religious systems according to the same criteria. These notes merely identify some key considerations in evaluating various faiths. Readers who desire to investigate these matters further are encouraged to study the key works, the history, and the historical and societal fruits of faith of the different religious systems to draw their own conclusions.

Hinduism

The Hindu Bhagavad-Gita contains beautiful poetry, yet this short work consisting mainly of narrative and dialogue offers a philosophical system of lofty ideals but little direct guidance, and the identity of the authors has been lost in the mists of time. Sanscrit epics purport to tell of battles of the Gods, yet it is often unclear who wrote or transmitted these writings, to say nothing of the absence of independent witnesses to corroborate the account. Very little is known of the few early historical figures who are mentioned at all. Hinduism lacks foundational historical figures like Moses and Abraham whose words we can read and whose credibility we can assess directly. Hinduism claims literally hundreds of gods, but without prophets in historical times who saw and talked with them, on what basis is one to believe that the traditions built up around them are true?

Hinduism represents a broad spectrum of beliefs varying from polytheism to pantheism to monotheism. The branches of Hinduism lack any centralized authority, and Hinduism is scarcely interpreted in the same way in any two villages. Most educated Hindus may accept certain core elements of their faith, yet reject many others. Hinduism, like Buddhism, is a relativistic faith that is observed very differently by adherents depending on their upbringing, opinions, and personal inclinations. Without prophets in historical times to teach clearly the divine word and to separate truth from error, Hinduism is a mishmash of philosophy, myth, and tradition. We will not find the world's single unifying truth in Hinduism, which provides no mechanism for verifying or falsifying its many competing claims.

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Buddhism

The Dhammapada or sayings of Buddha contains beautiful poetry and practical wisdom, but few specifics for daily life. The Tripitaka or Tipitaka of Buddhism comprises some forty volumes of expansive poetry, dialogue, and principles, yet the text is repetitive around common, vague themes. Buddha spoke in vague and often ambiguous terms with few proscriptions or prescriptions. No central authority exists on earth or in heaven: Buddhists believe in harmony of the universe and the ability of the contemplative soul to achieve a state of transcendence, but not in a supreme being who will one day judge mankind in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition. Buddhism is a relativistic faith. The inner "path to truth" claimed by one person is often very different from that claimed another, and so we arrive where we started with numerous opinions but no unifying or universal truth. Buddhism is essentially an individual faith of meditation and contemplation which lacks the communal instruction, fellowship, and support of other organized faiths; there is no Buddhist concept of a congregation or of Sunday School. We find in Buddhism some useful (although often exceedingly vague) precepts, but no explicit means for believers to verify its

tenets. The limited fruits of this vague philosophical system as seen in more than two thousand years of history give seekers little reason to believe that Buddhism represents the ultimate path to enlightenment. Buddhism is more of a philosophy and tradition than religion in the Western sense.

Confucianism and Taoism

From ancient times, China has had an advanced and relatively enlightened society which has contributed inestimably to the West. Inventions such as the stirrup, the wheelbarrow, the adjustable plow, the rotary winnowing fan, moveable type, and countless others were known in China centuries before they were known in the West.^[1] Various Chinese technologies brought back by Dutch and Italian traders played a central role in the agricultural revolution and in the Age of Discovery. China's relatively backward position in the modern world is a historical anomaly following the seventeenth century Manchu invasion and twentieth century Communist takeover.

The brief Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu and the Analects of Confucius offer great wisdom for life. Both men were recognized during their lifetimes as wise and great teachers, but they never claimed the visitation of God, nor any divine authority beyond the principles of good as elucidated by conscience, meditation, and reason.

For most of the past two thousand years, Chinese society was administered by officers who had to pass a series of civil service examinations based on the teachings of Confucius. We can identify many valid principles in Confucius' teachings. Confucius taught as a wise man pointing out the path to enlightenment through honor, humility, obedience, and personal purity through which each person can become attuned to the divine and act in harmony with the principles of nature's God. Yet Confucius never claimed divine authority, nor did he claim that his teaching were either infallible or complete. He testified that he himself was not a recipient of divine manifestations, stating: "I add nothing, I merely transmit," citing as his source ancient wisdom handed down by the fathers from the beginning of time. Although we may find valuable wisdom in the teachings of Confucius, we must also recognize that his teachings do not represent a complete theology. Even as we learn from the positive principles which Confucius taught, we must continue seeking more complete truth as he encouraged.

Islam

Islam, founded by Muhammad, is the world's second largest major faith. Although often at odds with Christianity and Judaism, Islam shares many common theological underpinnings, including belief in one supreme god who spoke to ancient prophets and revealed divine law and inspired teachings recorded in holy scripture. There is some organization and teaching of believers, although there is less structure than in most Christian churches.

The Quran constitutes beautiful Arabic poetry, yet is a relatively short book that lacks the many of the enlightened directives for personal conduct found in the Christian scriptures. Many of its positive principles represent re-workings of Judeo-Christian teachings or commentaries on Biblical stories to which Muhammad was exposed in his youth. Relatively few individuals outside of Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cultures have found great spiritual resonance in chapters with titles such as "The Cow," "The Bee," "The Ant," "The Elephant," "Suad," and "The Fig."

During the Medieval era, major Islamic centers including Samarkand, Bukhara, Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad, and others, were great centers of scholarship and learning. Medieval Islam was generally tolerant of Christians and Jews; more tolerant, in many cases, than Christian crusaders were of Muslims. Nonetheless, such tolerance at best was limited to allowing non-Muslims to practice their own faith, and even today rarely allows Christians and Jews to proselytize Muslims.

In modern times, not a single Islamic state has been a world leader in science or technology; the more prominent Islam in the political system of a nation, the more backwards and oppressive its government. The only stable democracy in the Islamic world has been in Turkey,^[2] a secular state rejecting the Sharia law of the Koran and banning various Islamic displays. The continued implementation of Quranic Shar'ia law in many Islamic states has been seen as an obstacle to national development and human rights. The most advanced Islamic nations, like the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, are also the most secular. Most Muslims are peaceful, although literal interpretations of Quranic teachings justifying killing of unbelievers have been widely used by extremist segments to justify violence against non-Muslims, and relatively few Islamic states have afforded non-Muslims the tolerance, rights, and latitude of religious and political expression that Muslims have come to expect Christian nations. In contrast, the American democracy was founded primarily deeply religious men of the Judeo-Christian tradition who recognized the importance of not imposing their views on others by means of state coercion.

The laws of Islam were devised for a medieval nomadic society and have shown little evidence of the timeless relevance of the Ten Commandments or other elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Some educated Muslims in the West have led distinguished careers while maintaining Islamic identity, but most reject many of Muhammad's foundational teachings regarding Sharia law and other matters, leaving a pared-down version of Quranic teachings drawing heavily from Judeo-Christian roots with some Islamic cultural peculiarities.

Islam's claim to be the "one true faith" suffers from several difficulties. Mohammad, the prophet of Islam, claimed to have received revelation from God, yet not a single other person was witness to any of these alleged events. Nor did Mohammed claim to perform a single miracle, unlike many the prophets of scripture. Islam thus faces the issue of uncorroborated claims based on a single witness, and a historical legacy claimed to originate from the Bible which is acknowledged but not studied.

Muhammad claimed that the Bible teachings were generally correct (while also claiming some errors) and acknowledged that God sent Jesus, while at the same time proclaiming himself [Muhammad] to be God's greatest and last prophet. Muhammad drew heavily from Christian teachings in composing the Koran, yet adds no real insight to the scriptural stories he summarizes in simplified form. Muhammad never claimed to have performed a single miracle. Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, and rose from the grave. Jesus claimed to be the son of God. If the New Testament teachings are true, then Jesus is the son of God, and Jesus is more important than Muhammad. There is no possibility allowed by scripture for Jesus merely to be a great teacher without being the literal son of God. Jesus lived a sinless life, whereas Muhammad was admonished to repent of his sins. Jesus was resurrected from the dead; Muhammad made no such claims of himself. The Quran claims that Jesus never died and was raised up to heaven, in contrast to Muhammad, who died and was buried; even Muslims apologists acknowledge a unique role

for Jesus and that he is prophesied to return again,^[3] which precludes claims that his teachings were merely situational ones made obsolete by Muhammad. If Jesus was a special prophet raised up by God who will one day return, as the Quran teaches, can thoughtful individuals escape the conclusion that His words are important and should be studied and contemplated? Yet the Bible is rarely read by adherents of Islam because of a litany of embarrassing contradictions to the claims of Muhammad and the Quran.

Notwithstanding substantial common roots with the Judeo-Christian tradition in acknowledging the inspiration of the Old and New Testaments in addition to the Quran, Islam has been perhaps the most difficult faith for Christians or other faiths to proselytize. This relates to the doctrinal idea that Jesus, while viewed as a prophet, was "superseded" by Muhammad, and that Biblical teachings were for a specific people at a specific time in contrast (they claim) to the more universal and enduring teachings of the Quran. Muslims are generally discouraged from reading the Bible and in some nations, like Iran, possessing a Bible is punishable by law.^[4] Islam has thus sought to claim the legacy and heritage of the Old and New Testaments, in most cases without its adherents studying either book. Islamic law strongly prohibits conversion of Muslims to other faiths; "apostasy" from Islam is viewed as a capital crime similar to adultery. Such doctrines and traditions have stifled objective inquiry and interfaith dialogue, and have allowed few Muslims to engage in an earnest search for truth beyond the pages of the Qur'an. As a result of such teachings and cultural pressures, Christian faiths have achieved very little growth even in secular and relatively tolerant Muslim nations like Turkey.

Judaism

The Old Testament records are corroborated by dozens of authors over hundreds of years. Epics of early cuneiform writings attest to divine events in the legendary past in contrast to the historical era chronicled by Old Testament authors. Notwithstanding some parallels of early cosmology, culture, and literary devices, nowhere in the records of other contemporary cultures, such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, do we find a work adequately comparable to the Bible. The pattern of divine prophets called by God over centuries contrasts with the teachings of non-Christian faiths which claim enlightenment from a single historical figure of the distant past but whose successors are acknowledged not to have possessed the same manifest divine connection.

As Jews await their promised Messiah, having rejected New Testament teachings of Christ, Judaism faces problems of discontinuity. Judaism acknowledges no prophets since the time of the Old Testament, the role of divine revelation had been supplanted by tradition of scholars and interpreters of the law even in Christ's day. Of the interpretations of the law by learned rabbis found in the Talmud, the Midrash, and other sources, how does one determine what, is authoritative, and what is opinion? Christ observed to the Jewish elders who rejected him: "Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law?"^[5] James wrote: "whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all."^[6] If Christ is rejected as the Messiah, then where is the divine word from holy prophets to declare that the sacrifices and rituals mandated by the Mosaic Law are no longer necessary? Whereas temple rituals and sacrifice had resumed after the Babylonian captivity and other prior disruptions, the final cessation of these Mosaic rites in the first century AD points to Christ as the promised Messiah, the great and last sacrifice.^[7]

Christianity

No book has given so much to the world as the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament teaches powerful principles that have withstood the tests of time, changing circumstances, and cultural diversity for nearly two millennia. Even Muhammad claimed Bible as part of the Islamic legacy, and the Quran's repeated allusions to Biblical stories demonstrates the Bible's great wisdom and unmatched appeal. Old Testament passages are repeatedly cited in demonstrating that Christ represents the fulfillment of scripture. Christ and the Apostle Paul both explained repeatedly that the Law of Moses was fulfilled in Christ and replaced with a new covenant.

In contrast to the solitary revelations of Muhammad and the isolated testimony of Buddha, numerous independent contemporary witnesses have left their testimonies of the veracity of the teachings and histories of the Old and New Testaments. The four gospels present the testimony of independent witnesses to Christ's life and teachings. Although some minor differences are encountered in the New Testament Gospels, the authors compellingly agree on central elements of Christ's life, His teachings, and His divine nature. The life and coming of Christ was prophesied for centuries before his birth by prophets, providing corroborating testimony not only of contemporary witnesses but reaching back many generations. The New Testament writers demonstrated Christ to have fulfilled numerous prophecies dating back to the early antiquity.

In contrast to Muhammad and other alleged prophets who asked people simply to believe, Christ provided a way through which individuals could receive a divine witness of the truthfulness of his words: "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."^[8]

The great difficulty with sectarian Christianity, as widely taught and preached by many denominations today, is its discontinuity. Christ and the apostles lived two thousand years ago, and the teachings, practices, and worship of many modern denominations bear little resemblance to the New Testament Church. The New Testament repeatedly teaches of the need for divine authority and unity of the saints, yet modern Christianity has fragmented into more than thirty thousand denominations, each interpreting Biblical teachings in its own way while denying the authority and leadership of other Christian faiths and in many cases even the idea of a single true church. Among all of the competing brands of Christianity, which, if any, is the heir to the apostles, the true Church directed by Christ himself through revelation to divinely-called leaders authorized to do God's work?

- [1] See Temple, Robert. The Genius of China: 3,000 Years of Science, Discovery and Invention. Simon and Schuster, 1986.
- [2] Lewis, Bernard. "Why Turkey is the Only Muslim Democracy." Middle East Quarterly I/1 (March 1994) 41-49.
<http://www.meforum.org/216/why-turkey-is-the-only-muslim-democracy>. Accessed 22 July 2010.
- [3] "Did Jesus get crucified according to Islam?" <http://www.answering-christianity.com/crucified.htm>. Accessed 9 April 2010.
- [4] "Iran authorities lash man for having Bible in car," IranFocus.com, 13 August 2007,
http://www.iranfocus.com/en/?option=com_content&task=view&id=12110, accessed 22 July 2010.
- [5] [John 7:19](#)
- [6] James 2:10
- [7] Alma 34:10-14
- [8] [John 7:16-17](#)