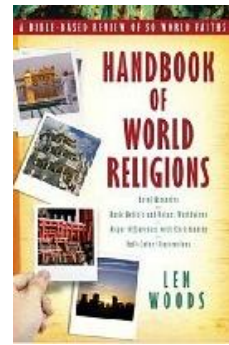


# What's the Difference?

## Lesson 1, 1/18/09

### Nature of Religion & Differences



## SURVEYING THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

### Opening Group Discussion

-What are other religions that you know about and potentially encounter in our world?

-What do you know about these different religions?

-What is a religion? What makes a religion a religion (i.e. the requirements of it)?

## WHAT IS THE "TOOTSIE ROLL" AT THE CENTER OF THE RELIGIOUS LOLLIPOP? (AKA DEFINING RELIGION)

What is a religion? It's a tougher question than we often think but important to define.

Different disciplines will define and describe religions in different ways (i.e. anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history, theology, etc.). Furthermore, different religions would most likely say that something different is at its heart; they would describe themselves differently. Here are dictionary sort of definitions to see what they might help us see.

Webster's Dictionary Online:

1 a: the state of a **religious** <a nun in her 20th year of *religion*> **b** (1): the service and worship of God or the supernatural (2): commitment or devotion to **religious** faith or observance; 2: a personal set or institutionalized system of **religious** attitudes, beliefs, and practices; 3 *archaic* : scrupulous conformity : **CONSCIENTIOUSNESS**; 4: a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith--[but what is "religious?" ... you can't use that in the definition!!!]

Dictionary.com

1. a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, esp. when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.

## A PROBLEM-BASED APPROACH TO RELIGION

Sometimes, when we compare religions, we seek to compare structures and look to see what is the equivalent of what. This assumes that there are the exact same components and the exact same structure in every religion. However, this leads to strange and untrue comparison, as it causes questions that have no answers because they do not really make sense. This happens in everyday life as well. Here are everyday examples where we can do the same thing:

- Child comes up to your playing solitaire and says, "Who's winning?"
- Who is the President of England?
- What does the number 9 smell like? (thanks to the Chris Rice song...)

In the religious sphere, not all religions believe in a "heaven and hell," believe in a "Savior," see sin as a problem, talk about a personal god, have clergy/religious leaders, places or worship or service, etc. Therefore, in order to compare different religions properly, we need to understand religions in their own framework, seeing what their framework does. Does this mean that we cannot compare? No! In spite of the different frameworks, religions inherently seem to seek to do *the same sort of things*. The form might be different, but the *function* is the same; the *content* is package differently, but there is still content. **This is where we find the place of comparison.**

What are the things that are distinctive of all religions? Perhaps the easiest place is to see its perception of the world, both as it is and as it ought to be, and then some idea of how to solve these problems and light in light of these realities. To break it down differently, we can see some similarities to the work of medical doctors.

### **Nature of Reality (How does the system work?)**

- Is there more to the world than what we see?
- How are we to understand what else might be out there?
- What is the nature of humanity and the world?



### **Nature of Problem (What are the symptoms? What is causing the symptoms?)**

- Is there anything wrong in the world?
- What lies at the root of the struggles and battles of life?

### **Nature of Solution (How should we treat the problem?)**

- How is the problem solved?
- How do we live in light of reality and the problems of it?
- What is the fate of people?



The claims of a religious system make sense because of all of these claims—they are inter-related. For example, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life" is dependent on the realities, problems, and solutions seen in the Christian religion (worldview). Sharing this with a person yet in a different religious background does not effectively share the gospel because their understanding of the world is so different! They don't know what a President is!

Therefore, we will focus our discussion of religions upon these issues—the assumed systems of different religions, the diagnosed problem, and the attempted solution.

## RIGHT OR LEFT OR RIGHT AND WRONG?

Now that we know how to compare religions in a way that makes sense of each on its own terms, we need to consider what to make of the differences between them. While this might seem like an easy issue, there are different ways to consider it (even among religions).

### 1. Culture/Opinion

Some people see the differences in religions as being similar to the differences between Coke and Pepsi—they are essentially the same (though “die-hards” will say that there is a significance difference). In many ways, the differences are just cultural; countries and cultures have different traditions and religion is part of what fits one’s identity. In some ways, religion would be more about a country’s culture than about the world as a whole; it is more about your heritage than reality.



### 2. Psychological/Self-Help

Some people see the differences in religion as being similar to the differences between sporting teams and colleges. When we say, “We are number 1” (i.e. this is what we believe), it is just a preference that ultimately fits our culture and circumstances. Just as a person born in Chicago is likely to be a Bears fan (though some might rebel and root for the Packers or Cowboys), so someone in a Christian home is more likely to be a Christian. It is not a big deal—find whatever works for you. Therefore, religious claims say more about you than they do about reality.



### 3. Reality/Correspondence

Some believe (and this is where orthodox Christianity would fall, as well as many traditional religions) that religion is something that is real. Just as there are physical laws, just as there are medical conditions, just as there are real things that happened in the past, so there is something real that religion describes. Therefore, the different religious systems make different claims about the world, claims that are either true or false.

For views 1 or 2, understanding religious differences are academic or just fascinating—it is more of a sociological sort of discussion. However, according to view 3, the differences have real implications. While “religious” conversations can be uncomfortable, they are of tremendous importance, both for this life and for whatever exists beyond this life!

According to view 3, the important thing to remember is that true religion understands the world correctly, as well as the problem and solution—we are out to pursue truth!

### Here’s the way a smart guy defines and evaluates religions:

“A religion proposes a *diagnosis* (an account of what it takes the basic problem facing the human beings to be) and a *cure* (a way of permanently and desirably solving that problem): one basic problem shared by every religious person and one fundamental solution that, however adapted to different cultures and cases, is essentially the same across the board. Religions differ insofar as their diagnoses and cures differ. A particular religion is true if its diagnosis is correct and its cure is efficacious.” Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*, 17.

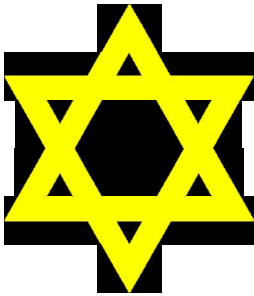
## OVERWHELMED? FIND YOUR “RELIGIOUS FAMILY”

How can we begin our journey of exploring different religions? As you can see from Len Woods' *Handbook of World Religions*, there are so many of them. People spend all of their life just trying to understand *their own* religion, let all *other religions*, so each religion could exhaust multiple classes. Furthermore, how do we do so as those who have faith in Jesus Christ, who believe in His Lordship and desire to grow in our faith (remember what our goal is!)?

While it runs the risk of oversimplification, it is often helpful to try to find similarities and resemblances across the different religious ideas out there—to “get a grip” and find some general differences with religion. We have come up with a threefold makeup of religious ideas that you will encounter in life (with the gospel being different from all of them). See pp. 6-8.

### 1. Major World Faiths (p. 6)

These are religions that are dominant forces in particular lands and seem to be relatively ancient of origin. Key examples would be **Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism,** and **Islam**. There would also be the traditional religions of other places, such as traditional **Native American** thoughts and **Chinese** thoughts. These ideas are more than just “theology” but have a whole way of life usually attached to them, truly making them “worldviews”. You might even lump “mainstream” Christianity into this list.



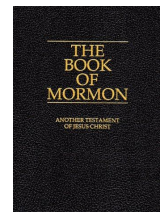
What is often overlooked by Christians looking at these major world religions is the diversity within each group. Just as there are denominations of Christian that share some ideas but also differ in others, there is diversity within these world religions. Therefore, they are more complicated than first meets the eye; we also can make assumptions about an adherent of another faith that might not be true of their branch within the river of their faith. Just as we want people to be sensitive to what different people label “Christian,” we need to be sensitive to different things that can be labeled Islam, Hindu, Jewish, etc.

### Key Things to Remember in talking to people from this background

- Many might hold to their system nominally (see this as their culture, not religion)
- Their religion has strong cultural ties, so conversion is extremely difficult (and complex)
- They likely do not understand the “basics” of Christianity ... can't assume they know it

### 2. Christian Offshoots (p. 7)

Some might use the word “cults” but this term usually doesn't help us talk to them. These religions are relatively new (19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century) and came from people breaking off of Christianity. Prominent examples would be **Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Sciences,** and to some extent **Seventh Day Adventists** and some branches of **Christian Church/Church of Christ (particularly International Church of Christ)**. These systems deviate from orthodox Christianity in affirming another authority besides Scripture, downplay the deity and death of Christ, and have an emphasis on the need to work for salvation (particularly by sharing your faith) as well as the fulfillment of prophecy.



Other religions also have some “overshoots.” Some might put Buddhism into that camp, as it seemed to have some origin in Hinduism. Better examples are **Jainism, Sikhism** (Hinduism and Islam), or **Hare Krishna**. However, in America, we deal most often with the Christian offshoots, and these are more easily confused with apostolic, gospel Christianity.

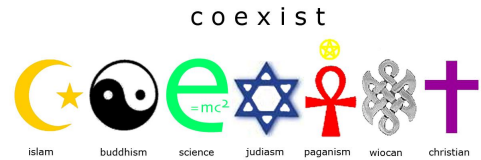
### Key Things to Remember in talking to people from this background

- They see themselves as “persecuted” minority, so be careful not to add to this
- They can use similar terms with different meanings, so define terms
- Do not focus on peripheral issues
- They likely have strong respect for their own authorities, bashing them is not always wise
- They likely know their faith pretty well and might try to convert you!

### 3. “Smorgasbord Religions” (p. 8)

This is where we throw things like **pluralism**, **agnosticism**, “**New Age**,” and **secularism**, as well as things like **Scientology** and maybe things like **Kabbalah**. These religions are usually not “religious” in the same sense as the above; they are highly diverse and de-centralized.

In some ways, they are less “religious” in the usual sense and more philosophies, but they too reflect beliefs about the world and humanity. *In many ways, these systems are the “default” systems of our age—people have “mutt religions.” Many people mix and match views that ultimately are contradictory; we are our own religious guides, as opposed to listening to an institution.*



### Key Things to Remember in talking to people from this background

- They might not think in terms of “either/or,” but seek to synthesize
- They will likely think more about how this affects *their* life than “truth” (man-centered)
- Religious “debates” might turn them off ... usually concerned more with practice

### **As usual: Proceed with Caution**

Like all systems, this threefold distinction breaks down at some points. In some ways, Islam is a reaction against Christianity (Mohammed was familiar with Christian teachings...well, actually perverted forms of Christian teaching). Where does the **Bahai** faith fit in, as it incorporates truth of many religions but then somewhat devolves into religious pluralism? **Buddhism** is often complex, too, because what is usually called Buddhist in America today is not the true form but the popularized form brought over by the likes of the Beatles, etc. Classification always runs the risk of simplification, but it also presents a way to grip a very complex area of knowledge.

## **GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS**

However, something to remember here is that in the class discussion, we are dealing with ideas. **Ideas and people are not the same.** That is, just because someone calls himself/herself Hindu, Muslim, or Christian does not mean that they will exactly espouse the views as discussed in class; in fact, in our day and age, people will very rarely be “pure” anything! **Never assume that you know what a person believes unless you have directly discovered it through conversation. We are called to love them because they have been made in the image of God; we compare and combat false teachings, but we love people who hold them.**

*We are called to treat people as people, but to also seek to engage them in pursuit of the truth.*

### **Potential Questions to Ask Others:**

- How would you define a religion?
- How should we view the differences in religions?
- What would you say the most important thing is in your religious beliefs?
- Do you think that there are misconceptions about your religious beliefs/institutions?
- What would it take to change your religious beliefs? Why? How would that happen?

# World Religions

These religions are common throughout the world, in some ways “traditional” to certain lands and becoming more global through globalization.

	Islam (103-109) <sup>1</sup>	Hinduism (97-102)	Buddhism (17-23)	Judaism (123-130)
<b>Number of Followers</b>	1.2-1.4 billion (5-7 mil. in US)	800 million-1 billion	325-400 million	12-14 million (6 mil. in US)
<b>Place of Origin</b>	Middle East	India	India	Middle East
<b>Appx. Time of Origin</b>	600 AD	Unclear	500 BC	2000 BC; changes in 70 AD
<b>Distinctive Ideas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Name means “submission,” as one needs to submit to Allah</li> <li>-Koran (Qur’an) is revelation</li> <li>-God is Allah, all-powerful God</li> <li>-Jesus Christ is a prophet, virgin born but not divine; Mohammed is the final <i>prophet</i> of Allah</li> <li>-Keep the 5 pillars and repentance; salvation is through obedience and submission to Allah</li> <li>-Disobedience leads to hell</li> <li>-Obedience leads to paradise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Brahman is the “Ultimate Reality”</li> <li>-Various deities are worshipped</li> <li>-Life is cyclical and spiritual</li> <li>-Samsara: soul is continuously (reincarnation)</li> <li>-Karma: actions have impact on this life and next</li> <li>-Moksha: release from reincarnation cycle through actions, knowledge, and devotion</li> <li>-Dharma is the way of living</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Buddha shows way</li> <li>-4 Noble Truths</li> <li>-Eightfold Path (way of life)</li> <li>-Goal is to reach enlightenment, which happens by eliminating suffering by removing desire; this is nirvana</li> <li>-No real need for God, about self-effort</li> <li>-Meditation usually a practice</li> <li>-Can be individualized or focus more on community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Old Testament as basis for their faith; Talmud with rabbis interpretation of OT</li> <li>-God’s covenant people</li> <li>-Circumcision, Sabbath, and dietary laws are important</li> <li>-Since destruction of temple, rabbis and teaching of the law have played major role (no sacrifices)</li> <li>-More interested in actions than theology, nation than individual</li> <li>-Many non-religious</li> </ul>
<b>View of Christianity</b>	Islam is a “purification” of Christianity, in that Christians have perverted truths revealed by Allah; Islam will share many OT convictions but filters it all through different lens	It is open to pluralism and tolerance (no real creed), as there are many paths; however, its whole framework is vastly different from Christianity	Might incorporate ideas of Christianity but in many ways the system contradicts key Christian truths	The differences are more than just view of Jesus, as it has developed differently over past 2000 years; Christians have often persecuted Jews
<b>Subgroups</b>	Sunni (majority) Shi’ite (minority, but usually more influential in politics) Note: There are many differences with Nation of Islam	Not really a unified “theological” system but much diversity; Buddhism broke off of it	Theravada (“conservative”) Mahayana (“liberal”) Zen (under Mahayana) Tibetan “Westernized”	Orthodox (strict) Hasidic (pious) Conservative (moderate) Reformed (progressive) Messianic (believe in Jesus)
<b>Historic &amp; Modern People</b>	Mohammed; <i>imams</i>	Deities and Gurus (teachers)	Buddha, Dali Lama	OT figures, rabbis

<sup>1</sup>Page numbers are from Len Woods, *Handbook of World Religions*. The information draws on insights from the book but does not reproduce the material.

# Christian Offshoots

These religions are very similar to historic Christianity but broke off at some point, seeing as being corrupted and presenting the true version of it

	<b>Mormonism (136-142)</b>	<b>Jehovah's Witnesses (115-119)</b>	<b>Christian Science (34-38)</b>
<b>Founder &amp; Key Leaders</b>	Joseph Smith Brigham Young	Charles Taze Russell Joseph Rutherford	Mary Baker Eddy
<b>Number of Followers</b>	11-12 million	1.7 million (?) [high?]	? 150-140,000
<b>Place of Origin</b>	Upstate New York to Missouri, Illinois, eventually Utah	New York area	Massachusetts
<b>Time of Origin</b>	Around 1830	1880-1890's	1870's
<b>Authoritative Books</b>	Bible (correctly translated) Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants; Pearl of Great Price	Bible as translated in New World Translation (many changes)	<i>Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures</i> which interprets the Bible
<b>Meeting Place</b>	Church of Latter-Day Saints	Kingdom Hall	Church of Christ, Scientist
<b>Major Differences with Apostolic Christianity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Golden plates (which were translated by Joseph Smith) record lost tribes of Israel in America to whom Jesus appeared after his life</li> <li>-The church experienced a "Great Apostasy" and Joseph Smith restored it</li> <li>-Many gods and godhood can be achieved: "As man is, God once was; as God is, man can become"</li> <li>-Salvation through faith and works; Mormon baptism is important (Baptism for the dead)</li> <li>-3 heavens (highest for Mormons, 2<sup>nd</sup> for good people who do not embrace, 3<sup>rd</sup> for wicked)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-God is one (no Trinity) whose name is Jehovah</li> <li>-Jesus Christ not as God but "firstborn" of creation; same as Michael the archangel</li> <li>-Salvation comes through good works (including sharing faith)</li> <li>-Only the 144,000 will live in heaven while the rest will live on earth</li> <li>-1914 was a critical year, when Jesus began to reign and Satan got more power on earth</li> <li>-Armageddon is imminent and will destroy the wicked</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- God is divine Love, Father-Mother, impersonal, all-powerful force</li> <li>-"The true nature of each individual as a child of God is spiritual"</li> <li>-Material things are not real; neither is sickness, death, and sin, as they are illusions</li> <li>- God's infinite goodness is realized in prayer and heals (physically and emotionally)</li> <li>-Heaven and hell are more states of mind than literal places</li> <li>-Jesus understood true living</li> </ul>
<b>Other Notes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Officially opposed to polygamy</li> <li>-Heavy emphasis on family and holy living</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Do not engage in political activities or celebrate birthdays; official teaching is against blood transfusions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-"Mind Science" similar to New Age systems</li> <li>-"Reading Rooms"</li> </ul>

# “Smorgasbord” Religions

These religions are not as clearly delineated by people and many would see some overlap. They probably would not classify themselves as “religious” but these are common worldviews. They seem to be focus more on humans than on discussing spiritual life.

	<b>Pluralism</b>	<b>Agnostic<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>“New Age” (154-159)</b>
<b>Distinctive Ideas</b>	All religions are essentially the same as they teach to love others and to worship some otherworldly being. Differences are most likely due to different cultures trying to come to grips with the supernatural; the key is the fact of faith and not the content of faith	God may exist, but he cannot be known and (most likely) does not interact in world; we should use reason rather than theology; bridge between theism and atheism; might mention God but not really to worship	Borrow from all sorts of religions and focusing more on experience and practices as opposed to dogma and beliefs. Has a particular attraction to Eastern religions but not in their pure form; sees life as “spiritual”
<b>What to do with religion</b>	Pick the one that you like the most and practice that with all of your heart; should have religious toleration and we should work together across faiths	Engage in life as a rational person rather than trapped in religious practices; should have religious toleration	Pick what you like from each religion and kind of form your own; focus on practices that help you connect
<b>View of Differences in Religions</b>	Differences are just different cultural and social understandings of the same God; in reality, the differences are not contradictory but complementary	Differences come from futile speculation, as people are trying to understand what they cannot understand	Differences are good and should be embraced, as each person needs to carve their path to self-enlightenment
<b>Underlying Problems</b>	Saying that there all religions are the same misunderstands each religion, as there are major differences within each system	Is knowledge an all or nothing sort of pursuit? Furthermore, while claiming that one cannot know God, it usually leans to atheism rather than theism	It makes truth subjective, but is there any objective truth? Furthermore, it usually incorporates contradictory systems and ideas that claim to be mutually exclusive
<b>Examples</b>	Universalists, “Co-Exist,” “All paths lead to heaven”	Mark Twain, Larry King, The Simpsons	Oprah, Shirley MacLaine, Madonna

<sup>2</sup>There are many different levels of agnosticism, as some think that the existence of God is unknowable while others might say that the truth is unknowable. In Woods text, the section on Deists (54-58) might be the closest thing to differing how some forms of agnosticism works out.

<sup>3</sup>This might be more easily called atheist. However, secularist is a “nicer” term in the sense that it sees what they are for as opposed to what they are against.