



ANSWERING THE **TOUGH QUESTIONS** ABOUT CHRISTIANITY

WHICH GOD DO I CHOOSE?

LESSON #
5

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

A person who incorporates a supreme entity into their worldview has several options from which to choose. At a minimum, they must decide how many supreme entities there are and how to describe the relationship between the entity(ies) and creation. In some cases, the gods of various world religions have combinations of these characteristics. This lesson will explore the beliefs of the major world religions regarding their god.

THINK ABOUT THIS

Don't all world religions lead to the same god?

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

ROMANS 1:18-25; 3:23 (*All Scripture CSB unless otherwise noted*)

THE MAIN IDEA

Everyone has a worldview, whether they can define it or not. It is the "filter" or "lens" through which a person analyzes world events and their experiences so they can make sense of the world around them. If a person incorporates a supernatural god into their worldview, the next question is, "Which god do I choose?"

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What do the major world religions believe about their god?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

Romans 1:18-25. In these verses, Paul addresses those who don't acknowledge the true God when they choose to worship created things, and he explains the risk they take in making the wrong choice.

Romans 3:23. In chapters 1-3 of the Book of Romans, Paul begins his "apologetic" or "reasoned justification" for the statement he makes in Romans 3:23 where he concludes: "*For all have sinned (i.e., chosen themselves to be "in charge") and fall short of the glory of God.*"



START HERE

CONVERSATION EXAMPLE

Your father-in-law tells you he believes in God but that all religions lead to the same God. This lesson will give you tools to help you show that the gods worshipped by the world religions are very different, which means he should be interested in deciding which is the true God.

Theism is the belief that a god or supreme being is involved [e.g., created, intervenes, etc.] in the world around us¹. People who believe in a god, supreme being, or unifying force are called theists. Within theism are subcategories of beliefs based on the concept of a god.

ADDING CLARITY

The most widely held theistic worldviews (i.e., worldviews that include a god) today are:

- **Polytheism** ("poly" - more than one, "theos" - god)
- **Pantheism** ("pan" - all, "theos" - god)
- **Monotheism** ("mono" - one, "theos" - god)

There are other less widely held theistic belief systems, such as:

- **Deism** - Their god created the world and set up natural laws but no longer engages in world events and has left mankind to figure out the best way to live by using logic and reasoning alone. A 2005 book by Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, revealed that many U.S teenagers in 2002-03 were functional deists.²
- **Panentheism** - Their god is a force holding everything together. Like the force in Star Wars, "all is in god, and god is in all." Changes in the world reflect ever-increasing perfection in god.
- **Finite godism** - Some things catch their god by surprise because it is not in control of all things.

¹ Yeats, J. M., & Blase, J. (2005). *Worldviews: Think for Yourself about How We See God* (p. 55). NavPress.

² Smith, C. & Denton, M. (2005). *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (n.p.) Oxford University Press.



GOSPEL FOCUS

Understanding how other religions prompt people to interact with their supreme entity allows Christians the opportunity to highlight the hope of our beliefs, including:

- Our assurance of a relationship and fellowship with God through His grace and mercy in Christ that lasts for eternity.
- Our belief is in God, who loves humanity and is involved in our lives daily.

REVIEW AND DISCUSS

1. POLYTHEISM IS THE BELIEF IN MANY GODS.

Hinduism is the most popular polytheistic religion in the world, with about 15% of people on the planet practicing one or more forms of this faith.³ One count of the gods in Hinduism reveals there are thousands.⁴

The "ultimate reality" of Hinduism is called the Absolute (or Brahman), which is not a deity like the Christian God but an impersonal ultimate truth and power outside of which all life and all reality cannot exist. It is also believed to be the universe's cause; the "universal soul" gives life to all. Some Hindus believe in a hierarchy among the gods, with all lesser gods coming under the unifying Brahman. These "lesser" gods have one or more characteristics of Brahman, and each person must decide which of these gods will guide them in life.

Buddhism has its roots in Hinduism, so followers also believe in the Absolute, although they don't use the name "Brahman." In addition, most Buddhists believe that other supernatural gods and demons are just different forms of life available to mankind through reincarnation in the progression to enlightenment and Nirvana. Some forms of Buddhism worship Buddha as one of these other gods, and others incorporate the deities of different religions (including Jesus) into their version of Buddhism.⁵

³ Statista. (September 18, 2023). Share of global population affiliated with major religious groups in 2022, by religion [Graph]. In *Statista*. Retrieved December 02, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/374704/share-of-global-population-by-religion/>

⁴ Subhamoy Das. (2019, May 7.) "Hindu Gods and Goddesses." Learn Religions. Retrieved November 16, 2024, from <https://www.learnreligions.com/why-hindus-have-so-many-gods-1769466>.

⁵ It (Nirvana) is used to refer to the extinction of desire, hatred, and ignorance and, ultimately, of suffering and rebirth. Literally, it means "blowing out" or "becoming extinguished," as when a flame is blown out or a fire burns out.

Donald S. Lopez (2024). *Nirvana*. Britannica.com. Retrieved November 19, 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nirvana-religion>.



Hindus and Buddhists strive to rid themselves of the negative consequences of wrong behavior (bad karma) by faithfully living according to their religious teachings:

- Hinduism's laws (i.e., the Dharma)
- Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path

Reincarnation, the cycle of birth called samsara (suhm SAA ruh), is the process that gives them opportunities to rid themselves of bad karma.

The Absolute is beyond good or evil. Individuals who recognize good and evil reflect that they have not yet achieved oneness with the Absolute. To get closer to the Absolute, a person must progress toward nonattachment or enlightenment - the utter unconcern for one's actions and the resulting consequences. They accept that "[a]ll good and all evil is relative to the individual point of growth...But in the highest sense there can be neither good nor evil" (Bhagavad-Gita, 140). Hindus and Buddhists believe that when they reach perfection or "moksha" (MOWK-sha), they become one with the Absolute (think of a drop of rain falling into the ocean).

Some claim that Mormonism should be considered polytheistic because of its belief that Mormons who live an exemplary life by adhering to all the commandments taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will become the god of their own world, just as the god of this world once did. One of their early church leaders said, "As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may be."⁶

DISCUSS

How would you prepare to talk to a polytheist like a Hindu or a Buddhist? (Possible answers: Pray for wisdom in my approach; Seek to understand their beliefs first, etc.)

2. PANTHEISM BELIEVES GOD AND CREATION ARE NOT SEPARATE.

Pantheism adherents believe that everything in the natural world is God - humans, animals, plants, rocks, water, and air are all God. In other words, "all is God, and God is all." Most Hindus and Buddhists are pantheistic as well as polytheistic.

Because the pantheistic Absolute is not separate from creation, this worldview rules out the possibility of miracles because only something outside of creation can intervene in this manner.

⁶ (n.d.). Retrieved November 17, 2024, from https://www.mormonwiki.com/As_Man_Now_Is_God_Once_Was.



Thus, pantheists reject the Christian belief in God's miraculous intervention in the world through prophecy, the incarnation of Jesus, and God's inspiration of the Bible, etc. Some Hindus believe that everything we perceive as reality is the Absolute's illusion (i.e., a figment of the Absolute's "imagination.")

DISCUSS

How would you compare the Christian God to the Hindu "Absolute"? (Possible answers: God is loving, God cares for us in miraculous ways, He is full of grace and mercy, etc.)

3. MONOTHEISM IS THE BELIEF IN ONE GOD.

The two major worldwide monotheistic religions are Islam and Christianity, with almost 2 billion followers each. Judaism is also monotheistic, but it has only about 15 million adherents. Unlike pantheists, all monotheists believe God is separate and distinct from creation. Still, each person holds a different understanding of the degree of engagement of their god in the lives of others each day.

The term "Islam" is Arabic for "submission," and Allah is the god of Islam. Muslims consider him to be so far above humanity that there is no way mankind can have a personal relationship with him. This distant relationship between Allah and mankind stands in stark contrast to the adoptive Father God of Christianity, who desires daily fellowship with humanity. Muslims submit to Allah as servants or slaves, and his main concern is the degree of their submission to his commands (e.g., the Five Pillars of Islam) found in the Quran and other sacred Islamic texts.

A significant difference between Islam and Christianity is the concept of the Trinity. Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, had a significant problem with the polytheistic practices of the pagan religions around him, so the Quran stresses that God is one. To have more than one god is unthinkable to a Muslim, and they consider the Christian Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) as polytheistic. Muslims also don't believe that Jesus is God because there is no way Allah would lower himself to live on earth. Therefore, they don't believe in the redeeming work of Jesus through his death, burial, and resurrection. However, they believe Jesus was one of many prophets, of which Mohammed is the greatest.

The goal of a Muslim is to obtain a place in Jannah (Paradise). For a man, some Muslim teachers conclude Jannah is filled with hedonistic pleasures such as gardens, wine that has no aftereffects, and beautiful maidens (houris) untouched before by...men.⁷ For a woman, Islamic

⁷ Definition of Jannah in Islam. Learn Religions. Retrieved on December 2, 2024, from <https://www.learnreligions.com/definition-of-jannah-2004340>.



teachers surmise that she is promised her youthful looks again and eternity with either her husband - if he is found worthy of a place in Jannah, another eternal partner provided by Allah, or contentment with her singleness.⁸

The difference in rewards for men and women is explained by the observation that men pursue women while women don't pursue men in the same way. Muslims believe there are several levels in Paradise, but which level one will attain is not assured because it depends on the degree of the person's submission to Allah.

DISCUSS

What have you learned about Islam that may be an opportunity to start a spiritual conversation with a Muslim you may know? (Possible answers: Various personal responses)

REFLECT ON THE LESSON

All major world religions other than Christianity appeal to man's need to **do something** to obtain the approval of their supreme entity. This stands in stark contrast to the free gift of salvation available through Christ's death on the cross.

According to Hinduism and Buddhism, a person is a god who has multiple chances through reincarnation to realize their godhood, at which time they will be absorbed into the Absolute. For Muslims, their god's approval is based solely on following the rules and performing "good works."

Only in Christianity does God reveal Himself as a loving Father who unilaterally reconciles fallen humanity to Himself by His grace and mercy through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-9,

¹ And you were dead in your trespasses and sins ² in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. ³ We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even

⁸ Mohamed Kohia and Syed E. Hasan (2015). "Do Heavenly Rewards Differ for Muslim Men, Women?" The Kansas City Star. Retrieved November 17, 2024, from <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/story/lifestyle/faith/2015/02/28/do-heavenly-rewards-differ-for/985978007/>.



though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! ⁶He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift— ⁹not from works, so that no one can boast.

DISCUSS

How can a "Christian" make the same mistake about God that the followers of other religions make? (Possible answers: Suffer a tragedy and blame it on God; Become angry with God because He did not answer their prayers; Endure abuse from someone who claims to be a Christian. make a profession of faith in Christ at some point in their life but want nothing to do with God after that; become legalistic; reject the leadership of the Holy Spirit in their daily life, etc.)

RESPOND

Do you believe God when He says in the Bible that Jesus is the only way to Him? Have pagan views about God influenced what you believe about Him?

APPLY

List names of people you know who belong to a religion other than Christianity.

Think about how you might respond to their questions about Christianity and study those topics to be prepared to converse with them.

Consider what questions you might ask them and how the articulation of their beliefs could provide opportunities for further discussion.

Pray about starting spiritual conversations with them and follow the Holy Spirit's guidance.



LOOKING TO NEXT WEEK...

WHICH HOLY BOOK SHOULD I READ?

Many adherents of the major religions attest to the validity of their faith through an emotional event. Muslims experience "peace and belonging" when they first recite the Shahadah ("I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah") with conviction. The Hindu sense is becoming one with the "ultimate reality" through meditation. Mormons feel a "burning in the bosom" when they believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God and that the "restored gospel" of the LDS church is the truth. Christians sense relief from the burden of their sin and the joy of entering the family of God when they are saved. Although our personal experience is authentic, we may find it unconvincing to others. If our sincere emotional event does not determine which god others should follow, how do we help them make that decision? In each of the world's religions, ancient writings describe their god and how humankind relates to that god. The real question is not "Which god do I choose?" but "Which holy book contains the truth about god?" Next week, we will discuss why we believe the Bible is God's Word and thus "*is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness...*" (2 Timothy 3:16).

GENERAL RESOURCES

Resources are available from the North American Mission Board Apologetics site <https://www.namb.net/apologetics/topics/world-religions/>, and the Southern Baptist of Texas Convention site <https://sbtcwebstore.com/collections/language-evangelism?page=1>