



Conducted by
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“We hear a lot today about Hindus, Moslems, and Buddhists. Can you briefly tell us something about their religions?”

These, of course, are three of the major religions in the world, and detailed information concerning them is available in most libraries. However, I have been asked the question, and I think the best way to answer it so that it will be of maximum benefit to the reader is to give a brief survey of the religions

mentioned, and then to indicate the important differences between those religions and the Christian religion. First of all, I think, we must enquire as to what we mean by religion.

Religion

When we mention the word 'religion' most people automatically assume that we are talking about the *Christian* religion; I suppose this is because most religions rest on the belief that there is a supernatural power or powers which govern the universe. In point of fact, however, not all religions relate that power to the God of Heaven, as we shall see.

One notorious definition is attributed to Karl Marx and it is almost always quoted out of context. Part of that definition says, "It (religion) is the opium of the people". On the face of it, this part of the statement seems to be extremely cynical, but we have to understand that Marx was speaking about down-trodden and oppressed peoples, and his comments on religion must be viewed in context, "Religion is the sigh of the hard-pressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, as it is the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people." Who would be bold enough to say that religions, including the Christian religion, have not flourished among the oppressed peoples of the world? Oppression has made them seek the sanctuary of religion diligently, and having found it, they, the poor and the illiterate, have found more hope and comfort than the brilliant Marx who pinned *his* hopes on universal socialism and political theory.

The search of man for religion, then, is his quest to gain contact with some supernatural power, to elevate his spirit, to gain relief from oppression (and here we must think also of the oppression of sin), and finally to reach that sublime experience which Christians call Heaven, and some call Nirvana. So let us examine the religious groups mentioned in the question in somewhat greater detail.

Buddhism

Gautama Siddhartha, the Founder of Buddhism, was born in the north-eastern part of India about 560 B.C. He was a member of one of the ruling families, and Gautama was the family name. It is said that certain magical signs attended his birth, and that the sages depicted him as a future world leader. It was also said that if he saw certain signs then he would become a homeless wanderer. His father tried to protect him from seeing the signs, but see them he evidently did, and it is further said that from them he learned the lesson of the vanity of earthly things, and that feminine beauty was transient. Having learned these lessons, he forsook his privileged life and sought liberation.

He turned first to the philosophy of the Hindu sages and found no satisfaction from them. He then turned to asceticism and complete austerity, but still found no peace of mind. It is said that he was then beset by many temptations but he overcame them all and was mastered by none. Then all of one day he was subjected to further temptations and still overcame them all. Then in the dark he received enlightenment and became the Buddha or Enlightened One.

The main thrust of his teaching was that attachment to the world, with its roots in desire and possessions, was the cause of all suffering. Also fundamental to his teaching are the Four Noble Truths. These are : The Noble Truth about suffering. The Noble Truth about the origin of suffering. The Noble Truth about the destruction of suffering. The Noble Truth about the Eightfold Path. Roughly translated into English this Eightfold Path is said to be: right understanding;

right thought; right speech; right action; right vocation; right effort; right awareness of the mind; right concentration.

Buddhism differs from Christianity in that even though there is a general belief in gods, the Buddha is said to have denied that he was a god, and certainly there is no belief in a creator-god. There is no belief in a Saviour. Buddha is venerated in Buddhist temples by the size and the number of his images, to which numerous flower-offerings are made. I remember well entering a Buddhist temple in Burma and being overwhelmed by the sheer size of an image of the Buddha standing at the far side of the temple. All around the inside of the temple there were literally hundreds of smaller images so that one seemed to be submerged in the all-pervading presence of the Buddha. The beautiful posture into which the image is cast is supposed to represent the Buddhist Nirvana, the utter and complete dissolution of all worldly vices such as greed, hate, desire, and all such.

Hinduism

Hinduism emerged from the ancient traditional literature of India known as the Vedic literature (Veda means 'knowledge'). Hence, religious writings, mysticism, sacrifices, philosophical knowledge, and what was known as the Royal Knowledge. Vedic religion had many festivals, and also there was a belief in many gods (polytheism). It also had a rigid caste system, at the top of which were the Brahmins, the priest-rulers.

Hinduism retained the caste system. It also retained the belief in many gods, but three leading gods emerged; Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the kindly sustainer; and Siva, the destroyer, who rather paradoxically is also the power of fertility.

Religious festivals also pay a prominent part, the chief festival being the Festival of Lights. Animal sacrifices have, in the main, been replaced by offerings of flowers and fruits. The life of devotion lies in the important Yoga schools. The doctrine of reincarnation is taught, and this is regulated by the law of Karma (as a man sows so shall he reap). The cow is a sacred animal and may not be killed. The Yoga schools teach personal discipline, insight and knowledge, personal devotion, good works, and contemplative and intellectual discipline. It is said that Hindu philosophers see the many gods as the manifestations of the Eternal Spirit Brahman. Thus we have the rather strange combination of polytheism and monotheism.

Hindu ethics seem to be governed by Karma (as a man sows so shall he reap). This must not be looked upon as punishment or reward as in the Christian religion, but rather as the harvest of actions of different kinds. This harvest will be reaped relative to the new incarnation. Hell is looked upon as boiling hot or icy cold, while heaven is bedecked with flowers and music and sensual pleasures. Hell and heaven are intermediate stages between subsequent incarnations.

Christian ethics is dominated by love. Hindu ethics seeks to obtain for oneself a state of bliss and happiness in a world of moral order. According to the Hindu there are four roads to this. The lowest road lies through sensual pleasure, while the highest lies in the abandonment of all worldly ties. Through this road, it is said, lies the escape from death and rebirth; no further incarnations would be necessary.

One can see in all this the all-embracing nature of Hinduism when contrasted with the rather specific Christian ethic of the One True God, and a Saviour Christ.

