

Other Religions: Their Origins, Scriptures and Basic Teachings

John M. Oakes - Tuesday, July 24, 2001

NOTES ON OTHER RELIGIONS

Some helpful definitions:

Polytheism: a religious system which includes worship of many gods.

Pantheism: a theological perspective that sees God as being synonymous with the universe or with nature--kind of like "the Force" of Star Wars.

Animism: belief that all animals, or perhaps all objects contain individual spirits.

Asceticism: a belief that enlightenment, or a close relationship with deity is obtained by an extreme denial of worldly pleasures and possessions. Associated with monasteries, monks, nuns, and the like.

Mysticism: a belief which has been incorporated in all world religions which sees enlightenment and spiritual powers coming through contemplation/meditation.

ZOROASTRIANISM

Founder: Zoroaster (Zarathustra)

Although his character has been highly mythologized, Zoroaster is almost certainly an historical figure who lived somewhere around 600 BC in Persia.

Region of the world: Zoroastrianism was formerly the dominant religion in Persia. Since the conquest of the Arabs, it has become a minor religion, mainly in Iran and India.

Scriptures:

1. The Avesta and the Zand. Sayings of Zoroaster. Most are now lost.
2. The Gathas. Sayings of Zoroaster which were not lost.
3. Later writings: The Bindahish--mythology and history. The Dinkard--commentary, doctrines, history, traditions. Written hundreds of years after Zarathustra.

Beliefs:

Zoroaster did not claim deity or to work miracles. Semi-monotheistic worship of Ahura Mazda in fire temples. Ahura Mazda is in a sense a fire god.

Other gods: Mithra, Anahita

Strong emphasis on the battle between good and evil.

HINDUISM

Founder: none.

Hinduism is the national religion of India. Certain parts of the world which have come under strong political influence by the Indian culture contain elements of Hinduism in their religion. Early on, Hinduism was quite animistic. Later, it evolved into more of a pantheistic religion. It has always been polytheistic. It is very difficult to separate the caste system in India from the religious system of Hinduism because of its relationship to the reincarnation doctrine. Nevertheless, many "gurus" have attempted to transplant a westernized form of Hinduism in the western world.

(Transcendental Meditation, Hare Krishnas, guru Maharaj Ji, etc....) There is a strong tendency toward mysticism in most sects of Hinduism.

Scriptures:

1. Four Vedas. Poems from around 1500-1200 BC. Originally transmitted orally. Written down around 500 BC. Oldest surviving manuscript 1300 AD. Very strong element of animism and polytheism. Thirty-three main gods. Gods of places and things. Nature worship. Here is found the teaching that the earth is supported on four elephants on the back of a turtle swimming in a huge bowl of milk.
 2. Brahmanas. 1000-500 BC. These introduced the priestly system and the caste system.
 3. Upanishads. 800-500 BC. Philosophical treatises. More emphasis on meditation. Brahman has evolved into a pantheistic "god." rather than an individual. Brahman the spiritual reality behind the unreal physical world. The world we observe is maya--an illusion. The soul is Atman, and Atman is part of Brahman. Therefore, we are in a sense deity. The concept of karma is developed, related to the concept of sin. Karma is a works salvation concept. Reincarnation became part of Hinduism. Note: none of this was in the Vedas.
 4. Baghavad Gita, Ramayana, etc., Epic poems from 200BC -- 200 AD. At this point, two main gods, in addition to Brahman emerge in Hinduism. These are Vishnu and Shiva. A strong sensual element emerges. Vishnu and Shiva have undergone various incarnations. This is what the epics are about. Vishnu was incarnated as Rama and as Krishna. The stories are strongly mythological in tone, containing such things as monkey-people, gods intervening in wars (as in Greek mythology) and the like.
 5. Sutras. Rules, doctrines, rituals, commentaries on the Vedas. Attempting to bring together the various aspects of Hinduism.
 6. Puranas. The Bible of the common people of India. Various myths, fables and legends concerning local gods and the like. Totally unbelievable. You will not find Hindus in the Western world using these.
- Clearly, Hinduism can be a confusing religion. The chief aspects to be aware of in Western world are reincarnation, pantheism, meditation and mysticism.

Summary:

1. Hindu scriptures are not defensible as "inspired" in the same sense as the Bible. They contain much of what is clearly myth, fable etc.
2. A significant amount of self-contradiction as the religion has evolved extremely over time.
3. Although they may sound very pious, the essence of Hinduism is self-centered, as Hindus believe they are deity. There is a strong emphasis on self-realization.
4. The New Age movement is essentially an offshoot of Hindu religion.

JAINA/JAINISM

Founders: Parshva, about 750 BC, and Mahavira, 599-527 BC.
Mahavira was a contemporary of Gautama Buddha in India (Buddha 567-487 BC). He was the last of a line of gurus, beginning with Parshva.

Location: Several million followers, mostly in India.

Scriptures:

1. Purva. Fourteen texts. Teachings of Mahavira. All lost
 2. Angas. Twelve sets of teachings. All originals lost. Reconstituted around 600-900 AD from oral tradition.
 3. Many other scriptures.
- Much of the content of these are obviously mythical.
These scriptures teach:
1. The earth is the center of the universe. Two suns and two moons.

2. The earth has existed forever.
3. Pantheistic. Everything has soul--even water has soul.
4. Many gods.

A very strongly philosophical tendency.

A five-fold path to righteousness. Nonviolence Truthfulness Non-stealing Chastity Non-possession/Non-attachment

Jaina clearly has roots in Hinduism, but it rejected the priestly class in lieu of a personal righteousness.

The heart of Jaina is asceticism--achieving enlightenment through denying the physical self. The ultimate good is to starve yourself to death.

Karma/works salvation. Reincarnation,

Devoted Jainas breathe through a cloth to avoid killing bugs.

BUDDHISM

Founder: Gautama Buddha or Siddhartha. Northern India, 567-487 BC.

Location: Mainly Sri Lanka, Nepal, China, Tibet, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia and Bali. Very few in India!

Buddhism is divided into many main sects with extremely varying teachings. The two chief divisions are:

Hinayana--lesser vehicle. Asceticism more common. The most pious saints reach nirvana. Closer to the original teachings of Buddha. Ceylon, Burma, Thailand. Less polytheistic.

Mahayana--greater vehicle. Mysticism stressed. Many Boddhisatvas (incarnations of Buddha).

Many gods. Idolatry common. China, Tibet, Korea and Japan. This form bears little resemblance to the teachings of Buddha.

Scriptures: No one scripture is accepted by all Buddhists. There are a broad variety of "scriptures," in many languages. In general the writings of Buddhists include:

1. Sayings of Buddha.
2. Doctrines, interpretations of the sayings of Buddha.
3. Philosophical discussions, ethics.
4. Apocryphal stories of previous Buddhas. These are clearly mythological, containing lots of miracles etc.

Buddha: Born of a wealthy family. He left home and his inheritance to pursue an ascetic life. He later claimed to have a vision, because of which he rejected asceticism. His movement was a negative response, both to asceticism (Jaina) and to priestism/ritualism (Hinduism). He proposed a middle path of righteous living called the eight fold path, much of which we might find ourselves agreeing with. He did not claim to be God or to work miracles, but to have a wise path to living a spiritual life.

Doctrines:

1. The eight-fold path to righteous living. Hold the right views, Have the right aspirations, Use the right speech, Show the right conduct, Pursue the right livelihood, Expend the right effort, Maintain the right attitude, Practice the right meditation.
2. Through this, one can overcome one's karma, and achieve enlightenment. Essentially works salvation.
3. Pantheistic. God is in nature and he is in us. Virtually agnostic.
4. Modern Buddhism--as opposed to Buddha's teaching--has many gods, myths, etc.

CONFUCIANISM

Founder: Confucius 551-478 BC in China.

Location: primarily in China, although some Confucian influence can be found in Korea and Viet Nam.

Scriptures:

A. The five great books.

1. I-Ching 1000 BC. Book of divination, magic.
2. Shu-Ching. History, ancient documents, speeches.
3. Shin-Ching 800-600 BC. Poetry used extensively by Confucius. Customs concerning courtship, marriage, war, agriculture, feasts, sacrifices, etc..
4. Li Chi. Book of ceremonial etiquette. 200 BC -- 200 AD.
5. Ch'un Chiu. History of one Chinese province. Collected by Confucius?

B. The four great books.

1. Lun Yu. Written down 400 BC. The sayings of Confucius, especially on ethics and government.
2. Ta Hsueh. Unknown author around 350 BC. Philosophy of the self-made man.
3. Chung-Yund Written by Tfu Su, grandson of Confucius. Harmonious development of human nature.
4. Meng Tzu. Written by Shu Mencius, 372-287 BC. Mencius helped to make Confucius' teachings a national philosophy in China.

Confucius: A government bureaucrat who became known in his own time as a great teacher. Confucius never made claims of deity or to work miracles. He was just a "good teacher."

1. Not a religious leader--he accepted the religious superstition of his day as sufficient.
2. Agnostic--"Keep aloof from spiritual matters, but perform the ceremony correctly."
3. Utilitarian, conservative philosophy. Each person should accept his position in society for righteousness and stability. Strong emphasis on proper government, training for holding government office.
4. Ancestor worship stressed.
5. Later Confucian philosophy involved emphasis on ying and yang--the competing balance between good vs. evil, physical vs. spiritual, hate vs. love.

Note: historically, there were three major competing philosophical systems in China: Taoism, Moism and Confucianism. Confucianism won out eventually as more practical.

TAOISM

Founder: Lao Tzu--a contemporary of Confucius A somewhat obscure background.

Location: Principally in China.

Scripture: The Tao Te Ching. Tao = way Te = power Ching = teaching

Basic doctrine: Through non-involvement and withdrawal, we come to know god/deity. Emphasis on self-interest, asceticism.

Commonly said of Taoists: "He would not pluck so much as a hair out of his head for the benefit of his fellow man."

Pantheistic: God found through contemplating nature. "Sitting in forgetfulness."
A strong emphasis on mysticism and magic.

Modern Taoism: gods, genii, immortals. Lao Tzu declared a god in 666AD. Deities of the kitchen, city, fire, disease, etc. Has evolved into animism.

SHINTO

The national religion of Japan.

Origin: obscure. Like Hinduism, Shinto was not founded, but evolved from animistic beginnings. Shinto is the naturalistic/animistic religion of ancient Japan. Its teachings are based on mythology. Many Japanese are at the same time Buddhist and Shinto without seeing any real contradiction. Many worship at the temple (Buddhism) at certain religious festivals, but maintain shrines (Shinto) in their homes. Shinto is a religion of ritual and tradition.

Scripture? Possibly the Warongo. Written 1669 by Sawada Gennai. Oracles of the gods. The "God of Heaven" is a nebulous super-god. Pantheistic.

An excerpt from a Shinto "scripture.":

Some time later the brother of Ameratsu, named his Brave-Swift-Impetuous-Male-Augustness did a number of things which caused grave offense and fright to the sun goddess. For example, he caused damage to be done to the rice fields, and he also flayed backward a "heavenly piebald horse" and flung it through the roof of the hall where Ameratsu was weaving garments for the gods....

Japanese emperors are literally descended from the gods.
Worship at simple shrines with priests and idols.

ISLAM (literally, submit the will in Arabic)

Founder: Muhammad. About 570 -- 632 AD, in Mecca, in modern Saudi Arabia.

Location: Northern Africa, almost the entire Middle East, Pakistan Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Albania, Indonesia and the Phillipines, with scatterings elsewhere.

At the age of 40, Muhammad claims to have received a vision in which he was called by the angel Gabriel to be a prophet. He had very little success for several years, converting only a small group of disciples primarily from his own clan. Expelled from Mecca for his religious beliefs in 622 AD, he went to Medina. This trip, known as the Hegira, is very important to Muslims. After acceptance at Medina, he began to make a number of conversions. He massacred many Jews in Medina. He sponsored piratical raids on caravans from Mecca out of a spirit of revenge, and to finance his government. Eventually he conquered Mecca and established it as his religious capital. Eventually, as his wealth increased, Muhammad had nine wives. He died in 632 AD, having conquered much the Arabian peninsula.

Religious background:

The Arab people were involved in pagan religion, worshiping many idols. In Mecca there were four main pagan gods: Allah, Allat, al Uzza and Manat. Allah was worshiped as an idol at a black meteorite in what is known as the Ka'bah. Mohammad raised Allah to be the chief, and eventually the only god. Muslims still worship the idol/black rock in the Ka'bah in their famous pilgrimages.

Scriptures: The Qu'ran (Koran) Written all or in part by Muhammad. The original has been edited extensively over the years. Nevertheless, there is a strong link back to the original writings of Muhammad.

$\frac{3}{4}$ the length of the New Testament

Written in 114 "suras" treatises arranged in order from longest to shortest.

No clear order to the suras in terms of chronological order or teaching.

Very repetitious. Apparently, when Muhammad wrote, he did not have in mind to create a single compiled book.

Three apparent periods for the writing of the Koran which are reflected in the content and philosophy of the writings.

1. Early Meccan period. Arguments for there being only one god--for Allah being that one god.
2. Mecca/Medina period. Muhammad had more exposure to Judaism. Seeks to make Allah equivalent to the God of the Old Testament. Stories about Abraham, Moses, Noah, etc.
3. Later Medina period. Muhammad has massacred many Jews. Islam is now a religion to stand on its own. Muhammad wants a book uniquely for the Arabs which would be equivalent to the Bible. Abraham called a Muslim. Hints that eventually Islam would be the enemy, not the friend of "peoples of the book." (Jews or Christians). Ex: Surah 5:63 God turns some Jews into apes and pigs.

Scientific blunders:

1. Surah 21:33. The sun orbits the earth.
2. Surah 12 mentions 11 planets.
3. Surah 34:9, Surah 52:44 A piece of the sky falls and kills someone.
4. Surah 34:11 King David makes an iron coat of mail.

Doctrines:

1. Praying toward the Ka'bah five times a day. Originally, Muslims prayed toward Jerusalem, but later Muhammad changed that. All good Muslims must make a pilgrimage to Mecca at some time in their life. Observance of Ramadan, a month of fasting, in which they eat no food from sunrise to sunset.
2. Monotheism very strongly emphasized.
3. No priests, no idols, no alcohol, pork.
4. Predestination. Allah leads astray who he will. No free will.
5. Judgement, heaven and hell, somewhat similar to the New Testament, except heaven is a very sensuous place with men waited on by beautiful virgins, eating food like a banquet, etc.
6. The prophets never sinned. Muslims refuse to accept that Noah got drunk. (Genesis 9:21).
7. Jesus was a prophet, similar to Mohammad, but definitely not a savior. He was not killed on a cross.
8. Muhammad is the fulfillment of John 14:16,17, the comforter who God was to send. Muhammad the greatest and final prophet.
9. Works "salvation." We are saved by our own righteous life. Allah primarily a god of justice, not of love.
10. The doctrine of jihad, or holy war for Allah. Death in jihad is a sure means to going to heaven.
11. In fairness, some of the worst aspects of modern Islam are not in the Koran--for example horrible treatment of women.

Sects:

1. Sunni. The orthodox sect. Most Moslems are Sunni. Followed the caliphs, not the family line of Muhammad.
2. Shia. Only Muhammad's direct descendents can lead the true Muslims. They are waiting for a sort of second return of Muhammad's descendents to earth: the Mahdi--sort of like a Messiah concept. Iran, Lebanon, scatterings in other Moslem countries.

These two groups are surprisingly similar in doctrine, and even in practice. Islam is much more united than "Christianity."

3. Sufis. Moslem mystics and ascetics.

SIKKHISM

Founder: Nanak 1469-1538 AD, in Punjab province in India.

The religion Nanak founded has every appearance of being an attempt to forge a philosophical/religious bridge between Islam and Hinduism. Nanak claims to have had a vision, after which he declared "There is no Hindu and no Muslim." Nanak worked no miracles. He did not claim deity, but to have a better way to God.

Location: Tens of millions, mostly in Northwest India, centered around Gujarat province and its capital in Amristar where the Golden Temple is located.

Scriptures:

1. The Adi Ganth, or the Ganth. Written down in 1604 AD by Arjun, the fifth of the great gurus of the Sikh religion. The writings of Nanak, Arjun and other early Sikh gurus, and even some by non-Sikhs. Hymns, doctrines and a prayer book.
2. The Ganth of the Tenth King. Writings of the last of the "great gurus," Guru Gobind Singh.
3. The Janamsakhis Legends. These are obviously mythical stories of supposed miracles which Nanak worked. In fact, Nanak did not claim to be able to work miracles.

Doctrines:

1. Monotheistic.
2. Opposed to religious formalism, priests, religious divisions.
3. The word Sikh literally means learner or disciple.
4. Strong opposition to idolatry.
5. Strong opposition to asceticism.
6. Baptism in sugar water holding a two-edged dagger.
7. Works salvation. "Sin and sorrow are destroyed by hearkening."

Several of the original gurus were martyred by the Hindus. Sikkhs have traditionally been very militaristic. They can be thought of as the exact opposite of the Jains. Sikh militants killed Mohatma Gandhi and Indhira Gandhi.

BAHAI

Founder: Baha-ullah "The Glory of God" (Mirza Husain Ali) (1817-1892) and The Bab "The Gate" (Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi) (1819-1850)

Location: About 6 million in Iran, Iraq, small communities across the Middle East, Europe, India, the US etc.

The Bab is more or less the John the Baptist of Bahai. He claimed to be the forerunner of One greater than himself"who was to come after him. He started a religious movement in 1844 which spread rapidly in Iran, but which was extremely persecuted. His religious movement could be thought of as a reform movement within Islam. He was martyred in 1850.

Baha-ullah was a Babi--a wealthy follower of the Bab. He was imprisoned, and in 1852 he claims to have received a vision while in prison of a divine woman who declared him to be "The Beauty of God amongst you." Narrowly escaping execution, he was exiled to Bagdadh, where, in 1863 he officially pronounced himself to be the fulfillment of the Bab's prophecy of one who would come after him. Baha-ullah spent most of the rest of his life in prisons or in house arrest in Adrianople, Istanbul and Acre.

Scriptures:

1. The Kitab-I-Aqdas (the Most Holy Book). Written by Baha-ullah. A collection of teachings, laws and principles to be obeyed by his followers, as well as instructions for organizing the Bahai religion.
2. The Kitab-I-Iqan (Book of Certitude). The nature of religion and how the Bahai faith is the fulfillment in present day of prophecies of other religions.
3. The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys. Mystical treatises written while Baha-ullah was influenced by Sufi mystics.
4. The Hidden Words. Aphorisms on spiritual and ethical themes.
5. etc... Baha-ullah wrote extensively.

Teachings:

1. Baha-ullah is the last in a line of prophets from Moses to Buddha, Jesus Christ and Muhammad. (sound familiar?) The vision of Baha-ullah in prison is analogous to Moses at the burning bush, Buddha under the Bodhi tree, Christ when the dove fell on him or Mohammad when Gabriel appeared to him in the cave.
2. Baha-ullah did no miracles. He did not claim to be deity, but to be a prophet, spoken of by other scriptures, including the New Testament.
3. The Bahai faith is the one which will unify all world religions, as it is the culmination of all these faiths.
4. Strong emphasis on good works, taking care of the poor, education, the rights of women, political justice.
5. A rejection of a priestly class, religious trappings in general.
6. Worship in shrines. Many are 9-sided as the symbol of the Bahai is the 9-sided star.
7. Monotheistic

MORMONISM (The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints)

Founder: Joseph Smith (1805 - 1844)

Location: Utah Mormons are headquartered in Salt Lake City. Reorganized Mormons are headquartered in Independence Missouri. The Utah Mormons are now a world-wide organization.

Joseph Smith was a vagrant and charlatan who had an early interest in religious charlatanism. He was arrested and convicted of bilking people out of money by performing divining and using "magic stones" to find supposed hidden treasure. He claimed to have a vision and to receive a commission from Jesus and from John the Baptist. He also claims to have been visited by more than one angel, including Gabriel. Beginning in 1827 he claims to have translated the Book of Mormon from golden tablets he found buried near Palmyra New York. The writing on the tablets was in "Reformed Egyptian" writing, He translated the plates using the same "magic stones" he called the Urim and the Thummim. The Mormon Church has never produced these tablets. All the original witnesses to the tablets later fell away from Mormonism. Joseph Smith had as his chief adviser Sydney Rigdon, a former member of the Disciples of Christ (Alexander Campbell) who was into speaking in tongues. He influenced Smith to include the speaking of tongues and water

immersion baptism in his fledgling religion. Smith was killed in a riot when a mob broke him and his brother out of prison and shot him. Mormonism soon split into several groups, the largest of which followed Brigham Young to the Salt Lake valley. Many who remained behind were reconstituted as the Reorganized Mormons in Independence Missouri.

Scripture:

1. The Book of Mormon. Published 1830. A grade-B historical religious novel about a group of Jews who migrated to the New World in a boat, and a later group of the lost tribes of the Jews who also migrated to the New World. Many wars are described. The book records Jesus coming to the New World to preach to these people. The last of the great teachers of this group recorded the history of his people and buried the books, which Joseph Smith later dug up. Large parts of this book were lifted directly from another 1820's author. The story is completely unsupported by history or archaeology.
2. The Pearl of Great Price, containing the Articles of Faith (Smith) the Doctrine and the Covenants, The Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham. The Doctrine and Covenants are an open-ended collection of precepts of the church, including teachings of Smith, Brigham Young and others.
3. The Bible (so far as it is correctly interpreted)

Teachings:

1. The original church completely fell away with the death of the original apostles. There was no legitimate church for about 1700 years.
2. Joseph Smith is a prophet of God. He did not work miracles. He was not deity per se, but Mormonism makes a slim distinction between humans and deity.
3. The Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are three separate gods.
4. Truly spiritual people can become gods as well, eventually having their own world to be the god of.
5. Faith, repentance, water immersion baptism, holy spirit baptism.
6. Polygamy. Taught and practiced by Smith, even with married women. Officially denounced in 1890.
7. Blacks and especially Indians are degenerate humans. Racism officially renounced in the 1980's through a new "revelation."
8. A group of 12 "apostles" receive modern-day revelation.
9. Baptism for dead people.
10. Modern-day priesthood of Melchizedek.

Outline created by John Oakes