

A Deeper Look at World Religions

By Miguel Angel Endara

“And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance in the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.”

—J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*

In the above quotation, Frodo sails the Great Sea toward paradise. Tolkien’s words awaken a deep longing within us—the hope of living in an idyllic state where all of our heart’s desires will find their ultimate fulfillment. Fairy tales, myths, legends, and even the religions of the world seek to address these longings.

Many religions state that people feel these desires because we all live in a fallen world; we experience spiritual alienation while we yearn for redemption and joy. A variety of religions affirm the idea that the world was once perfect but has since been corrupted by evil. Now nothing is as it should be. But there’s hope for us, individually and for the whole world—there will be a time of rebirth and renewal when all things will be made new.

How, exactly, do the world religions concern themselves with these longings? Each religion—including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and the New Age Movement—has its own teachings about [evil](#), salvation, and the [afterlife](#).

Hinduism

[Hinduism](#) is the main religion in India. Its diverse beliefs run from atheism—the belief in no deity—to polytheism—belief in many gods. Hinduism includes practices like asceticism and those associated with secular social position and stage of life. This variety of teachings and practices may be due to its lack of official creed, centralized hierarchy, or recognized founders. This makes Hinduism a bit difficult to explain.

One helpful way of understanding Hinduism is through “family resemblances.” Applied to Hinduism, the best way to classify it is through some of the features its many diverse manifestations share, especially those of its priestly/scholarly tradition.

Scholars believe that between 1500 and 1200 BCE, Indo-Aryan peoples migrated to the Indian subcontinent, where their culture and religion developed and spread for the next millennium.¹ Many of their religious epics, hymns, and prayers were passed down through oral tradition to become the sacred texts we now call the Vedas.²

Another important set of writings is the Brahmanas (c. 800–600 BCE), a collection of explanations, mythology, ritual application, and mystic speculations about sacrifice and the universe.³ A third set is the Upanishads (c. 600–300 BCE), which carry these speculations further, to the point of monism (the belief that all reality is one).⁴

Transmigration, Retribution, and Release

Many Hindus claim that the universe consists of *Brahman*—a notion in which absolute reality or pure consciousness both transcends and is all things. Each individual thing or being—humans, animals, plants, and inorganic matter—possesses an inner essence called an *Atman*. The Upanishads suggest that Atman and Brahman are actually one and the same impersonal reality.⁵

¹ S. A. Nigosian, *World Faiths*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1994), 76.

² *World Religions*, ed. Geoffrey Parrinder (New York: Facts On File, 1971), 194.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Nigosian, 83–85.

Simple analogies help to capture the relationship between Atman and Brahman. For example, as the pebble of sand is to the beach, the drop of water is to the ocean, and the flicker is to the flame, so is the individual soul (Atman) to the universal soul (Brahman). Everything that the pebble, water drop, and flicker are to the beach, ocean, and flame, the individual soul is to the universal soul. They are one and the same ultimate reality.

If reality is one, then our common human experience of the dichotomy and diversity of existence is an illusion (*maya*).⁶ This illusory appearance of the world makes us ignorant of the truth.⁷ Since Atman—our true self—is pure consciousness, we should avoid worldly attachments to objects based on illusory distinctions. Attachment to the world brings forth evil and suffering. It impels the soul on a cycle of life and death (*samsara*) in which we acquire one form of being after another according to our deeds in each previous life.⁸ This is determined by the implacable, impersonal law of *karma*, which judges the soul from death to life and back again.⁹

But the weary soul can achieve liberation or release (*moksha, Nirvana*) from its endless cycle. By becoming detached from this world and totally identified with the universal soul, one can eventually be reunited with ultimate reality.¹⁰ Ignorance and evil finally fall away, and the soul is reabsorbed into Brahman.

Hinduism Summarized

To summarize, according to Hinduism there is great evil in the world due to our attachment to worldly illusions and our ignorance of our true selves. But if we achieve liberation from worldly attachments, we can become reabsorbed into Brahman.

Buddhism

Unlike Hinduism, [Buddhism](#) has a known founder: Siddhartha Gautama, who lived from 563–483 BCE. When he was born in what is now Nepal, a Hindu priest prophesied that if he remained at home he would become a great monarch; otherwise, he would become a great religious teacher.¹¹

Siddhartha's father, wanting his son to have worldly prominence, raised him in the palace with great luxury, shielding him from exposure to any kind of evil or suffering. But when Siddhartha was twenty-nine years old he ventured beyond the palace and saw human evil and suffering for the first time.¹² He first encountered a decrepit old man using a crutch; then a sick man soiled by incontinence; then a corpse being carried to its funeral pyre; and finally a clean-shaven, wandering monk living an ascetic life. Forever changed, Siddhartha left home to seek a solution for suffering.

A Hindu sage helped Siddhartha on his quest by showing him how to reach the “realm of nothingness.”¹³ Quickly attaining this state—yet finding no real solution to human suffering—Siddhartha moved on to meditation and severe physical austerity.¹⁴ According to legend, during this time he became so emaciated that when he touched his stomach he could feel his backbone. At the brink of death, he decided that the path of austerity was no solution and resolved to recover his health.

At age thirty-five Siddhartha achieved enlightenment while meditating in India under what is now known as the Bodhi tree, becoming the supreme *Buddha* (enlightened one).¹⁵ He then attracted disciples eager to find the antidote for evil and suffering. After the Buddha's death his movement began to divide; today there are hundreds of Buddhist sects.

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path

The Buddha claimed to have discovered a “middle path” of morality, meditation, and wisdom to help us avoid the equally unhelpful extremes of indulgence and austerity.¹⁶ But to understand this path one must first grasp the Four Noble Truths.¹⁷

First, life is in a state of suffering (*dukkha*) that inevitably involves dissatisfaction, anxiety, misery, and pain. We may experience joy, but only for fleeting moments. In fact, everything in our impermanent universe is in a constant state of flux—*always becoming but not being*. (For example, there is no human nature or dog nature or cat nature.) Indeed, there is no ego, no I, no self. Instead, as a flame passes from candle to candle, so our lives pass from one state to another; we are a bundle of sensations.

⁶ Parrinder, 215.

⁷ See Nigosian, 85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹² *Ibid.*, 121.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 121–123.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁶ Parrinder, 272–274.

¹⁷ Nigosian, 128–129.

Second, the state of *dukkha* is the result of *tanha*—craving and desiring. We desire good health, riches, and ideas and concepts. But we don't realize that all of these things are part of the impermanent world. Even if, at one point, we could obtain all we wanted, these things would quickly dissipate and leave us craving still.

Third, we must experience *nirodha*, the cessation of all selfish desires, in order to escape from *tanha*.

Fourth, the way to attain *nirodha* is *maggā*, the Noble Eightfold Path.¹⁸ This includes right understanding, right thought, right speech, right bodily action, right livelihood, right moral effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. In short, the Noble Eightfold Path is the way of morality, meditation, and wisdom—the path toward Nirvana.

Buddhism Summarized

In sum, then, the great evil and suffering that we encounter in our lives comes from the impermanence of all things and from our own cravings and desires. The world, in other words, is such that our cravings and desires will never be fully satisfied. Through this perpetual lack, we experience suffering. But there is a way out. If we follow the Noble Eightfold Path of morality, meditation, and wisdom, we allay our cravings and embark on the path toward Nirvana.

Judaism

[Judaism](#) is one of the three most well known monotheistic faiths, along with Christianity and Islam. These three are sometimes called the Abrahamic religions, for they ascribe their origins to Abraham. All monotheistic traditions make a fundamental distinction between the creator and his creation.

Judaism proclaims that one—and *only* one—God exists. He created the heavens and the earth and all that is therein.¹⁹ We see this in the traditional morning and evening prayer of Judaism, the prayer of the *Shema Yisrael*, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”²⁰

Judaism began around 1900 BCE when, according to Jewish sacred tradition, God called out Abram and renamed him Abraham. Due to his faith and obedience, God established an everlasting covenant with him and his descendants.²¹ As part of this covenant, God promised Abraham that he would become the father of many nations, and God promised Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan.

Though Abraham had previously sired Ishmael, the covenantal lineage of Abraham continued through Isaac and Isaac's son, Jacob, whom God renamed Israel. As such, the twelve sons of Jacob—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin—became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became Israel's three great patriarchs. Thus the Israelites became God's chosen people.

Redemptive History

Contemporary Judaism runs the theological gamut from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal interpretations of their history and God's covenant with them. Theologically, there is little that all Jews can agree on. In any case, the following are some beliefs connected with God's redemptive plan for Jews and the world with which many Jews will agree.

The Hebrew Bible, also called the *Tanakh*, contains the sacred writings of Judaism. The first five books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—are known as the *Torah* or Law. In Genesis, God creates the heavens, the earth, all plants and animals, man, and woman.²² Man and woman are placed in a garden paradise, where they live and commune with God. However, they rebel against their creator; consequently, God places a curse upon them and their descendants—meaning all humanity. This rebellion and subsequent curse are the sources of all of the natural and human evil in the world.

Within the book of Exodus, the Israelites are delivered by God through Moses—Israel's greatest prophet, the only one “whom the Lord knew face to face”—after living in slavery in Egypt for four hundred years.²³ Moses brings down the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai and establishes many of Israel's ceremonial and ethical traditions. It is through Moses that the Hebrew Law—as detailed throughout the rest of the Torah—is revealed and established. Finally, the book of Deuteronomy tells of the Israelites arriving at the River Jordan, ready to cross into the Promised Land.

¹⁸ Ibid., 129–132.

¹⁹ See *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Genesis 1:1.

²⁰ Ibid., Deuteronomy 6:4.

²¹ Ibid., Genesis 12 and 15.

²² Nigosian, 340–348.

²³ *The Holy Bible*, Deuteronomy 34:10.

Apart from the Torah, the Tanakh has two other parts: the *Neviim* (prophets) and the *Kethuviim* (writings). Most of the *Neviim* and the *Kethuviim* continue to recount the redemptive history of humanity through God's dealings with his chosen people and God's promise of restoration and covenantal culmination. Specifically, many Jews believe that a personal Messiah, a descendant of the house of King David, will herald this covenantal culmination, when God will establish his kingdom on earth.²⁴ Until then, God grants Israel a system of atonement for their sins through sacrifices and law-keeping.

Judaism Summarized

We see then, within Judaism, the pristine state of the garden paradise in which God placed the first human beings. We also see the fall of these human beings through rebellion and sin—thus the subsequent need for law and atonement. Yet there will come a time of covenantal culmination where the Jewish Messiah will usher in a new paradise. For now, Jews are to commit acts of atonement for their sins.

Christianity

Christianity emerged in the region of Judea and Galilee during the first century CE. Historically, it can be described as an offshoot of Judaism. Its founder, Jesus of Nazareth, was Jewish, and Christianity shares much history with Judaism. Christians also consider the Hebrew Bible—known within Christianity as the Old Testament—to be Holy Scripture.

According to a group of four Christian books called the gospels, Jesus was directly conceived by God's Holy Spirit and born of a young virgin named Mary. Jesus' earthly adoptive father, Joseph, was a carpenter from Nazareth, where Jesus lived until he was about thirty.

At this time, Jesus began teaching and performing [miracles](#) throughout Galilee and Judea. About three years later, after he was deemed a threat to both political and religious leaders of the region, Jesus was condemned to death and executed for claiming to be the king of the Jews. Three days later, according to Christian belief, he was resurrected and again walked among men before ascending into heaven.

Jesus Christ, the Messiah

As within Judaism, adherents of Christianity also believe that humanity is fallen; after all, the two religions share the same creation story in Genesis. As Paul, an early follower of Jesus, put it in a letter to a group of new Christians in Rome, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."²⁵ As a result of humanity's sinful state, all people are separated and alienated from God. Death is the ultimate consequence of this separation.²⁶

Christians, like Jews, believe that we are all in need of deliverance from our sinful condition—and only God can save us. Both Christians and Jews believe that God's plan is to redeem humanity from this sinful condition. However, here Christianity departs from traditional Judaism. Christians believe that God has already provided this salvation through the person and work of [Jesus](#) Christ.²⁷ In other words, they believe that God's Messiah has already come. Jesus is the Messiah.

Indeed, the very source and focal point of Christianity is Jesus, who Christians believe is both 100 percent human and 100 percent God. The gospels provide a portrait of more than a good man, teacher, or prophet. They present Jesus as the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Messiah—God's Savior for all humanity.

According to Christian sacred tradition, Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, and willingly sacrificed himself on the cross. This ultimate sacrifice is the means through which all sins are forgiven "once for all."²⁸ Most importantly, Jesus was resurrected from the dead three days later, conquering sin and death. Jesus' resurrection opened the pathway for anyone to attain God's forgiveness for sins; it made a personal [relationship](#) with God possible for anyone who pursues it.

Those who place their faith in Jesus can find this forgiveness and receive the gift of eternal life with God. The hope of the Christian is in the second coming of Jesus, in which he will return to the earth in glory.²⁹ Jesus' second coming heralds the judgment of the earth and the fulfillment of biblical covenantal promises—the establishment of the kingdom of God.

The Christian Canon

The gospels and twenty-three other books—including a narrative of the early years of the Christian church, letters from

²⁴ Parrinder, 401.

²⁵ Ibid., Romans 3:23.

²⁶ See *The Holy Bible*, Romans 5:12, 6:23.

²⁷ "Christ" is simply the Greek word for Messiah.

²⁸ *The Holy Bible*, Hebrews 10:10.

²⁹ See *The Holy Bible*, Titus 2:13.

several prominent early Christians, and a prophetic book about the [end times](#)—make up the New Testament. The New Testament and the Old Testament (the *Tanakh* of Judaism) comprise the sacred canon of Christianity.

The title “Old Testament” refers mainly to God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Even though this covenant was directed to God’s chosen people, Israel, God promised to bless the whole world through the Jewish people.³⁰ From the Christian perspective, God did indeed bless the world through Abraham: Jesus was a descendant of Abraham, and through Jesus, God established his New Covenant (or Testament) with the world. That is, because of Jesus’ sacrifice, all people now have the opportunity to have a relationship with God.

The Trinity

A particularly unique aspect of Christianity is the concept that the one true God exists in three co-eternal, co-equal persons: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and God the [Holy Spirit](#). Because of this belief, some view Christianity as a religion of three gods. However, for Christians, there is only *one* God. This theological idea is known as the Christian doctrine of the [Trinity](#).

While the doctrine has its basis in the earliest Christian writings, it was not fully articulated until a few hundred years later. Nonetheless, this idea of a single Triune God (yet still only one God) is accepted by all three main branches of modern-day Christianity—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant.

Christianity Summarized

Christians believe that God became man to save all humanity; Jesus came to earth so that all people might have eternal life with God.³¹ Specifically, Jesus died on the cross and his death became the payment for all people’s sins, thus redeeming our lives through his. Jesus then rose bodily from the grave. By accepting his sacrifice as payment for our sins, Christians can also come to [know God](#), receive his [grace](#) and forgiveness, and eventually conquer death. All those who place their faith in Jesus then live the remainder of their lives according to God’s righteous way as described in the Bible. Ultimately, Christians look forward to the day of Christ’s return when God’s kingdom will be fully established and all people will be resurrected to face God’s judgment or to enter into an eternal life with God.

Islam

In the beginning of the seventh century CE the Arabian Peninsula was best known for its trade routes, for it was one of the most desolate regions on earth, made up of “forbidding deserts, arid steppes and barren mountains.”³² Bordered on the east by the Byzantine Empire and on the west by the Sassanid (Persian) Empire, it was inhabited mostly by warring Bedouin tribes. But by 732 the peninsula’s inhabitants became a fierce fighting force. They conquered and assimilated the Sassanid Empire and two-thirds of the Byzantine Empire, along with great stretches of land from India to North Africa, through most of Spain and part of southern France.³³

How could such nomadic and fragmented tribes so quickly come to lead a vast empire? The answer is [Islam](#), a religion whose name that means “submission” to God’s decrees.

Muhammad

[Muhammad](#), the founder of Islam, was born around 570 CE in Arabia.³⁴ Orphaned at the age of six, Muhammad became a successful caravan merchant as a young man. Noticing his talent, a wealthy widow fifteen years his senior hired him to run her caravan business. They were later married.

Islam teaches that at age forty Muhammad was visited by the Angel Gabriel, who commanded him to “Recite!” The message that would later become the [Qur’an](#) poured forth from him. Muhammad continued receiving messages until his death around 632. Muslims see the words of the Qur’an not as words *inspired* by God (as Jews and Christians view the Bible), but as the very words *of* God, whom Muslims know as Allah.³⁵

The Qur’an is an ethical, political, and religious book intended to lead people to submit to Allah’s will in all areas of life. Though its message was not at first well received by Muhammad’s fellow Arabs, through persuasion and war he unified the contending clans of the peninsula.³⁶

³⁰ See *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 12:3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, John 10:10.

³² *Parrinder*, 463.

³³ *Ibid.*, 475–476.

³⁴ Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), 66.

³⁵ *Parrinder*, 471–472.

³⁶ See *Parrinder*, 468–469 and Nigosian, 421–424.

Islamic Doctrine

Islam has five fundamental doctrines of faith.³⁷

The first is *tawhid*, meaning the absolute unity of God. Islam rejects both polytheism and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as violations of God's unity.

Second is the doctrine of angels, the messengers through whom Allah often accomplishes his purposes.

The third doctrine is the belief in the sacred, revealed texts, as well as in Muhammad as the last and greatest prophet in a long and noble tradition of prophets sent by Allah. Among others, Muslims see Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as prophets.

Fourth is that of the Last Judgment—also called the Day of Doom, Last Day, or Day of Distinguishing. Allah will assemble all human beings who have ever lived and who are still living, handing each one a record book on either the right (a sign of goodness and purity) or left (a sign of evil and impurity). After each human answers for his or her deeds, Allah will assign each one to either eternal joy in paradise or eternal torment in hell.

The fifth and most controversial doctrine is that Allah predetermines the acts and destiny of all human beings, down to the tiniest details.

Islamic Practice

In addition to these doctrines, there are the Five Pillars of Islam. These are the fundamental Islamic practices.³⁸

The first is the *shahada*, the declaration and confession that "There is no God but one, and Muhammad is his prophet." This reminds Muslims of Allah's complete unity and his demand for complete submission.

The second is *salat*, prayer which must be performed five times each day. The call to this prayer is both a call to submission and to an expression of one's gratitude to Allah.

The third is *zakat*, the obligatory act of giving a percentage of one's wealth to benefit others. Islam considers this an act of worship that a Muslim does as a favor to other Muslims. In addition, there is the *zakat al fitr*, whereby Muslims, as they are able, are to give additional alms.

The fourth is *sawm*, the month-long daytime (before dawn through sunset) fast during the ninth lunar month of [Ramadan](#). The fast includes abstaining from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual relations. There are exceptions to this fast but intentionally breaking it is punishable. The intent is to incite awareness of one's dependence on Allah and empathy toward others—especially the poor and hungry.

The fifth is the *hajj*, a pilgrimage to Mecca to be performed at least once by every Muslim who is economically and physically able. The purpose of the hajj is to strengthen the Muslim's devotion to Allah and his will.

Islam Summarized

Within Islam, evil comes from not submitting to Allah by going against his revealed will. As a means of salvation, one may submit to Allah's will through Islam's five doctrines and five practices and through Allah's moral laws. Through this submission, one may not be condemned on the Final Judgment to the fires of hell but instead enjoy the paradise Allah has created for those who submit to his will.

The New Age Movement

In addition to the main religions of the world, many today have sought a path toward spiritual fulfillment outside the main religious systems. One of the more influential of these is sometimes called the New Age Movement (NAM). The New Age Movement is a loose collection of individuals and groups who subscribe to beliefs and practices with an Eastern religious flavor. The NAM has no founder, no official books, no headquarters, and no universal beliefs or practices.

Common Beliefs and Practices

The NAM is an amorphous, eclectic, and syncretistic movement. It draws its inspiration from various sources, including

³⁷ Denny, 92-98.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 105-124.

but not limited to Hinduism, Buddhism, spiritualism, Wicca, neo-paganism, astrology, and Gnosticism. Its practices are just as varied and include vegetarianism and veganism; environmentalism; meditation; yoga; harnessing and directing energy through crystals; pilgrimages to places of energy; *feng shui*; holistic health practices; drug-induced altered states of consciousness; tarot card reading; astral projection; and spirit-channeling.

Bringing in the Age of Aquarius

Two of the most common New Age beliefs are monism (all reality is ultimately one) and pantheism (all reality is god itself). As such, we human beings—or at least our souls or spirits, the true part of us—are one with reality, one with god. As some New Agers put it, humans possess the spark of the divine within us and this makes us divine. Nonetheless, due to the type of life we live, we enter the cycle of rebirth in accord with karma.

But if we are god, why are we subject to the cycle of rebirth? Why does our world experience so much evil and [suffering](#)? Much like ancient Gnosticism, the NAM says we are spirits trapped by material bodies in a universe that blinds us to our true selves. As such, we are not evil; we have a good nature. Instead, we do things that are evil because we are ignorant of who we are; we are ignorant of being gods. We begin to recognize our true selves when we engage in consciousness-altering practices like meditation and yoga and align the good energies of ourselves and the world through crystals and *feng shui*.

However, the New Age quest for enlightenment and spiritual realization isn't necessarily egocentric; numerous followers have strong social consciences.³⁹ For example, many New Agers become vegetarians to minimize the killing of animals. Others promote practices to conserve and renew Mother Earth (or *Gaia*).

Many New Agers strive to help usher in a new age of spiritual enlightenment and social consciousness. In connection with human spiritual evolution, some adherents claim that we have just left the zodiac Age of Pisces that began around the first century CE, which is associated with Christianity. We are now experiencing the dawn of a new age, the Age of Aquarius. This new age will usher in spiritual enlightenment and with it, a near paradise on earth.⁴⁰ Our redemption, then, awaits our enlightenment.

The New Age Movement Summarized

Humans are divine, for they possess a spark of divinity within them. Our problem is that of ignorance. We do not recognize our own divinity and instead act as purely material beings. This ignorance then allows the law of karma to keep us in the cycle of rebirth. However, there is hope. If we enter into alternate states of consciousness and realign the energies around us, we will escape karma and ignorance and help usher in an age of spiritual enlightenment and social consciousness, thus saving ourselves and our society.

Our Common Human Condition

Through Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the New Age Movement, we see our common human condition: the realization of the imperfection of the world due to evil, our need for redemption, and our hope for ultimate peace and joy. Though each religion is different—and exclusive claims are made by each—one thing is certain: we all yearn to reach Frodo's "far green country under a swift sunrise."

³⁹ Elliott Miller, *A Crash Course on The New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 183-184.