
SPIRITUAL SPECIES

People are spiritual. Many are also religious. It is difficult to effectively journey together without some understanding of our religions and practices.

A 2015 POLL by Gallup International found that only 22% of the world population is not religious and only 11% were "convinced atheists."⁶³ Humans are clearly a spiritual species, which is not surprising to those of the Abrahamic (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) families of faith, which believe that every person is made in the image of God. In part, being made in God's image makes us spiritual and gives us the capacity to have a personal relationship with God. Over time, spirituality has gone in many directions, including away from where God designed it to be.

The three big families of faith are Eastern (Hinduism, Buddhism, and New Age), Secular (Atheism, Agnosticism, and Naturalists), and Abrahamic.

Upon reviewing religions, Os Guinness, an author and social critic, suggests putting up two questions before each religion:

- Does it adequately deal with human dignity?
- Does it adequately deal with evil and suffering?

The various religions offer decisively different answers to those questions.⁶⁴ I encourage you to look deep into those questions regarding your own spirituality.

Hinduism made up 13.8% of the world population in 2010, according to The World Factbook.⁶⁵ It is practiced by 80% of the population in India, where it originated. Hinduism is a conglomeration of religious, philosophical, and cultural ideas and practices. It is characterized by four main themes including the following:

1. The belief in one absolute being of multiple manifestations
2. The law of cause and effect following the path of righteousness
3. Reincarnation, which is the idea that the soul or spirit, after biological death, can begin a new life in a new body
4. The desire for liberation from the cycle of births and deaths.⁶⁶

Hinduism involves the worship of thousands of gods. Brahma is considered the one supreme god who created the world, and all of the other gods are manifestations of Brahma.⁶⁷

The concept of karma or "law of karma" is the broader principle that all of life is governed by a system of cause and effect, and action and reaction. Therefore, one's deeds have corresponding effects on the future, including one's next life. Karma is thus a way of explaining evil and misfortune in the world, even for those who do not appear to deserve it. Their misfortune must be due to wrong actions in their previous life. Karma is regarded as a fundamental law of nature that is automatic and mechanical. It is not something that is imposed by a god as a system of punishment or reward, nor is it something that the gods can interfere with.

The word karma refers primarily to "bad karma," which is accumulated as a result of wrong actions. Bad karma binds a person's soul to the cycle of rebirth, leading to misfortune in this life and poor conditions in the next. This may be realized in one's class, disposition, and character. Hindu texts also prescribe a number of activities, such as pilgrimages to holy places and acts of devotion that can wipe out the effects of bad karma. Such positive actions are sometimes referred to as "good karma."⁶⁸

The concept of dharma includes both the natural universal laws which hold the people of this world and the whole creation, and the observance of those laws. Observing those laws enables people to be content and happy, and it allows for the saving of oneself from degradation and suffering. A person observes the natural universal laws by living life according to the codes of conduct as described in Hindu scriptures. The Bhagavad Gita has thirty-four scriptures, Ramayana and Mahabharata have thirty-one scriptures, and the Vedic Mathematics have ten scriptures. A person also observes the natural universal laws by having virtues such as simplicity of appearance, purity, compassion, and truthfulness.⁶⁹ Ultimately, in order to achieve good karma, it is important to live life according to dharma.

Reincarnation is new life in a new body following death. A person's desire is to be rebirthed into something better. The goal is freedom from the cycle of births and deaths, where one will not have to go through an earthly life again.

Buddhism made up 6.77% of the world population in 2010, according to The World Factbook.⁷⁰ Buddhism as a religion and philosophy was founded in 525 BC by Siddhartha Gautama, who is known as the Buddha. "Buddhist tradition tells how Siddhartha Gautama, born a prince and raised in luxury, renounced the world at the age of twenty-nine to search for an ultimate solution to the problem of suffering [within] the human condition. After six years of spiritual discipline he achieved the supreme enlightenment and spent the remaining years of his life teaching and establishing a 'sangha.' This is a community of monks and nuns which continued his work. After the Buddha's death, his teachings were orally transmitted until the 1st century BC, when they were first committed to writing."⁷¹

The basic doctrines of Buddhism include the "four noble truths":

1. Existence is suffering.
2. Suffering's causes are craving and attachment.
3. There is a cessation—an ending—of suffering, which is nirvana.
4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering which is the "eightfold path," including right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Buddhism describes reality in terms of process and relation, rather than substance. All of life arises in interrelation and in dependence on causes and conditions. Like Hinduism, Buddhism holds to cause and effect, which is karma, as well as to the idea of reincarnation. Humanity's ultimate desire is freedom from

the cycle of reincarnation—the cycle of re-births and deaths. In Buddhism, release from this cycle is nirvana. Nirvana is when a person can finally transcend that cycle and attain the ultimate stillness of mind.

Meditation and observance of moral precepts are the foundations of Buddhist practice. The five basic moral precepts, which are important to all Buddhists, are to refrain from killing, stealing, being sexually promiscuous, speaking falsely, and drinking intoxicants. Members of monastic orders also keep five additional precepts. They refrain from eating at improper times, viewing secular entertainments, using garlands (decorative cords), perfumes, and other bodily adornments, sleeping in high and wide beds, and receiving money.⁷²

The New Age movement is a spiritual group that developed in the 1970s, especially in Western nations. It draws on both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, infusing them with influences from self-help and motivational psychology. Estimates vary widely on the number of adherents to the New Age movement because it holds to a variety of beliefs which often overlap with various religions.

As was previously stated, 22% of the world population did not adhere to any religion. Surveys indicate that many of those who do not adhere to any religion hold some belief in God or a universal spirit, but they do not identify with a particular faith.⁷³ The rest of those who do not adhere to any religion are agnostic and atheist. Agnostics do not have belief or disbelief in God. They do not believe one can know if God is real based on the material world, and they do not recognize evidence beyond the material world. Atheists do not believe in God. For atheists, finding meaning in life is up to oneself and those around them. Life is largely based on Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest."

Atheists would generally discourage turning to God for peace, hope, and human dignity because they do not believe God is real. If God is not real, then there is no eternity, so one must make the most of this earthly life. While monotheists, including Christians, describe God as omnipotent—all-powerful, the website of a free thinkers group that "includes atheists [and] agnostics" reads, "Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."⁷⁴ To that statement the question arises, what happens when we get tired, sick, stressed out, depressed, sad, and feeling hopeless—common issues for us humans? Who then can we turn to but to our fellow humans who also struggle in the same ways? That would seem to be quite a difficult predicament.

Islam is the second largest religion in terms of the number of adherents. According to The World Factbook, in 2010, 22.7% of the world population was Muslim.⁷⁵

Muhammad (AD 570-632) is the founder of Islam. He was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Muhammad claimed to receive revelations from God through the angel Gabriel. He received these revelations over a period of twenty-three years and they were written down as the Quran (Koran). Islam is part of the Abrahamic family of faiths as the Quran contains stories about many of the people who are in the Bible, including Abraham, Moses, Noah, David, Jesus, Mary, and Zechariah. It also contains similarities to the Torah, which are the first five books of the Bible.

While there are some similarities between Islam and Christianity, there are many differences. Islam is a monotheistic religion, as Christianity is, but Islam does not hold to the doctrine of the Trinity in which God is three beings in one. In Islam, God is one being and is called Allah. The Quran describes Allah as having many of the same attributes that are used to describe God in the Bible: sovereign Creator, holy, all-powerful, all-present, and gracious. As well, Islam describes humanity as made in Allah's image. However, Allah's way of relating to people, according to Islam, is different from God's way of relating to people according to the Bible and Christians. This difference is largely based on their understanding of Jesus Christ. Jesus is regarded in Islam as the anointed one (book 5, vs. 72 of the Quran), as the son of the Virgin Mary, as one who received the Holy Spirit (book 5, vs. 110), and as a great prophet and messenger. However,

Islam does not regard Jesus Christ as God the Son. In other words, Islam denies that Jesus is part of God. As well, in Islam, Muhammad is regarded as the last prophet and messenger, and is therefore greater than Jesus. According to book 4, vs. 157-158 of the Quran, Jesus was not crucified: "They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did. Indeed, those who differ about him are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it, except the following of assumptions. Certainly, they did not kill him. Rather, God raised him up to Himself. God is Mighty and Wise."

Denying that Jesus was crucified and then resurrected from death into life is a denial that God offers his grace and love to the extent that the Bible and Christians claim. That is clear as one reads the Quran. Allah is described as gracious and forgiving, but it is largely up to each person to live up to Allah's standards. People's hope is that by the time of death, they have lived a good enough life to receive Allah's grace and enter heaven.

The Quran disputes much of what God had earlier inspired his prophets, kings, and apostles to write down in the Bible over a period of 1,500 years. The biggest difference in the Quran is that it denies the Bible's description of Jesus Christ as Immanuel—God with us, and as the Savior of people from their sins.

Judaism is a faith with a small number of adherents. According to The World Factbook, in 2010, .22% of the world population was Jewish.⁷⁶ As Jewish identity is not dependent upon religious beliefs, a strong secular movement also exists within Jewish life. Therefore, the actual number of religious adherents to Judaism may be less.⁷⁷

Judaism's scriptures are understood as the Hebrew Scriptures (traditionally called the Old Testament by Christians) and the compilation of oral tradition known as the Talmud (which includes the Mishnah, the oral law). Religious life for Jews is generally guided by strict adherence to the Torah, which are the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures written by Moses.⁷⁸

Judaism denies that Jesus Christ was the Messiah—the special Anointed One of God—who is described in numerous prophecies in the Old Testament. Adherents to Judaism continue to wait for the Messiah. In Judaism, a person's relationship with God is not based on God's grace and a person's faith in God. It is the responsibility of the individual to establish a personal relationship with God by keeping the laws of the Torah. Regarding salvation, "by origin and nature, Judaism is an ethnic religion, therefore salvation has been primarily conceived in terms of the destiny of Israel as the elect people. In Judaism, salvation is closely related to the idea of redemption of people, the saving from the [nations] or circumstances that destroy the value of human existence. In terms of salvation for eternity, after a person dies, Judaism has always had varying beliefs. During the Second Temple Period [between 515 BC and AD 70], the Sadducees, who were the high priests, denied any particular existence of individuals after death because it wasn't written in the Torah. The Pharisees, who were ancestors of the rabbis, affirmed both bodily resurrection and immortality of the soul. The Pharisees maintained that after death, the soul is connected to God until the messianic era, that is, when the promised Messiah finally comes. [At that time], the soul is rejoined with the body in the land of Israel at the time of resurrection."⁷⁹

The Christian faith is the largest religion in the world today. According to The World Factbook, in 2010, 33.39% of the world population was Christian.⁸⁰ Although there are three major Christian branches—including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—Christians generally believe in the same major doctrines of the Bible, which is considered the Word of God.

Second Timothy 3:16 reads, "All Scripture [Bible] is inspired by God." This means that God breathed His Spirit on the writers of the Bible to write what He desired to communicate. It "is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right."

Christianity is a monotheistic faith, meaning Christians worship one God. Some people dispute that fact because of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Tri- means three, and God is described in the Bible as the Father, as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit. These are three different, distinct beings who are co-eternal and who work as one God. The Father is the ultimate creator and sustainer of all things in the world. The Son, Jesus Christ, is God who came in the flesh, as a human, to redeem people from being lost in sin. He did this as he lived, was executed for the sins of humanity, and resurrected from the grave. God the Holy Spirit actively works through prayers and offers guidance in life; he is always present.⁸¹

God is considered sovereign because he is powerful over all things, he knows everything, he is present everywhere, and he is eternal.

According to the Christian faith, humans are made in God's image, which gives each of us enormous capacity. We have the responsibility of being stewards of the world because we can think and make choices. We have the ability to be in a conscious, personal relationship with God.

Also, as humans made in God's image, we have a conscience. We know right from wrong, and we can choose to honor God or dishonor Him. To dishonor God and to do things that are contrary to God's will is to sin. Sin includes lying, stealing, murdering, gossiping, being controlled by addictions, being jealous or selfish, hating others, degrading others, falling to hurtful temptations, profaning others, and anything else that dishonors God. According to the Bible, everyone sins: "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard" (Romans 3:23).

While humans get trapped in sin, God is considered holy, which means God is perfect and set apart from all sin and evil. Being holy, God requires justice and accountability for human sinfulness. But, God is also loving and gracious, so he offers to each person the opportunity to be forgiven and to be brought into a good relationship with him. This loving, forgiving, saving work of God was done through Jesus Christ. As Jesus is God himself, he was the only perfect human who could effectively justify God's requirement for punishment. Therefore, Jesus took humanity's punishment through dying on the cross. Jesus then defeated death as he came alive again from the grave. The results for people who receive God's gift of salvation are tremendous: God forgives all sins, a person can pray to God and be in a conscious relationship with God, the Holy Spirit is present and counsels a person through life, and a person can rise from death and go to heaven.

As described above, people adhere to many different religions. To that, I have heard it said, "It does not matter what religion you have because we all believe in the same God and we are all going to the same place after we die anyway." Mahatma Gandhi was a great man of peace for India and for the world, and he was one for religious tolerance. Gandhi insisted, "The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the different religions...Any attempt to root out traditions, effects of heredity, etc., is not only bound to fail, but is a sacrilege. The soul of religions is one, but is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will persist to the end of time...Truth is the exclusive property of no single scripture...I cannot ascribe exclusive divinity to Jesus. He is as divine as Krishna or Rama or Mohammed or Zoroaster."⁸²

This trend toward spiritual and religious relativity is becoming more common. National Public Radio did a story on the growing popularity of chaplaincy programs on university campuses. An interfaith chaplain at the University of Southern California said, "Our office is not oriented around God. Our office is oriented around the big questions of meaning and purpose, of significance and authenticity." This interfaith chaplain oversees one hundred student religious groups and fifty chaplains of different faiths, including an atheist chaplain to serve secular students.⁸³

Religious tolerance and religious freedom are important human rights. People of different belief systems should respect each other and learn from each other. But, is religious truth as relative as Gandhi and others believe it to be? That is challenged by certain truths proclaiming themselves to be absolute and exclusive over all other truths. If a crime is committed by one person against another person and there are no witnesses, it is the legal system's task to find the one truth of what exactly happened. Though different versions of what happened may be presented, there is only one truth of what really happened. In the same way, when a religion is in complete disagreement with another religion's version of truth, it would seem incorrect for a person to declare that something they believe to be false is true for someone else. Though opinions may vary, it ultimately is either true for life, or it is false.⁸⁴

Jesus Christ said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." Those words of Jesus may be the most polarizing in this book. Likewise, while some religions encourage faith in many gods, or in gods who are different than God as described in the Bible, God himself speaks to that in the Ten Commandments:

I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods (Exodus 20:2-5).

That Jesus is exclusive in proclaiming to be the Savior, and that God describes himself as "jealous" are understandable. God as Creator provides for people's sustenance. God as Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice in love and grace for people. God as Holy Spirit is present for people. In return for those blessings, God asks for complete allegiance and worship.

Every one of us holds in common the ability to experience multiple blessings from God, as well as the ability to worship God in response to the blessings. How we each choose to respond is a personal, individual choice.