

Eastern Religions

Go east, young man?

Keeping in mind the character of eastern religions from the prior write-up, we can see the rather dramatic difference between eastern and western religions, even before seeing the points of distinction among the eastern religions. Eastern religions can be generalized as having a few characteristics in common:

1) God, if part of the religion at all, is seen as within the material of the universe, as are other aspects of spirituality. Fundamental spirituality is seen as non-personal, with personal and visible expressions being temporal and secondary to the primarily immanent spirituality within the universe. Personality and individuality and the uniqueness of a single life are but temporal illusions – interruptions in the ever-flowing river of universal consciousness.

2) Human life is seen in view of a vast number of reincarnations. The impact is to diminish the significance of each human life as just part of a vast series of reincarnations through which all must go, and the relentless flow of which cannot be thwarted. A principal characteristic of this series of reincarnations is that life is viewed primarily as circular. Linear progress takes place over time, but within the human perspective of a lifetime, it is only a matter of how long until the next time around the ever-turning circle.

3) Morality and truth are not founded upon the infinite holy character of a supreme and personal God, to Whom we are accountable upon the end of one lifetime, but rather upon the impersonal and rigid principles of karma which play within the almost endless cycle of life and death into life and death again and again and again and...

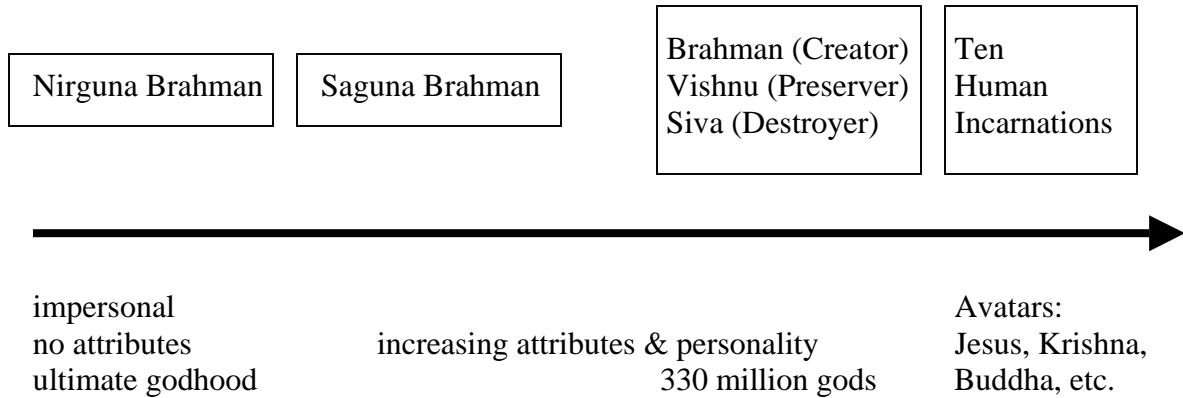
Aspects of this worldview have been increasingly “marketed” in the United States over about the last four decades. We have seen it come in such forms as:

- Transcendental meditation celebrities: Beatles, Donovan, Mia Farrow
- Hare Krishna: saffron robes, airport beggars and peddlers, corruption and abuse
- Exercise & sports: Yoga, Tai chi, martial arts
- Health: acupuncture, eastern alternative medical approaches, diets
- Books: Siddhartha, Touch for Health, The Divine Conspiracy
- Movies & music: The Lion King, “Circle of Life”; Star Wars: “The Force”; Ravi Shankar: sitar music; “Just A Little Talk With Jesus”: “...prayer wheel turning...”
- New age & reincarnation celebrities: Shirley Maclaine, Sylvester Stallone
- Advertising: showing people doing yoga or meditating in “lotus posture”
- Language: “karma”, “mantra”, “nirvana”, “past life”, “next life” among non-Christians; “praying a wall of prayer” or “bathe with prayer” among Christians

While recent decades have undermined belief in absolute truth in western cultures, and even substantially among the western religions, eastern religions and cultures have been very accommodating of various religions and philosophies for centuries – unless a claim is made to absolute and exclusive truth. There is no tolerance for that.

Hinduism

Hinduism has its roots in India, about the same time that Moses was out in the desert tending sheep among the Midianites (about 1500 BC). Initially the religion was more focused upon ritual, involving and requiring priests, but later became more focused upon meditation. We can represent core Hindu religious theological belief as shown:



In Hinduism, there is only physical death, but no spiritual death, since reincarnation keeps recycling the embodiment of the spiritual into a new physical manifestation. It takes 8.4 million reincarnations to become a human being, and within that, innumerable reincarnations as a human or perhaps a lower physical being, before the spiritual aspect of the human is taken back into the impersonal Nirguna Brahman, with no attributes.

In Hinduism, it is the ignorance of the divine nature of humans and even that of evil spirits that is held to be the ultimate problem, although local variations of Hinduism and folk belief will cast that into varying perspectives. Salvation in Hinduism is entirely by works, instituted by the relentless law of karma, in which there is no forgiveness – only absolute enforcement of the law of karma. There is, then, both a resignation to karma and a reluctance to interfere with it.

In practical terms, Hindus often fall into a worship of one or more of the many subsidiary deities emanating from Nirguna Brahman, and are focused upon superstition, idols, and local cultural expressions.

Buddhism

Buddhism began with the teachings of its founder, Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (563-483 BC – actual historical dates vary and are debated among scholars), who said that desire is the fundamental problem, and that the attainment of enlightenment (nirvana) is the “extinguishing of the candle flame of desire”¹, which frees one from the ongoing cycle of rebirth, death and rebirth again (samsara). To attain enlightenment, one must come to an understanding of the Dharma, the way of higher truths, which Buddha presented as the four noble truths and the eightfold path to enlightenment.

¹ Sometimes also referred to by other metaphors, such as “breaking the mirrors of suffering”.

The Four Noble Truths

1. Life means suffering.
2. The origin of suffering is attachment.
3. The cessation of suffering is attainable.
4. The path to the cessation of suffering - enlightenment - is eight-fold.

The Eightfold Path to Enlightenment

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|------------------------|--|--------------------|
| 1. Right view | | Wisdom |
| 2. Right intention | | |
| 3. Right speech | | Ethical conduct |
| 4. Right action | | |
| 5. Right livelihood | | |
| 6. Right effort | | Mental development |
| 7. Right mindfulness | | |
| 8. Right concentration | | |

As brought forward at the outset, Hinduism and Buddhism share similarities of assumptions about the world and life, which make it possible to present perspectives that the two religions have in common (page 1). Like Hinduism, reincarnation and karma are generally central to the life and worldview of Buddhism. Also like Hinduism, there are aspects of Buddhism, historically, which do not set well with typical modern viewpoints:

- Women were considered a lower level of reincarnation than a man, all other considerations and factors aside. Modern Buddhism has tended to update this viewpoint where it has encountered the influence of feminism.
- Though there are many local variations within Buddhism, as with Hinduism, reincarnation and karma have tended to degrade into profound neglect, subjugation and abuse of animals and/or people that are viewed as lower or retrogressive in the series of reincarnations. Buddhism had also been presented as kind and loving.

As one would expect, apologists for Buddhism will indicate that such skewed teachings and practices are not correct, unenlightened, exceptions, etc. But the historical basis for these disgusting viewpoints and the logical consequences of reincarnation and karma remain.

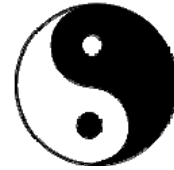
The math again: division & addition

As one would expect, there is a spectrum of variation within Hinduism and Buddhism, including differing local expressions (the divisions), and regional admixtures with other philosophies and religions (the additions – see next section).

Other eastern religions & philosophies

Aside from the major religions, there are secondary eastern religions (as measured by the numbers of adherents), but please be aware that adherents will likely disagree with some or all of the simplified characterizations given below:

- Sikhism: can be characterized as a combination of Islam and Hinduism
- Shinto: animism, with an eastern twist
- Jainism: an older religion, historically, than Hinduism and Buddhism, which still falls under the basic eastern views, but sees the universe as eternal
- Confucianism: a social philosophy, conveying eastern wisdom
- Taoism: more of a philosophy and worldview than a religion, Taoism is the source of the yin / yang principle, often presented by the symbol recognized by many, even in the western world:
- Astrology: pagan spirituality that has had expressions in western and eastern religions



How do I talk with people on this not so merry-go-round?

In Hinduism, Buddhism and basically all eastern religion and philosophy, the great burden is the hopelessness of the impersonal “karmic machine”. The law of karma grinds relentlessly on without personality, mercy, forgiveness, or true hope in one’s life. Hinduism offers no end to the almost endless cycle of birth, death & rebirth, so while one can have a small influence in each lifetime, there is no shortcut to getting out of the cycle.

So the Christian has a place to offer the hope, mercy and forgiveness that Hinduism simply does not have. But to do so, one must present the personal God of the Scriptures, our alienation from Him, and the reconciliation to Him that is found only by faith in Christ. Those holding to the eastern religions and philosophies will often have their own concepts of God and even of Jesus Christ, accommodated to their own view, but must come to an understanding of the truth and that there is salvation in no one else. It is God’s work that saves – not ours. It is God’s revealed truth that is spiritually profitable – not that of any of the Maharishis, Swamis, or other eastern “masters”.

Acts 17:22-31

So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23 "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown God.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. 24 "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' 29 "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. 30 "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, 31 because *He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world* in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." (see also Hebrews 9:27, focusing upon the finality of a single death)