

# One's Future in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam

*Just because the Christian message is true does not imply that everyone should take the time to grasp its truth. Only if the nature of the message is so important that one's future fulfillment and happiness depend on knowing it should the effort be made to properly respond to it. That the biblical message is indeed that important is made clear by contrasting it with the prospects for happiness that one would have as an adherent of each of the three great non-Christian world religions.*

by Daniel P. Fuller

Two remarkable aspects of God's purpose for his creation are found in Isaiah 64:4: "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him." The first aspect is his promise that for those who trust him, he will work to do them good. The encouragement this gives is made even greater by a further promise in Jeremiah 32:41: "I will rejoice in doing them good...with all my heart and soul." The Almighty God, the Creator of the universe, thus wants nothing so much as to work for people's benefit; doing so brings him complete and unsurpassed joy. The more we consider this truth, the more we become assured of enjoying an eternity of happy tomorrows.

The second remarkable teaching in Isaiah 64:4 is that God works for the benefit of those who wait for him. It must be emphasized that enjoying the blessing of having God working for our benefit is conditioned upon ceasing to trust in our own wisdom and efforts to attain a happy future, but waiting instead for him to bring it to pass.

The uniqueness of God's promise to work beneficially for those who wait for him can be verified in large measure by comparing Christianity with the three other great religions in the world: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. This comparison will show that only in one of Buddhism's two branches is there anything faintly resembling the idea of Isaiah 64:4, though closer examination will show that it too falls far

short of providing lasting happiness. First, however, we look at Hinduism, probably the oldest of these three religions.

## Hinduism

Some 630 million people (13.1 percent of the world's population), most of them in India, espouse this ancient religion. Since its religious leaders are pictured as content and serene, one might infer that Hinduism provides the sort of peace and joy that people would have whose God is acting benevolently on their behalf. But a consideration of its tenets makes clear that, to the contrary, this serenity comes from learning to suppress the desire for happiness by disciplines designed to enable one both to become detached from this present world and to be indifferent to one's welfare in the future.

This detachment is illustrated in the "Song of God," a famous passage in the Bhagavad Gita that has been called the Gospel of Hinduism.<sup>1</sup> The song begins by telling how Arjuna, a member of the noble warrior caste (Kshatriya), was poised with his four brothers to do battle with an army made up of close relatives. Previously Arjuna had been robbed of his land and exiled for thirteen years by his cousin Duryodhana. Upon his return he sought to reclaim his land, but not even his uncle could prevail upon Duryodhana to restore it. So Arjuna prepared to do battle with his relatives, and the story opens as the two armies confront each other.

But Arjuna was troubled as he faced these men whom he would soon be trying to kill. Therefore he asked

Krishna, his charioteer, who was actually the ninth incarnation of the god Vishnu, to delay the battle by halting between the two forces. As Arjuna looked at these "fathers, grandfathers, uncles, cousins, sons, grandsons, teachers, friends, fathers-in-law and benefactors" arrayed against him, he confessed to Vishnu, "My limbs fail me...my body trembles and my hair stands on end. [My bow] slips from my hand, and my skin burns. I cannot keep quiet, for my mind is in tumult..." What good can come from the slaughter of my people on this battlefield?" (8). "If, on the contrary, [my cousins]...should slay me, unarmed and unresisting, surely that would be better for my welfare! (10). To these questions Krishna replied,

The wise grieve neither for the dead nor for the living. There was never a time when I was not, nor thou, nor these princes [in the opposing army] were not; there will never be a time when we shall cease to be... Those external relations which bring cold and heat, pain and happiness, they come and go; they are not permanent. Endure them bravely, O Prince! The hero whose soul is unmoved by circumstance, who accepts pleasure and pain with equanimity, only he is fit for immortality... The Spirit [the ultimate reality, Brahman], which pervades all that we see, is imperishable. Nothing can destroy the Spirit. The material bodies which this Eternal, Indestructible, immeasurable Spirit inhabits are all finite. Therefore fight, O Valiant Man! (16).

He who thinks that the Spirit kills, and he who thinks of it as killed, are both ignorant. The Spirit kills not, nor is it killed... Even if thou thinkest of it as constantly being born, constantly dying, even then, O Mighty Man, thou

still hast not cause to grieve. For death is as sure for that which is born, as birth is for that which is dead. Therefore grieve not for what is inevitable. (17)

[Brahman] the end and beginning of beings [is] unknown. We see only the intervening formations... Though many are told about [Brahman], scarcely is there one who knows It. [Therefore] thou must look at thy duty. Nothing can be more welcome to a soldier than a righteous war... Refuse to fight in this righteous cause, and thou wilt be a traitor... incurring only sin... To the noble, dishonor is worse than death... If killed, thou shalt attain Heaven; if victorious, enjoy the kingdom of earth... Look upon pleasure and pain, victory and defeat, with an equal eye. Make ready for combat, and thou shalt commit no sin. (18)

Several facets of Hindu thinking are apparent in this exchange between Arjuna and Krishna. First, there is Brahman, an impersonal reality at the heart of everything in the universe. Here all the apparent opposites of the visible world for example, "cold and heat, pain and happiness, victory and defeat" meld together as one. Second, between phenomenal individuals and the noumenal, impersonal Brahman are "intervening formations." These are caused by what Hinduism calls *maya*, something of an illusion, so that people find it easy to regard as real the opposites in the phenomenal world around them.

The Hindu concept of righteousness also becomes evident. It is one's relationship to *dharma* (the "law," "custom," or "order") that spells out the duties the members of each caste are obliged to perform. Thus in the Bhagavad Gita we see Krishna's argument to Arjuna that sin is not killing revered relatives and friends but failing to behave as one who is a member of the warrior caste.

Another facet of Hindu thinking is *yoga*, the discipline necessary for going beyond the illusory phenomenal world and becoming conscious of the noumenal world of Brahman. "But thou

hast only the right to work, but none to the fruit thereof. Let not then the fruit of thy action be thy motive; nor yet be thou enamoured of in action. Perform all thy actions with mind concentrated on the Divine [Brahman], renouncing attachment and looking upon success and failure with an equal eye. Spirituality [*yoga*] implies equanimity" (21).

Arjuna, however, regarded this teaching as hard to follow and thus objected to Krishna. "I do not see how I can attain this state of equanimity which Thou hast revealed, owing to the restlessness of my mind. My Lord! Verily, the mind is fickle and turbulent, obstinate and strong, yea, extremely difficult as the wind to control." Krishna agreed that the mind is "exceedingly difficult to restrain, but... with practice and renunciation it can be done." (65).

Verily this Divine Illusion of Phenomenon manifesting itself in the Qualities is difficult to surmount. Only they who devote themselves to Me and to Me alone can accomplish it... Who meditates on Me without ceasing, devoting himself only to Me, he is the best... After many lives, at last the wise man realizes Me as I am. A man so enlightened that he sees God [Brahman] everywhere is very difficult to find... I am not visible to all, for I am enveloped by the illusion of Phenomenon. This deluded world does not know Me as the Unborn and the Imperishable [i.e. Brahman]. (72)

[But] to him who thinks constantly of Me, and of nothing else, to such an ever faithful devotee, O Arjuna, am I ever accessible. Coming thus to Me, these great souls go no more to the misery and death of earthly life, for they have gained perfection. The worlds, with the whole realm of creation, come and go; but, O Arjuna, whoso comes to Me, for him there is no rebirth. (80)

In truth, therefore, there is the Eternal Unmanifest, which is beyond and above the Unmanifest Spirit of Creation... The wise say that the Unmanifest and Indestructible [Brahman] is the highest goal of all; when once That is reached, there is no return. That is My Blessed Home. (82)

Karma and "rebirth" are also important facets of Hindu thinking.

Karma is the degree of merit in achieving detachment from the phenomenal world that one has achieved in previous lifetimes and to date in the present life. Krishna spoke of it to Arjuna as follows:

No evil fate awaits him who treads the path of righteousness. Having reached the world where the righteous dwell, and having remained there for many years, he who has slipped away from the path of spirituality will be born again in the family of the pure, benevolent and prosperous... Then the experience acquired in his former life will revive, and with its help he will strive for perfection more eagerly than before. Unconsciously he will return to the practices of his old life; so that he who tries to realize spiritual consciousness is certainly superior to one who only talks of it. Then, after many lives, the student of spirituality, who earnestly strives, and whose sins are absolved, attains perfection and reaches the Supreme. (66)

The task of reaching the "Supreme" or the "Blessed Home" of Brahman thus is formidable. Only a "very few" devote all efforts to becoming spiritual. These must meditate without ceasing on the noumenal aspect of Krishna, or on one of the other aspects of Brahman such as the gods Shiva or Brahmin. They must also renounce all thought of the rewards they will gain from their labor to sustain life. No doubt the "restless mind" can be stilled for a few hours by rigorous exercises in meditating on the illusory nature of the phenomenal world pressing in on all sides. But such awesome forces as one's complete immersion in this phenomenal world and the mind's instinctive inclination to choose activities that will bring gain from one's work will soon again concentrate one's thoughts upon the illusory phenomenal world. Thus one's karma rating will decline. And the painful knowledge that one tends to live life exactly as it was lived in previous incarnations would tend to extinguish any hope of success in constantly meditating on the noumenal Brahman.

In contrast to Hinduism, all that is required of those who desire blessings from the omnipotent and omniscient God of the Bible is to wait for him in the sense of banking all their confidence for a happy future on the many promises he has made. So the future happiness one may have as set forth in the Bible is vastly more attainable than that offered to the Hindu. And since all humanity craves happiness, Hindus included, are therefore well advised to expend the time and effort necessary to learn God's whole purpose in history as set forth in the Bible.

### Buddhism

Buddhism emerged from a Hindu context in the person of Siddharta Gautama, born around 560 B.C. in a town in Nepal, near the northern border of India. Currently 556 million people (11.5 percent of the world's population) adhere generally to one of two basic forms of Buddhism. The original teachings of Gautama are most recognizable in southern Asia (Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Kampuchea, and Laos), although even here it has undergone variations. In Sri Lanka, for example, it is combined with astrology and many elements of primitive animism—ideas that Buddha himself would have spurned.

Fear of unknown forces is a very powerful controlling factor in the lives of many Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka. They go regularly to astrologers, shrines, medicine men, exorcists, or such people, who claim to have power to control or direct supernatural forces. When the people are faced with sickness or some such trouble, they ask, "Is this because of a charm or an evil spirit?" If so, they want to counteract the evil forces, using whatever means available to them.<sup>2</sup>

A different sort of Buddhism is found in Tibet, parts of the Soviet Union, Mongolia, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. In distinction to that of much of southern Asia, this northern form calls itself Mahayana

("Upper Vehicle") Buddhism. Since this title implies that the Buddhism in parts of southern Asia is inferior, its followers in the South prefer to call their religion Theravada Buddhism, or "The Buddhism of the Elders." A consideration of this earlier form is necessary in order to understand Mahayana Buddhism.

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### *The Buddhism of the Elders*

Siddharta Gautama, or Buddha ("the enlightened one"), a name Gautama received from his followers, was born into a wealthy family living in a palace as isolated as possible from the misery, poverty, and death in the world outside.<sup>3</sup> But one day at age twenty-nine, married and the father of a small child, Siddharta disobeyed his father's order never to leave the palace grounds and went out to see how the rest of the world lived. So profoundly shocked was he at the spectacle of death, poverty, and human suffering outside his palace that a few nights later he left his sleeping wife and child and departed, never to return.

Donning the saffron robes of a wandering beggar, shaving his head, and generally following Hindu teaching, he tried to block out the phenomenal world of suffering and reach Brahman through meditating and subjecting himself to ascetic extremes. But though he persisted in this regimen for six years, he found no relief from the problem of suffering.

Therefore he abandoned such efforts, and while sitting under a tree, later

called the Bodhi ("knowledge") Tree, he decided upon a new approach. The previous six years, he was convinced, had brought no enlightenment because he had sought it with the very same selfish desire that causes so much suffering in the world. Therefore he abandoned his efforts to get through to Brahman by rigorous efforts to concentrate on one of its manifestations such as Krishna,

choosing instead to follow a more relaxed "middle way" of living. Seven weeks later full enlightenment finally came. Going then to a public place in the nearby city of Benares, India, he began to teach this new way to attain peace in a world of suffering. As he taught, he radiated such calm and self-possession that ascetics who had known him during the first six years

became convinced that he truly had received a remarkable enlightenment. And so for the remaining forty-five years of his life, he tirelessly traveled throughout northern India preaching his message and radiating his serenity. An increasingly large number of men from different castes began to follow his precepts, and in time women too were allowed, to become initiated into an order.

Siddharta summarized his enlightenment in "Four Noble Truths": (1) suffering is universal; (2) the cause of suffering is attachment to things or a craving for them; (3) the cure for suffering is the elimination of craving and attachment by (4) following the "middle way." This middle way obviously meant avoiding one extreme of giving into carnal lusts. But it also meant avoiding the opposite extreme of craving knowledge of Brahman in the Hindu way of asceticism. To elucidate this middle way Siddharta advocated the Eightfold Path.

The first step of the Eightfold Path is *right belief*. Part of this right belief is to waste no time and energy trying to

answer metaphysical questions as to whether the world is created, is temporal or eternal, finite or infinite, or whether the life principle of a person is identical with the body or distinct from it. Suffering still exists no matter what answers are given to such theoretical questions. Effort should therefore be devoted instead to fostering worthy attitudes and practical ethical behavior. One must avoid modes of behavior that cause suffering such as killing, stealing, immorality, lying, tale-bearing, harsh language, covetousness, and ill will.

The second step, *right mindedness*, requires carrying on one's activities from a proper motive. While this step naturally includes rejecting the motives that lead to forbidden behavior, it also emphasizes the need to carry on one's activities with a wisdom that will alleviate suffering in oneself and others.

The third and fourth steps, *right speech* and *right action*, repeat much of step 1. The fifth step of *right living* concerns choosing a life vocation that brings benefit rather than hurt to society. *Right effort*, the sixth step, spells out the four virtues one needs to foster: avoidance of evil, overcoming of lust and bad habits, development of helpful words and actions, and maintenance of the sort of behavior that will help eradicate suffering.

The seventh step of *right attentiveness* also singles out four objects—the body, the emotions, the mind, and worldly phenomena—from which so much suffering can come until one learns, for example, not to love the beautiful or strong parts of the body, because they will wither and die as readily as the body's uglier and weaker parts.

*Right concentration* then brings the Eightfold Path to a climax. Those making progress into this eighth step should begin to experience the joy of trances that are a foretaste of nirvana, where one never again has to be reborn into the world of suffering.

True to his distaste for metaphysical

speculation, Buddha was vague in describing nirvana, which means literally the "blowing out" of existence. This concept would seem to imply annihilation, a conclusion that Buddha never affirmed. All that mattered to him concerning this subject was that it marked the end of painful becoming and the beginning of the peace of an eternal, changeless state of being. Those destined for nirvana after their last lifetime would await death with calm detachment and contentment.

In distinction to the Hinduism from which it sprang, Buddhism could be characterized as a humanistic, even as an atheistic, religion. It did, however, carry over into its teaching two somewhat revised features of Hinduism: karma and rebirth. Buddha reiterated the concept of karma, whereby one's merit from a preceding life would determine the status attained in a future one. But his understanding of karma allowed people to be much more optimistic about their future than they could be in Hinduism. "In [Buddha's] view a man of any caste or class could experience so complete a change of heart or disposition as to escape the full consequences of sins committed in previous existences... [The Law of Karma] could not lay hold upon a man... who had achieved arahatship, "the state of him that is worthy,"<sup>4</sup> the last step of the Eightfold Path. This arahatship, or spirituality, canceled out the past karma that heretofore had determined the quality of one's next life. So in Buddha's teaching a spiritual person, or *arahat*, would live eternally in nirvana and never become a part of the painful world of flux again.

Buddhism also distinguished itself from Hinduism in that Buddha and his followers were to foster a benevolent attitude toward others. So, for example, the sixth step of the Eightfold Path decreed that one should choose a vocation that contributed to the well being of society. Buddhists were also to

maintain a loving rather than an unconcerned or vengeful attitude toward others, which was essential to have peace of soul. This emphasis on love figured largely in the rise of "Upper Vehicle" Buddhism, which became prominent around A.D. 100 after going through several modifications.

#### *Mahayana ("Upper Vehicle") Buddhism*

The first modification came from the strong influence of King Asoka, who became ruler of all India in the third century B.C. To secure such power required his dealing cruelly with the people who lived alongside the Bay of Bengal, though the Buddhist teaching he had already received condemned him for such violence. Asoka decided to make Buddhism the official religion of India but expounded it as a system of piety whereby people could be good Buddhists simply by carrying on normal lives, without having to become monks or nuns.

Another step toward Mahayana Buddhism was the virtual deification of Buddha. Although Buddha himself had asserted that there were many gods in the universe, he discouraged prayer or devotion to any of them, since they, like human beings, were finite and subject to the pain that comes from the flux of life. Buddha himself never encouraged people to direct prayers to him after he died and entered nirvana. But in order to spread his teachings, his followers had come to build sanctuaries called "wats," where ordinary people could assemble to be instructed by monks. Most of these wats had an image of Buddha seated above the altar.

Although the well-trained monks regarded prayers as nothing more than repetitions that earned merit, the common people began to direct their prayers toward Buddha himself. They saw him as one who would help them in their need because he had fostered a benevolent attitude toward others and now enjoyed the transcendence of being in the changeless nirvana. It was then but a

short step to think of Buddha as having preexisted before coming down to earth to tell people how to gain alleviation from suffering. To this notion was added the idea that he was a divine omniscient being who had repeatedly volunteered to be incarnated on earth to bless people with his teachings. It was then another short step to the belief that Buddha had lived sinlessly during these incarnations and therefore had earned enough merit to dwell in Tusita, the most desirable heaven.

The third step in Buddhism's modification came with the belief that many such buddhas had come to earth before Siddhartha Gautama and that others would come after him. Thus the idea took shape that the universe was full of compassionate beings who wanted to aid suffering humanity. Now people sought salvation not just by the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path but by looking to these buddhas as divine beings with vast stores of merit that they were eager to share with the faithful so they too could enjoy the blessings of heaven. This exceedingly hopeful message carried by Mahayana Buddhism caused it to spread much more rapidly than the original form. By the second century A.D. it was found throughout the lands generally north of the Himalayas-Tibet, China (including Vietnam), Mongolia, Korea, and Japan.

Mahayana Buddhism taught that ordinary people who were well on their way toward the final step on the Eightfold Path were bodhisattvas ("Buddhas in the making"). But when they died, instead of entering nirvana, they would choose another rebirth, so that they might help thousands more learn the way to nirvana. The greatest of these bodhisattvas had chosen rebirth rather than nirvana thousands of times, and as a result

had acquired so much merit that they dispensed it from a heavenly place to those who worshiped them and directed prayers to them. Noss observes that "this merit is so great that they could readily achieve the full status of Buddhas and pass into nirvana; but they are com-

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passionate beings who out of love and pity for suffering humanity postpone their entrance into nirvana and transfer their merit, as need arises, to those who call upon them in prayer and give devotional thought to them."<sup>5</sup>

The following statement from a Prajnaparamita Sutra ("teachings concerning transcendental wisdom") written soon after the first century A.D., explains the motivation of such a being.

Doers of what is hard are the Bodhisattvas, the great beings who have set out to win supreme enlightenment. They do not wish to attain their own private nirvana. On the contrary, they have surveyed the highly painful world of being, and yet, desirous to win supreme enlightenment, they do not tremble at birth-and-death [of future lives on earth]. They have set out for the benefit of the world, for the ease of the world, out of pity for the world. They have resolved: "We will become a shelter for the world, a refuge for the world, the world's place of rest, the final relief of the world, islands of the world, lights of the world, leaders of the world, the world's means of salvation."<sup>6</sup>

One such bodhisattva is Amitabha, a great god revered in China, Korea, and Japan. According to Noss, The hopeful devotee turns to Ami-

tabha, and has merit transferred to him from the great being's store. A Mahayana treatise widely read in China and Japan, "A Description of the Land of Bliss" says distinctly that faith in Amitabha, quite apart from meritorious works and deeds, is alone sufficient unto salvation. It declares:

Beings are not born in that Buddha country as a reward and result of good works performed in this present life. No, all men or women who hear and bear in mind for one, two, three, four, five, six, or seven nights the name of Amitayus [an emanation from Amitabha], when they come to die, Amitayus will stand before them in the hour of death, [and] they will depart this life with quiet minds, and after death they will be born in Paradise.<sup>7</sup>

Is Mahayana Buddhism then, like Christianity, a religion of hope for the future?

#### *An Evaluation of Buddhism*

Unquestionably the original Buddhism, the "Teaching of the Elders," is more encouraging than Hinduism in that it affirms that one can break out of the destiny one's karma, gained through countless previous rebirths, would otherwise decree for one. Through a far-reaching repentance, one could be born instead into a much better form of existence in the next life. It is also more encouraging in that it clearly teaches that with the attainment of nirvana, one will never again be reborn into this world of flux and suffering. But the very changes that took place in the years following Buddha's death indicate that this earlier form too left much to be desired.

Ordinary people simply could not be satisfied with its indifference to transcendental matters. Their needs impel them to reach out for an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God to answer their prayers and deliver them from the difficulties of this life. People also want definite teachings about the afterlife, and so later Buddhism came to talk about specific heavens whose inhabitants have not lost their identity

as individuals. Also necessary is a religion in which men and women can participate fully without becoming monks or nuns but can carry on the ordinary vocations essential for society's well-being.

The subsequent changes both in the original "Teaching of the Elders" and in the development of Mahayana Buddhism demonstrate how Buddhism added those features for which people yearn. As a result the teaching regarding the foremost bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism comes close to competing with the Bible's teaching that God will rejoice with his whole heart and soul to work for the welfare of the people who wait for him. That the great Bodhisattva, Amitabha, will bring to paradise a person who does nothing more than meditate on his name for one day before death, sounds as if divine blessing could be received by grace. It is open to abuse, however, by those who wish to live sinfully during this life but nevertheless spend eternity in paradise—provided they could accurately predict when they would die. I certainly do not suggest that all who revere Amitabha are like that, for the teachers of Mahayana Buddhism urge people to be full of good works and to aspire to become bodhisattvas themselves.

Nevertheless the problem arising from the possible abuse of Amitabha's grace does exist, which could never arise with the God of the Bible, who works for those who simply wait for him. Waiting for God means banking one's hope for an eternity of happy tomorrows exclusively upon what God has promised to do; it means having him as one's hope for the future. According to Psalm 33:20, "We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield." A pronounced change of conduct then occurs in those having such confidence in what the loving and supreme Creator-God of the universe will do for them, for such a hope is the root cause of all virtuous living. People

who confidently wait for God to bring them the desired fulfillment for their lives will not abuse others and use them as means whereby they might gain some happiness for the future. Instead they seek to serve others, because they know that God will provide for every need. All would feel at ease living alongside a person with such a hope in God.

So the Bible teaches that the condition people must fulfill in order to have the loving God work for them is not to wait for him just for one day but to make waiting on him their purpose from the time they first trust him until death. To be sure, the Christian believes in the validity of death bed conversions, for Jesus told the thief on the cross who believed in him that he would dwell with him that very day in paradise (Luke 23:43). But the Bible gives no encouragement whatsoever to think that one could live sinfully for most of life and then be assured of paradise by thinking about God for a day or so before death.

An important advantage Christianity has over Mahayana Buddhism is that people need never feel ashamed to go to heaven. In Mahayana Buddhism a person could never refuse rebirth without feeling guilty that in so doing he or she was being selfish by denying others help so they too could find paradise. But there is no reincarnation taught in the Bible: "[A person] is destined to die once" (Heb. 9:27). Therefore Christians need never choose between enjoying heaven and acting lovingly toward others.

We also noted the tendency in Buddhism toward a personal transcendence. Thus Buddha himself became personalized, even though much of his individuality may have been lost in the indefinite nirvana. Herein lies Christianity's greatest advantage over Mahayana Buddhism: it explicitly teaches people to worship a living Lord now and to look forward to the enjoyment of a

close family relationship with him for eternity.

During his life on earth Jesus was subjected to much suffering, personally experiencing all the hurts life can bring. So we Christians "do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Indeed, in Mahayana Buddhism there are highly personal beings who have experienced the full range of suffering during their innumerable reincarnations. Amitabha, for example, dwells in a land one step removed from nirvana. He remains there because he still wants to use his vast store of merit, constantly increased by his unselfishness in postponing nirvana for himself, to bring millions and millions of people to his place next door to nirvana—the ultimate hope in Buddhism.

So the impersonal and individual-suppressing nirvana is still held to be the final goal of salvation, even though the history of Buddhism gives ample evidence that its adherents yearn not for cessation of individuality but rather for contact with a highly personal, transcendent being. Hence this basic tension, lying at the very heart of Buddhism, remains unresolved.

In Christianity, however, this tension is resolved. According to Revelation 21:1-5, the Christian will finally be in the closest fellowship with God, who "will wipe every tear from their eyes." There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

### Discussion Questions

1. Contrast the bases for the experience of peace as set forth in Christianity and Hinduism. Which would you prefer, and why?

2. Though Hinduism sees good and bad as merged together in Brahman, the impersonal, ultimate reality underlying all things, nonetheless it does

teach that there is sin. In what does this sin consist?

3. Why would Krishna's exhortation quoted above, to behave as a true warrior and not to worry about killing relatives and friends, be a counsel of despair?

4. What tends to be discouraging about the Hindu teaching of karma?

5. "Why would it be wrong for a Hindu to aspire to the highest (Brahmin) caste?"

6. How might a Hindu argue against Buddha's teaching that the desire to become one with Brahman was fostering a desire for attachment rather than detachment?

7. "What is more hopeful about "the Buddhism of the Elders" than Hinduism?"

8. Contrast the Buddhist nirvana with the biblical heaven? What would cause you to choose one rather than the other?

9. What is the strongest objection to Buddhism, which led to the development of "Upper Vehicle Buddhism"?

10. How does Christianity avoid the objection that one is selfish to want to go to heaven?

11. Under what circumstances can a Christian's desire to go to heaven be an extreme form of selfishness?

12. What great problem confronts both forms of Buddhism and causes Upper Vehicle Buddhism to teach something that at first glance seems to be a gospel of grace?

13. Why must it take as long as 1.25 billion years for one to become a bodhisattva, an "enlightenment being"? Why cannot one who renounces nirvana for the good of others start preaching Buddhism in the near future as soon as reaching maturity in his or her next rein-

carnation?

14. The teaching of Mahayana Buddhism about the god Amitabha

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**In perusing the paradise passages in the Koran, one notes that the ultimate blessings for the Muslim do not go beyond a superabundance of the most pleasurable things to be enjoyed in this life. There is no indication whatsoever that heaven's joys culminate in fellowship with God.**

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sounds like salvation by grace, which would seem to prove Isaiah 64:4 false. But why does Isaiah 64:4 remain true?

15. Why do the bodhisattvas, despite all the merit for others they have accumulated, finally become valueless in Upper Vehicle Buddhism?

#### **The World of Islam**

Islam, or "submission to the will of God," is the most recent of the world's great religions and claims 970 million followers, or 18.4 percent of the world's population. This monotheistic religion directs all worship to Allah as the creator and almighty God and regards Muhammad, whose teachings are set forth in the Koran, as the final prophet, superseding all previous prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

Muhammad was born around A.D. 570 in the region of Mecca in Arabia. With no acting father and a mother who died when he was six, he was cared for by his grandfather for a short time and then by his uncle. Becoming a shepherd boy, he lived in poverty as a nomad near Mecca. Some verses in the Koran may echo this time: "Did [Allah]

not find thee an orphan and shelter thee? Did he not find thee erring, and guide thee? Did he not find thee needy, and suffice thee?"(93:6-8).<sup>8</sup>

Later Muhammad accompanied caravans organized by his uncle; these took him as far north as Syria and as far south as Yemen. In this work he gained a reputation for being dependable and honest, and around 595 these qualities caught the attention of the wealthy widow Khadija, who entrusted her business affairs to him and later married him, though fifteen years his senior. With her wealth supporting him, he now had more leisure time.

By the seventh century both Judaism and Christianity had extended their influences into Arabia, and the frequent references to the Old Testament and to Jesus in the Koran indicate that Muhammad had been exposed to them both as a dweller in Mecca and during his travels as a caravaner. Their teaching of the one God who was not to be represented by any image or picture may have aroused within him a loathing for the idolatry of the pagan Bedouins. In any event, around 610 Muhammad formed the habit of withdrawing at night to a cave at the foot of a mountain north of Mecca, where he meditated and prayed. About a year later on the night of 26-27 Ramadan, he received his first revelation when the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said, "Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created Man of a blood-clot. Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that he knew not" (96:2-5).

Mecca had long been the destination of the pagan polytheistic Bedouins because of the sacred black meteorite resting in the corner of the Kaabah—a cube-shaped sanctuary for their gods. Since the economy of the town depended heavily on the money brought by these pilgrims, at first Muhammad was

reluctant to repeat the messages he had received from this monotheistic God. Such teaching would clash with the polytheism of the Bedouin pilgrims and would probably deter them from visiting Mecca and enriching its economy. But as Muhammad continued to receive revelations, his assurance that they were genuine increased. The resulting conviction that he had therefore become a prophet of the one and only God may be indicated by the following: "I swear... by the night swarming, by the dawn sighing, [that] truly this is the word of a noble Messenger having power, with the Lord of the Throne secure, obeyed, moreover trusty" (81:1521).<sup>9</sup>

With his calling assured, around the year 613 Muhammad began to declare that there was one supreme God and that he was that God's final prophet. He seems also to have denounced the Bedouin practice of burying alive baby girls thought to be superfluous (81:9). As expected, his preaching infuriated the people of Mecca. But his wife, Khadija, encouraged him to keep on preaching Allah as the only supreme God, a God of mercy and justice who would judge all people for their behavior. Earlier this God had been proclaimed by Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, but now he, Muhammad, had superseded them. "It is He [Allah] who has sent His Messenger [Muhammad] with the guidance and the religion of truth, that he may uplift it above every religion. God suffices as a witness" (48:25).

Opposition at Mecca to Muhammad and his followers (now called Muslims, or "those who have submitted to Allah") became so pronounced that in 619 he and many of his converts fled two hundred miles north to the city now called Medina. After his arrival he was invited to umpire disputes between tribes, and his success paved the way for more refugee Muslims to join him. Their number was then swelled by additional converts at Medina.

A number of battles ensued between

the Muslims of Medina and the pagans of Mecca, but finally Muhammad reached an agreement with the Meccans that allowed him and his followers to return as Muslim pilgrims. Thus Mecca became the Muslim sanctuary, and Muhammad now undertook to subjugate all of Arabia to Islam. For him there was no division between church and state. Jews and Christians could practice their faith as second-class citizens as long as they remained loyal to the state, but pagans were to be conquered. As "idolaters," they were to be given a few months to turn to Islam. If they failed to do so, however, the word was clear: "Slay the idolaters wherever you find them... But if they repent, and perform the [Muslim] prayer, and pay the alms, then let them go their way; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate" (9:5). Another directive reads, "O believers, fight the unbelievers who are near to you, and let them find in you a harshness" (9:125). With such statements it is no wonder that Islam was soon called the religion of the sword.

### The Teachings of Islam

This use of the sword was one reason why, after only a century, Islam reigned from Spain to India. It almost engulfed France as well, being turned back only after its forces suffered a decisive defeat in 732 at the hands of Charles Martel. Another reason for its amazingly rapid advance was the simplicity of its teaching, so that today it is the world's largest religion next to Christianity. Only five things are required to be a Muslim: (1) confess the unity of God and the apostleship of Muhammad; (2) pray five times a day facing toward Mecca; (3) give the prescribed alms; (4) observe a fast during the month of Ramadan, when no food is eaten from dawn until evening;<sup>10</sup> and (5) if at all possible, make one pilgrimage to Mecca before death.

There are also high ethical commands in the Koran. For example, in

2:272 one hears an echo of the Christian teaching to conceal one's good deeds: "If you publish your freewill offerings, it is excellent; but if you conceal them, and give them to the poor, that is better for you, and will acquit you of your evil deeds." This passage is significant not only as a likely instance of Christian influence on Islam but also as evidence that in Islam, salvation is attained as one performs more good deeds than bad ones: evil deeds are canceled out, or acquitted, by the performance of good deeds. But there is no hope of salvation for those denying the tenets of Islam.

The metaphor of the pan-balances of a scale appears several times in the Koran to emphasize that entrance into paradise depends on a preponderance of good works over evil ones.

For when the Trumpet is blown... then he whose scales are heavy—they are the prosperors, and he whose scales are light—they have lost their souls in Gehenna [hell] dwelling forever, the Fire smiting their faces. (23:104-5)

We shall set up the just balances for the Resurrection Day, so that not one soul shall be wronged anything; even if it be the weight of one grain of mustard-seed [to determine whether the good outweighs the bad or vice versa]. We shall produce it, and sufficient are We for reckoners. (21:48)

If the pan-balance shows that one's good works outweigh the bad, then at the Judgment Day that one will be admitted to paradise with blessings far exceeding the tit-for-tat good works performed on earth: "Whosoever does an evil deed shall be recompensed only with the like of it, but whosoever does a righteous deed, be it male or female believing—those shall enter Paradise, therein provided without reckoning [in a tit-for-tat way]" (40:44).<sup>11</sup> For those who earn this paradise pleasures abound:

O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? [i.e., it will be hard to choose which of the abundance of Paradise's bounties are to be enjoyed.] Therein [are] two fountains



of running water,...therein of every fruit two kinds. ...[Therein you shall be] reclining upon couches lined with brocade, the fruit of the gardens nigh to gather [whenever one wishes them],... therein [are] maidens restraining their glances, untouched before them by any man.... [They are] lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral... Shall the recompense of goodness be other than [such] goodness? (55:49-60, italics added)

[The God fearing] shall have whatsoever they will with their Lord; that is the recompense of the good-doers, that God may acquit them of the worst of what they did, and recompense them with the wages of the fairest of what they were doing. (39:35-36, italics added)

### The Value of Islam

There is no denying that the blessings of the Islamic paradise are enticing. But attention should be directed toward two drawbacks in these blessings as Koranic teaching presents them.

#### *Inability to Satisfy the Heart*

In perusing the paradise passages in the Koran, one notes that the ultimate blessings for the Muslim do not go beyond a superabundance of the most pleasurable things to be enjoyed in this life. There is no indication whatsoever that heaven's joys culminate in fellowship with God.

In comparing Islam with Christianity, we may find it helpful to reflect on one of the *Pensees* (or "thoughts") of Blaise Pascal (1623-62), the famous French mathematician and philosopher.<sup>12</sup>

All men seek happiness, without exception; they all aim at this goal, however different the means they use to attain it... The will never makes the smallest move but with this as its goal. [The quest for happiness] is the motive of the actions of all men, even of those who contemplate suicide.

And yet, for centuries past, never has anyone, lacking faith, reached the mark at which all continually aim. All men murmur: princes, subjects,

nobles, commoners; old and young; learned, ignorant; sound and sick; of every clime, of every time, of every age, of every state...

What is it then that this eager desire, and this incapacity, cry aloud to us but that man once possessed true happiness, of which nothing now remains save the mark and empty outline [*la trace toute vuide*], which he vainly

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**The uniqueness of the God of the Bible becomes most evident, for he "is not served by human hands as if he needed anything" (Acts 17:25). To the contrary, the God of the Bible works on behalf of, or for the benefit of, those who trust and hope in him. And he is so complete in himself that in thus working he finds his greatest joy.**

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tries to fill in with his circumstances, seeking from things [ahead in the future] the help which he fails to find in things present, [but] all of them incapable of giving [contentment and joy], because the infinite abyss [*goufre infini*] can only be filled by one infinite and steadfast object, i.e., by God Himself? (Thought 250)

Pascal argued that a philosophy contrived by human reflection could never succeed in filling this "infinite abyss" because philosophy can talk only about things either in this world or imaginatively by analogy to these things. But since human experience proves that nothing in this world succeeds in silencing humankind's universal complaint, it follows that to fill the abyss, attention must be directed to the great religions, with their claims to know of transcendent things that human imagination cannot concoct. As Pascal said in Thought 249, "Let us examine all the religions of the world, and see whether there is any other than Christianity which satisfies our need."<sup>13</sup>

On the subject of the ultimate blessings the Christian is to enjoy, the Bible's teaching contrasts sharply with the Koran's message for the Muslim faithful. During this life, fellowship with God for the Christian is the only thing that satisfies: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:25-26). The same great hope is held out for the hereafter: "And I, in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness" (Ps. 17:15). As does the Koran, the Bible refers to heaven as a place free from the miseries of this world; only the heaven of the Bible, however, includes enjoyment of intimate fellowship with God: "No longer will there be any curse. The

throne of God and of the Lamb [Christ] will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (Rev. 22:3-4).

Pascal's reasoning seems sound that the inner desire of humankind can never be met by earthly pleasures but only by fellowship with God. How, then, could one living in a Muslim heaven find contentment for eternity doing nothing more than lounging in gardens through which cool streams flow, being served refreshing drinks by beautiful and diffident maidens? But to have fellowship with a God who is like Jesus Christ would constitute a joy that could never become commonplace.<sup>14</sup>

Why does the Koran lay no emphasis on the ultimate blessing of having fellowship with God? One plausible explanation is that the blessings of a Muslim heaven are regarded as wages paid by God. Islam honors the individual as a workperson who has had the skills,

strength, and character necessary to meet some need of Allah the employer. So it would be incongruous in this system to consider fellowship with such a deficient God as a reward for one's praise worthiness in meeting his needs.

Precisely at this point the uniqueness of the God of the Bible becomes most evident, for he "is not served by human hands as if he needed anything" (Acts 17:25). To the contrary, the God of the Bible works on behalf of, or for the benefit of, those who trust and hope in him. And he is so complete in himself that in thus working he finds his greatest joy. As Old Testament theologian Walther Eichrodt observed, Israel's religion was the direct opposite of those practiced by the surrounding peoples. In their religions god was the client for whom the people must work in order to get from him certain blessings regarded as wages— something earned. But for Israel it was just the reverse: Israel was to regard itself as the client for whom God was working, as long as the people trustingly obeyed his directives for their welfare.

The situation in Islam is exactly reverse of Christianity. In the Christian faith God is the praiseworthy worker who meets the needs of believing people, then having fellowship with such a good God becomes most desirable. We thus can conclude that Islam, in comparison with Christianity, promises a heaven that falls far short of being what the human heart craves for most.

### No Assurance in Islam

This second drawback is made clear by the Koran, which teaches that it is only the pan-balances at the future judgment that will determine those Muslims who will be saved. In the meantime one can only hope that his or her good works will outweigh the evil. But no one can be sure, and this fear of failure tends to keep one somewhat nervous about the future and to that extent unconcerned about the needs of oth-

ers. Thus the very lack of assurance reduces a person's potential for being loving. Also the less benevolent one is to others, the fewer good works will be in the pan-balance to counteract the evil ones. This situation in Islam, and even in some branches of Christianity (i.e., Roman Catholicism) can easily create a vicious circle, where the lack of assurance of being God's child keeps uncertainty reigning in the heart, which in turn lessens one's chances for doing good works. And the more people realize that this fear is keeping them from looking for opportunities to be benevolent, the more they lack assurance that God will be pleased with them.

Here then, is a striking contrast between Islam and the religion of the Bible. Hebrews 6:11-12 says, "We want each of you to prove the same diligence as before in maintaining full assurance of hope unto the end of your lives, in order that... you may be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (author's own translation). The Bible makes full confidence that God is for us and not against us which is the foundation on which to build a life of good works. In contrast, Islam teaches that one must try to amass as many good works as possible without any such assurance, since only at the final judgment can it be known whether one is to spend eternity in paradise or in hell.

These two major drawbacks in Islam underscore the superior value of the religion taught in the Bible, as do the difficulties inherent in Hinduism and Buddhism. We therefore conclude, that the Bible sets forth a message well worth our while expending the time and energy to understand. Only by appropriating its message will the God-shaped vacuum of the heart be satisfied, completely and forever.<sup>15</sup>

### Review Questions on Islam

1. In what sense is Allah merciful, even though paradise is reserved only

for those whose good deeds outweigh the bad?

2. What is the most significant omission in the Muslim description of paradise (heaven) in contrast to the Christian description of heaven?

3. Who is the client in Islam, God or the Muslim? Who is the client in biblical religion, God or the believer?

4. When should one gain full assurance of sins forgiven in Christianity? When is it gained in Islam?

5. Explain why the Christian doctrine of assurance helps one to be more benevolent than does the Muslim doctrine.

### Notes

1. *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Shri Purohit Swami (London: Faber & Faber, 1978). This song is part of the Mahabharata, a 100,000-verse epic composed 400 B.C.-A.D. 400. According to John B. Noss, scholars estimate that the Bhagavad Gita was composed around A.D. 100 (*Man's Religions*, 3d ed. [New York: Macmillan, 1963], 266).
2. Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1987), 43. The author is a native of Sri Lanka.
3. The information regarding Buddhism for this summary comes from Noss, *Man's Religions*, 167-252, and from *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard (New York: E. F. Dutton, 1952).
4. Noss, *Man's Religions*, 180.
5. *Ibid.*, 217.
6. Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 128.
7. Noss, *Man's Religions*, 221, citing Sir Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, 3 vols. (London: Edward Arnold, 1921), 2:30. The quotation is from the Lesser Sukhavati-vyuhā.
8. The 114 suras, or chapters, in the Koran ("Reading") are arranged not chronologically but generally by length (e.g., the second is 15 percent of the whole Koran; the last one consists of only seven lines). Quo-

tations from the Koran are taken from *The Koran Interpreted*, trans.

Arthur J. Arberry (New York: Macmillan, 1955), a translation regarded as of the highest quality.

9. Muhammad never regarded himself as an inspired revelatory spokesperson, but only as one who repeated what the angel Gabriel, the “noble Messenger,” told him.
10. Because Muslims have a lunar calendar, over the course of several years Ramadan occurs at every season of the year.
11. The “believing” here is limited to the affirmation of Muslim beliefs and the denial of others; for example, “They are unbelievers who say, ‘God is the Messiah, Mary’s Son’” (5:19). Unlike the Bible, the Koran says nothing about the power of faith, understood as hope and confidence in God’s promises, to produce works pleasing to God and helpful to others.
12. Blaise Pascal was a genius who, in his twenties, developed analytical geometry and the principles of probability. At the age of thirty-two, he pursued more actively his long-time interest in religion and entered the reform-inclined, monastic Jansenist community of Port Royal, France. At the risk of his life, he wrote a score of pseudonymous letters exposing the devious practices the Jesuits were successfully using to silence all dissent against the papacy. Overtaken by cancer in his late thirties, he began his lifelong ambition of writing a book on the evidence for the truth of the Christian religion. His deteriorating health, however, allowed him only to jot down about one thousand “thoughts,” which were to be basic themes and arguments for this book. Though death intervened at age thirty-nine, his “thoughts” have been regarded ever since as theological thinking at its best. The source for quotations here, both English and French, is Pascal’s *Pensées*, trans. H. F. Stewart (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950).
13. In this chapter and the preceding one I have attempted to carry out, on a

small scale, such an examination of the world’s four major religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. Now we have seen that, unlike the other three great religions, Christianity satisfies the craving of the heart and enhances the welfare of society, thus making its truth of the greatest relevance.

14. Only a century after Islam’s founding, a mystical movement arose in a group called the Sufis, who sought to gain a sense of fellowship with Allah. Such a development indicates the insatiable desire of the human heart to have close communion with what is ultimately transcendent in one’s religion.
15. After comparing the Bible’s message with the teachings of other religions it becomes evident that its teaching about a God who works for people is unique. Tragically, however, this message is absent from many Christian traditions that have not kept on testing their teachings against biblical theology so that they might “always be reforming themselves” (*semper reformandum*). As recently as 1990 it dawned on me that the Bible’s unique message provides the quickest proof of the Bible’s truth.

Step #1: The human ego is completely averse to the idea of a God who works for people, because that idea gives the ego no room for pride. So in other religions, as well as tradition-bound Christianity, we hear much talk about our obligation to work for God. In Islam, for example, one works for Allah and earns “recompense” and “wages” from him (Koran 39:35-36; 55:49-60). But in Acts 17:25 Paul said to the proud Athenians “God is not served by human hands as though he needed anything.”

Step #2: How did the Bible, penned by humans, ever come up with this message so offensive to the human ego? The answer begins with an axiom, a self-evident proposition, verifiable by the absurdity of its denial. The axiom is that every effect must have a commensurate

cause. The Bible is an effect. But we need to see that what caused it, or what brought it into being, cannot lie within the realm of human dynamics because human nature hates this message. But since every effect must have a cause, we have to leave the “first floor” of human dynamics and go upstairs to the “second story” of God’s enablement to find the cause for the Bible’s existence. The apostle Peter in 2 Peter 1:21 talks of how writers of Scripture “spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” This explains the unique message of the Bible. It exists here on the “second story” because the Holy Spirit countered the egos of the Bible’s revelatory spokespersons and moved them to write a message totally abhorrent to the human ego.

Step #3: Therefore, the Bible’s message is true, because its existence can be explained only as a work of Almighty God. In that God moved people to pen such a message agrees with Paul’s statement that he and the Bible’s other revelatory spokespersons did not use “words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches.” (See 1 Cor. 2:13)

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[Editor’s note: This article is a reprint of chapters 5 and 6 from Dr. Fuller’s book *The Unity of the Bible*, a Zondervan publication. It is must reading for anyone serious about developing a Christian worldview. Permission granted for reprint.]