

WANDERING ALONG THE WAY

INTRO TO WORLD
RELIGIONS

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Do you have a minute to talk about...

The neighbors living in the apartment below mine are my friends. They're funny, generous, vibrant, exceptionally hospitable and kind people, but they aren't particularly religious. So when a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses arrived on their doorstep one day, the situation was uncomfortable.

To get out of an awkward interaction gracefully, my neighbors told the Witnesses that their pastor lived in the apartment above them and they should come to me if they wanted to have a religious discussion. Unfortunately, I was at the grocery store at the time and missed the opportunity, but what would have happened if I had been at home? What would you do if you were in my shoes?

When Christian friends hear me talk about situations like this one, they sometimes say they'd like to kick back with some popcorn and watch me deliver a Bible beatdown to whoever is foolhardy enough to knock on my door, but those friends would be sorely disappointed.

I don't give Bible beatdowns to visiting Mormons, Witnesses, or Vedics. The truth is that I appreciate anyone with the heart, openness, and eagerness to have real faith conversations, even if we categorically disagree on key ideas. In these discussions, I get to share about Jesus and the hope he brings. I also seize the opportunity to learn about unfamiliar faiths so that I can become a better informed, more engaging neighbor.

And I thought you might like to learn alongside me.

In these **Wandering Along the Way** blog posts, I'm going to share with you about world religions, where they came from, what they teach, and how Christian beliefs contrast with them. As we learn together, let us remember that our goal is to authentically love our neighbors, whoever they are and whatever they believe. Here, you will not find ammunition for the next time you hear a knock at the door. Because that's not the point.

Instead, the point is to become more like Jesus.

So let's do it.

In this first chapter, we'll start with the group that came and knocked on my door: the **Jehovah's Witnesses**.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:1

Jehovah's Witness History.

Jehovah's Witness history begins with the predictions of William Miller in the early to mid-19th century. Miller was an American Baptist minister who became the founder of the Adventist movement. Advent comes from the Latin term *adventus*,

which means “coming”. Thus, Adventism was characterized by predictions concerning the second coming of Jesus Christ described in Revelation.

Miller errantly believed that Christ’s glorious return would occur in 1843-1844. When this prediction failed to materialize, the Adventist movement was splintered. In the 1870s, one of these splinters reformed as a new, independent society under the leadership of a controversial Adventist named Charles Taze Russell.

Russell formed several organizations around beliefs which all major branches of the Christian Church describe as heresy (see below). These organizations included the International Bible Students Association and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania. In 1909, he moved the headquarters of their organization to New York City. Even though Russell’s own predictions about the return of Jesus went unfulfilled in 1914, he successfully urged his followers to continue circulating his materials and again recalculated the return of Christ.

In 1917, Joseph Franklin Rutherford took over the movement and renamed it the Jehovah’s Witnesses, since their group refers to God by the name Jehovah (the Latin spelling of God’s Hebrew name, Yahweh).

Over the coming decades, the Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to grow, opened their own Watch Tower Bible School, created Watch Tower periodicals, and increased their massive library of religious books, tracts, pamphlets, texts, and magazines.

In 1961, the New World Translation of the Bible was published by a committee of five Jehovah’s Witnesses, describing it as a modern, accurate, and readable translation of the Bible. Critics of the NWT have persuasively argued that numerous changes were made throughout the text in order to more consistently reflect preexisting Jehovah’s Witness beliefs, and that it had no basis in scholarly biblical study.

Today, there are approximately 8.5 million Jehovah’s Witnesses around the world. They are headquartered in Warwick, New York, and Kenneth E. Cook Jr. has

served as their president since 2019.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Jehovah's Witness Beliefs.

God. Jehovah's Witnesses believe in the worship of one God, the Creator of everything, Jehovah.

Jesus. Jesus Christ is the Savior and Son of God, ruling as the king of heaven since 1914. Unlike orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses reject the doctrine of the Trinity, believing that Jesus is a created being and lesser god to Jehovah. Jesus is thus unworthy of worship. Jehovah's Witnesses also believe that Jesus and the archangel Michael are the same person.

The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not divine and is not part of a Trinity. Instead, the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force, an expression of Jehovah's power.

Scripture. The 66 books of the Bible are God's inspired message to humanity but require appropriate translation to communicate the truth. Christianity's modern translations of the Bible are believed to be inaccurate, accounting for our differences in theology.

The Devil and the Fall. Evil came into existence when the Devil (then an archangel) rebelled against God and convinced Adam and Eve to eat the Forbidden Fruit. The consequences of this sin have been disastrous for humanity. God has allowed this evil and suffering for a time, but will not permit them to continue forever,

Salvation. Jesus' death on the cross served as a sacrifice for sin. By accepting Jesus' sacrifice, repenting, and receiving baptism, we can be saved from oblivion (if we are among Jehovah's 144,000 elect). Salvation cannot be achieved through works.

The Second Coming of Jesus. Jehovah's Witnesses expected Jesus to return in 1874, but when this prediction failed, the date was pushed forward to 1914. When this second prediction also failed, leadership concluded that they had misunderstood the nature of Jesus' return. Contemporary Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus did return in 1914... invisibly. This year marks Jesus' installation as the king of heaven and the end of the power of the kingdoms of the world. Because this return occurred in heaven, the second coming could not be perceived by those living on the earth.

End Times & the Resurrection of the Dead. We are living in the last days and God's literal Kingdom will soon come to earth to replace all human governments. At the end of time, God will resurrect humanity and judge them, but only 144,000 will be found faithful. These 144,000 faithful Jehovah's Witnesses will rule alongside Jesus in heaven and enjoy eternal life.

Heavenly Hope vs. Earthly Hope. Many outsiders have commonly asked the question, "If Jehovah's Witnesses believe only 144,000 of them will be resurrected to rule with Jesus, then what happens to the rest of the faithful beyond the 144,000?"

Jehovah's Witnesses make a distinction between those who have a "heavenly hope" and those who have an "earthly hope". Those with a "heavenly hope" believe they are among the 144,000 who will co-rule with Jesus in heaven. Those who merely have an "earthly hope" believe they will be saved, resurrected, and able to enjoy eternal life on an earthly paradise. They won't be part of the new covenant, won't rule, and won't dwell in heaven, but they won't fall into non-existence either. At an annual commemoration of Jesus' death (called the Memorial or Lord's

Evening Meal), only those who believe they have a heavenly hope and are among the 144,000 receive communion; all those with earthly hope allow the elements to pass them by.

For the 2022 Memorial, millions of Jehovah's Witnesses attended services to commemorate the Lord's sacrifice, but only 21,000 chose to receive the elements of bread and wine.

Heaven & Hell. Although Jehovah's Witnesses believe in Heaven, they do not believe in the existence of Hell. When God judges humanity at the end of time, they believe the non-elect will simply return to non-existence.

Jehovah's Witness Practices.

Jehovah's Witness practices include:

- weekly worship services
- use of terms Kingdom Hall & overseer instead of church & pastor
- baptism
- door to door evangelism
- annual Memorial of bread and wine, only received by the elect
- heterosexual marriage and prohibition of divorce (except for cases of adultery)
- care for the poor and disenfranchised
- in lieu of tithe, Kingdom Halls are supported via anonymous donations
- absolute pacifism, neutrality in political affairs, and refusal to vote
- refusal to salute any flag, recite any pledge of allegiance, or participate in military service.
- refusal to venerate any symbol (such as a cross)
- refusal to consume blood or to receive blood transfusions
- refusal to celebrate any holiday or event which celebrates anyone besides King Jesus (including birthdays, Valentine's, Mother's Day, Halloween, etc.) Christmas and Easter, believed to have pagan origins, are also prohibited.

These are the basic history, beliefs, and practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

As you look them over, you'll discover several points of crossover between our faiths, but some significant points of departure too.

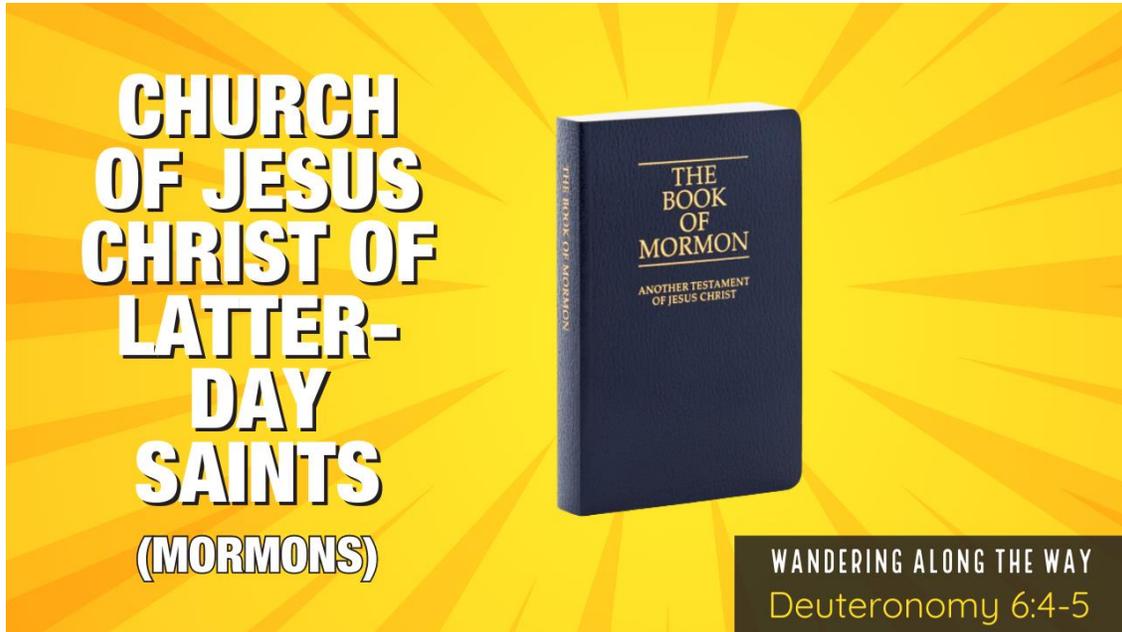
For Christians, the key disagreement with our Jehovah's Witness neighbors regards the very nature of God: is there a Triune God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit who is at work in the cosmos, or is there an independent great God, a lesser god, and an impersonal force at work instead? The answer to this question will be the decisive influence over every other belief which we hold.

Thus, our instinct may be to debate our local Jehovah's Witness to convince them that their view of God is incorrect, but such an argument will likely prove unpersuasive. Our foundation for doctrine is the Bible, and Jehovah's Witnesses believe our Bible is corrupted. From their perspective, it doesn't matter how many sound arguments we produce when a "faulty" text is our foundation.

With that in mind, the next time a Jehovah's Witness shows up on your doorstep, don't try to argue with them. Instead, let the light of Jesus shine through you, tell them what he's done for you, and allow the Holy Spirit to speak for Himself. Because the best proof that Jesus is more than a minor deity and that the Holy Spirit is alive and active is not found in shrewdness of argument but in boldness of example and witness!

Don't just tell your local Jehovah's Witness that God loves them, you love them, and that there's not a thing they can do about it...

Show them by your example!



- 2 -

Come and knock on our door...

When Joe Raposo wrote the theme song to Three's Company, I doubt he was thinking about door-to-door missionaries, yet for some reason, that's where my head goes when I hear his opening line.

In this chapter, we're going to talk about the folks who familiarized Americans with door-to-door missionaries: the members of the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints**, or as you know them, the **Mormons**.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Mormon History.

Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844) was the son of a New England farmer and founder of the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**. He was husband to more than 30 women, the prophet of the LDS Church, and the first American politician to be assassinated while campaigning for the presidency.

Joseph Jr. was born into a family with a blended religious heritage. Lucy Mack, Smith's mother, came from a Connecticut family which had been influenced by the **Seekers**, a 16th century separatist Puritan group interested in searching for modern-day prophets and new revelations which would restore Christ's true Church. Joseph Sr., Smith's father, was less interested in organized forms of spirituality and showed relative indifference to the religious side of his children's upbringing.

After several unproductive farming seasons in Vermont, Joseph Sr. moved his family to Palmyra, New York. Lucy began attending Presbyterian meetings there, but Joseph Sr. remained at home with his son. Religious differences further compounded as the family began to experiment with magic and treasure hunting.

Being raised in this diverse religious environment, Joseph Jr. would later describe himself as a very confused young man with many spiritual questions, questions such as:

Which church denomination is the true Church?

Can the true Church be restored?

Has the true Church become apostate?

According to his own account, the 14-year-old Smith prayed to God for help in easing his spiritual confusion. In answer to his prayer, Smith was visited by God the Father and Jesus Christ in a vision. Jesus told Smith that Christians "draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

Smith took this to mean that all churches had fallen away from the true faith and become apostate, the lack of unity among their denominations confirming his conclusion. But how did this apostasy come about?

According to Smith, Jesus's apostles were given the "keys of the Kingdom of God", but after the apostles died, these keys were taken by the devil to be used for his purposes. With the keys gone, the Bible became corrupted and mistranslated, and the truth was lost. This is when apostasy took root in the early church.

Smith reported that the "keys of the Kingdom of God" did not return to the earth until they were given to him through angelic visits from the apostles Peter, James, and John. He further claimed he was visited by an angel named **Moroni** in a follow-up vision in 1823. This angel revealed the existence of a stone box containing **ancient golden plates** buried a short distance from Joseph's family farm.

These plates contained "another testament" of Jesus Christ, describing the history of a 6th century BC Jewish empire in the Americas, of its culture, wars, prophecies, and fall from grace, and of Jesus' arrival to minister in the Americas following his ascension from Jerusalem. Smith claimed that he retrieved the plates four years later and translated them with the help of heavenly stones called the **Urim and Thummim**.

When he published the **Book of Mormon** in March 1830, Smith insisted it was the result of this miraculous translation, not of his own fabrication or composition. The following month, Joseph gathered a fledgling flock, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was born.

Over the next fourteen years, Smith would successfully grow his movement through an ambitious program of evangelism, bringing tens of thousands of converts from the Americas and Europe into his fold.

But his success would not last.

LDS teachings led the Mormons to face persecution everywhere they attempted to

settle, and they were repeatedly expelled by local authorities from various mid-western communities. When it seemed that they would be exiled for the third time, Smith attempted an armed resistance and became wanted for robbery, arson, and treason in the state of Missouri in 1838. Joseph's community fled to Illinois, where they founded the town of Nauvoo. Tensions in Illinois grew to the breaking point in 1844.

As in Missouri and Ohio, non-Mormon locals were growing dissatisfied with the large Mormon presence in their community. In addition to other religious curiosities, the Mormon practice of polygamy and Smith's leadership aspirations were particularly repugnant to them. And so, they published a highly critical reform newspaper in protest.

After the first issue of this newspaper was released, Smith, then the Mayor of Nauvoo and a candidate in the 1844 American presidential race, ordered that the publishing press be destroyed, and the city council agreed with his order. Suppression of free speech left non-Mormon locals further enraged. Smith and his brother, Hyrum, were arrested on the charge of promoting a riot and taken to the county seat for trial.

On June 27, 1844, an angry mob of about 200 men wearing wet gunpowder to disguise their faces stormed the Carthage jail where Smith was held. Hyrum was quickly executed via gunshot to the head, and Joseph attempted to escape through the second story window. He was shot several times, tumbling to the ground below. There, a firing squad executed him.

But of course, this was not the end of the movement. In Smith's wake came the second prophet of the LDS Church, **Brigham Young**. It was he who first led the Mormons to their modern-day capital of Salt Lake City, Utah.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Mormon Beliefs.

God(s). Mormons believe the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three separate gods, not the Trinity of orthodox Christianity. In fact, they believe in the existence of many gods in the universe, but that earthly humanity must worship only God the Father.

God the Father was once a mortal man on another world ruled by another god; by completing the necessary **ordinances**, he was able to become a god and rule over our world. By following his example and his will for us, anyone can become a god and have their own world to rule over with an eternal family by their side.

The Church. The entire Church (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant branches alike) became apostate after the original twelve apostles died and the Keys of the Kingdom were taken by the devil; through Joseph Smith, God brought about the restoration of Jesus' Gospel, the Church, and the true Christian faith.

The Holy Scriptures. Mormons have four holy books: the **Book of Mormon**, the **Doctrine and the Covenants**, the **Pearl of Great Price**, and the **Bible**.

- **The Book of Mormon** was given to Joseph Smith, according to his own account, by revelation from the angel Moroni in the form of hidden golden plates and translated using special stones called the Urim and Thummim; this book is the most accurate book in the world.
- **The Doctrine and the Covenants** contain instructions from Mormon prophets and presidents. These teachings are believed to come to the prophets as modern-day inspiration from God and are thus authoritative as Mormon Scripture.
- **The Pearl of Great Price** contains a selection of materials authored and translated by Smith, as well as an account of a vision of Moses and the translation of a sacred papyrus (purchased by Joseph Smith from a traveling salesman of Egyptian artifacts and mummies) telling the story of Abraham's visit to Egypt in Genesis.

- **The Bible** is a holy book for Mormons when it is translated correctly, but if the Bible conflicts with the other Mormon scriptures, then the difference is chalked up to corruption of its message in the early days of the church. Joseph Smith was working on a "correct translation" of the Bible (part of which can be found in **The Pearl of Great Price**) when he was arrested and killed.

Humanity & God's Plan of Salvation. All human beings (including Jesus) begin life as spiritual, sexually begotten, pre-mortal children born first to God and his divine bride(s), and then are born again on earth to bodily parents.

We were made mortal because the flesh enables us to learn lessons which we could not otherwise learn in God's presence. God's plan to make us into gods required the sacrifice of a Savior, which our loving brother Jesus volunteered to become for us.

Another of our brothers, the one we call the **devil**, presented an alternative plan in which all humanity could be placed under his control, thus forgoing the sacrifice. Without free will, humanity would theoretically obey God's plan and become gods, and the devil would be placed on par with God the Father in glory.

God rejected this plan, and the devil rebelled in a primeval heavenly war, taking 1/3 of the heavenly host to his side, and the other 2/3 following Jesus; the devil lost his war. Those who chose to follow Jesus were permitted to be born on earth, but those who sided with the devil were cast into the outer darkness.

Afterlife. After mortal life runs its course, human spirits are sent to one of two places:

- If you have accepted the "restored Gospel", then you go to a **spiritual paradise**.
- If you rejected the restored Gospel, then you go to a **spiritual prison**.

- Those in paradise visit those in prison to give a second opportunity to receive the restored Gospel.

Judgment & Eternity. After the period of spiritual paradise/prison, God reunites us with our perfected bodies for final judgment, after which you will go to one of these four locations for eternity...

- **Outer Darkness:** Reserved for the most wicked "Sons of Perdition", the devil and his followers, and those very, very few who have a "perfect knowledge" of Jesus and still choose to reject him; a place of fire and brimstone / darkness, Hell.
- **Telestial Kingdom:** Sinners who do not receive the gospel nor the knowledge of Christ but lacked "perfect knowledge" of Jesus will be assigned to this Kingdom after spending 1,000 years in spiritual prison; in the Telestial Kingdom, they will have communion with the Holy Spirit, but they will not be able to commune with Christ or the Father.
- **Terrestrial Kingdom:** Those who lived respectable, good lives, but who were thwarted by the machinations of evil men and rejected the "full gospel" of Jesus Christ, as well as those who rejected Jesus in life but received him upon testimony while in spiritual prison will be assigned to this Terrestrial Kingdom, where they can commune with the Spirit and Christ, but not the Father.
- **Celestial Kingdom:** This highest reward is for faithful Mormons who accept the "full gospel" of Jesus Christ and complete all the necessary ordinances for admission. They will have full access to the Father, Christ, and the Spirit, and can receive a world of their own to rule and to populate with their own spiritual children, and to reveal to them the way to godhood. So, the cycle repeats itself.

Mormon Practices.

- weekly worship services
- tithing

- baptism (both for the living and the dead)
- door to door evangelism
- Eucharist of bread and water
- Reading of the Book of Mormon
- Adherence to The Doctrine and the Covenants
- Recognition of the prophet (also called the LDS President)
- Public service
- Compassionate ministry
- Wearing of special garments
- Secret spiritual names
- Special handshakes
- Participation in the **Initiatory** and **Endowment** ceremonies (both for the living and the dead)
- Prayer
- Temple weddings
 - Early Mormons practiced **polygamy** (much to the irritation of neighboring non-Mormons) though this practice is only recognized by fringe groups today.

These are the basic history, beliefs, and practices of the Mormons.

As you look them over, you'll notice (as you probably did with the Jehovah's Witnesses) that we share some commonality with the LDS, but there are significant points of departure too.

Christians believe there is only one triune God.

Mormons believe in a limitless number of gods, but worship only one.

Christians believe God is eternal.

Mormons believe God was once mortal.

Christians believe in the Good News delivered by Jesus Christ.

Mormons believe in the Restored Gospel brought by Joseph Smith.

Christians accept as true the history, creeds, and faith of the early church.
Mormons accept as true the history, doctrines, and testimony of the latter-day saints.

Christians believe we are called to become like God in character.
Mormons believe we are called to become like God in power.

Mormons and Christians are very distinct from one another, however, our study of these and other differences should not be gleaned to help us win a debate or to defeat pairs of bright-eyed Mormon missionaries in rhetorical duels when they knock on our doors.

NO, NO, NO!

We should never take this arrogant and unhelpful attitude. Instead, the differences which we study should provide us with an open door to witness that Jesus Christ is real, that he loves us, and wants to save us, that he is more than a son, he is THE SON!

In my experience, Mormons have been kind, intelligent, and open to discuss faith, even if there are many things we don't and can't see eye to eye on. More than that, they always want to talk about their love for Jesus (even if they've got his story scrambled), and that's something I'm always excited to discuss.

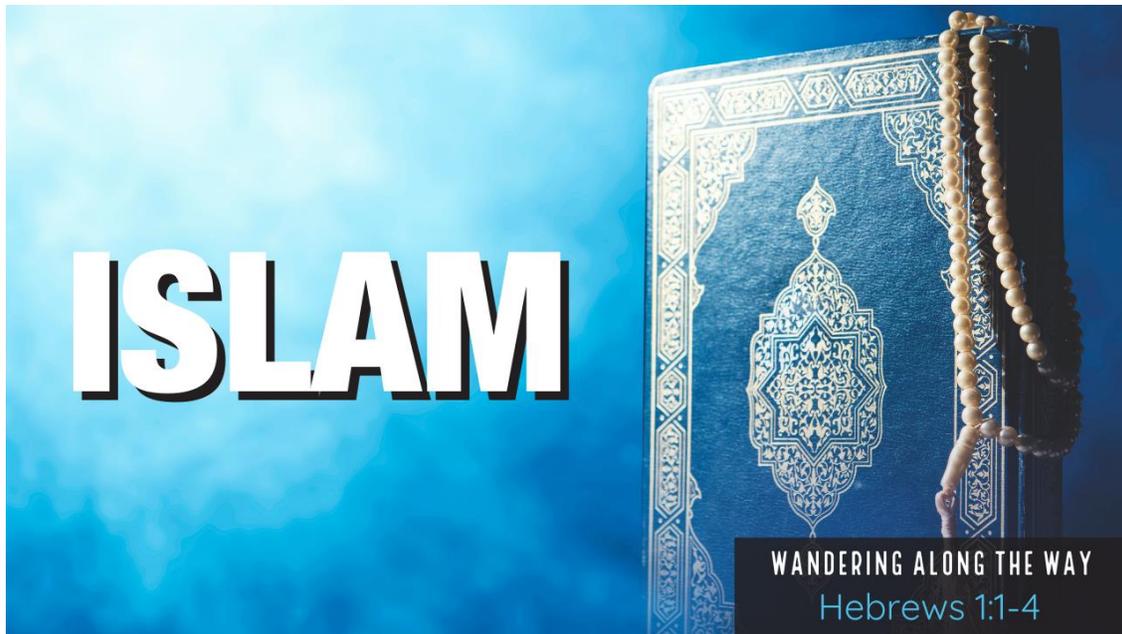
Our hope for our Mormon neighbor is this: that they may richly encounter Jesus, be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and enabled to experience God's freedom!

If this is our hope, and if Mormonism was founded on the idea that the Church is dead, then what better course of action can speak life and encouragement to our Mormon neighbor than to show them that Christ's Church is alive and well, that it never fell apostate, because the gates of Hell can never prevail against it?!

The next time a Mormon missionary knocks on your door, I hope you won't pretend you aren't home. Instead, welcome them in as you would the Lord himself. Offer them something to drink (they do alot of biking and talking!) and encourage them in

the name of Jesus. Look for commonalities, talk about your walk with the Lord, pray for them, and encourage them to read the Word, seek God, and ask good questions! When they knock on your door, let the Three's Company tune be a guide for your attitude.

"Come knock on our door... We'll be waiting for you!"



- 3 -

One day in Kansas City...

I was in seminary, taking a course about the theological and historical traditions of the Muslim faith. As part of our study, we attended a prayer service at a local mosque.

Our ladies respectfully donned **hijabs** (the traditional Muslim head covering) and we all removed our shoes before entering. We were divided and sent into one of two rooms, the first room for men and the second for women. This separation is customary, intended to keep those in attendance focused on prayer rather than seeking potential romantic distractions.

Our little room was filled with forty or fifty men, most of them immigrants from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Although we stuck out like a sore thumb, our new Muslim friends were very hospitable and made us feel welcome. We stood at the back of the room to observe the service, and the Muslims took their positions in parallel lines. Only the elderly and disabled were permitted to use chairs; everyone

else sat on carpets on the floor, as was typical in the days of Islam's founding.

The service began with the **adhan**, a traditional Arabic song which is sung five times daily in Muslim cities and serves as the public call to prayer.

Next, the teacher delivered a message summarizing the basic tenets of Islam. We later learned that he had prepared his lesson specially for us after he learned that a group of Christians would be visiting, which was very thoughtful. Sometimes the role of teacher is filled by a professional **Imam**, but it was a local lay leader in our case.

After this, the whole room entered a time of organized individual prayer, and it might have felt somewhat familiar to anyone who was raised in the Catholic Church: at various times, worshipers were directed to stand, sit, kneel, recite, meditate, confess, and pass the peace.

Afterward, our primary contact (the head of the student Muslim group at a local university) greeted us warmly, thanked us for coming, and offered to answer any questions. The teacher greeted us as well. We reunited with the ladies outside and went home to unpack our experience.

All in all, it was a very interesting afternoon, and I'm glad that I had the chance to go, since I believe that this experience better prepared me to be a good neighbor.

With this in mind, let's talk about the world's second-largest religion, **Islam**, and its followers, the **Muslims**.

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty

in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Hebrews 1:1-4

Muslim History.

Muhammad (full name: Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib ibn Hāshim) worked camel caravans and was a trader, later a prophet and warrior, the founder of Islam, bearer of the Quran, and husband to twelve wives.

Like many famous figures living prior to the Enlightenment, there is some debate about the reliability of sources describing the life of Muhammad, but for our purposes, this is a fairly well-regarded biography and account of his claims about God, himself, and his community.

Muhammad was born into the Quraysh tribe of Mecca, Saudi Arabia in 570 AD. In Mecca, there was a famous shrine called the **Kaaba**, and legend held that it was built by the biblical Abraham and his son Ishmael. By the late 6th century, this once monotheistic shrine dedicated to **Allah** (which is the Arabic name for God, equivalent to biblical Hebrew name **EI**) had fallen to polytheism and idolatry, becoming a pilgrimage site for neighboring pagans.

Muhammad's father died before he was born, his mother died when he was six, and his paternal grandfather (who was his de facto guardian) also died when Muhammad was eight. And so, Muhammad went to live with his uncle, **Abu Talib**, the head of his tribe. While on a trading expedition to Syria, Muhammad met a Christian monk who believed Muhammad would become God's missionary and prophet to the Arabs. However, this rising prophet's journey would not follow the trajectory which the well-meaning monk had laid out.

When he was 25, Muhammad was employed by a woman fifteen years his senior

to oversee a caravan on its way to Syria. Muhammad was so effective in his work that this rich benefactor proposed marriage to the younger Muhammad, and he accepted. The 40-year-old **Khadijah** gave birth to two sons (both died young) and four daughters. Muhammad would not marry again until after Khadijah's death in 619. After his first wife had passed away, he married eleven more women over the coming years, and went on to have one more son by his twelfth and final wife, **Maria al-Qibtiyya**.

In 610, a 40-year-old Muhammad went on a religious prayer retreat in the mountains. He would later report that he encountered God's angel of revelation, **Jibril** (in English, "Gabriel"), while meditating in a cave. Jibril embraced Muhammad tightly and commanded him to read words that were placed before him, but because Muhammad was illiterate, he replied that he could not. So, the angel Jibril revealed the words to him, and Muhammad recited them.

Over the next 23 years, Muhammad claimed to receive further recitations from Jibril which Muhammad collected as the 114 chapters of the Muslim holy book, the **Quran**.

Quran literally means "recitation" in Arabic, and this Quran would be the basis of a new religion called **Islam**, which means "submission" or "peace" in Arabic. This term comes from the same Semitic root word that gave us the Hebrew word **shalom**, which also means "peace".

Muhammad only shared his revelations in private for the first three years, but on encouragement from his wife Khadijah and her cousin, and by command of Allah, Muhammad took his testimony public. Although there was little resistance at first, Muhammad and his burgeoning community would later be faced with difficulty as their witness to Allah as the one true God came into conflict with their pagan and Jewish neighbors.

The coming years would be marked by retreats from persecution, military confrontations, and political intrigue. During this time, Muhammad claimed that he took a miraculous flight in the night to Jerusalem (which was almost 800 miles from Mecca), and there prayed to Allah with Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other biblical

prophets. Then, he was taken up to heaven to meet Allah, where he received the five daily prayers of Islam.

Around this time, he also lost the support and protection of his tribal hometown of Mecca, which then forced him to flee to neighboring Medina.

In Medina, Muhammad built a house of worship and signed a covenant with his followers and some neighboring Jews which declared that Muhammad was God's prophet. Muhammad also commanded that all prayer be offered while facing Mecca instead of Jerusalem, which had been the longstanding Jewish tradition. As such, this command further weakened Muhammad's relationship with his Jewish neighbors.

In 624, the Meccans attempted to make war with Muhammad in Medina, but the Muslim Medeans were successful in repelling this and two additional attacks from the neighboring pagans. During these conflicts, the Muslims also ousted the Jews that were living in their midst in Medina.

In 628, Muhammad and his community made a bold religious pilgrimage to Mecca. A treaty was signed with the Meccans calling for a cease of hostilities, and safe passage for the pilgrimage was guaranteed.

In the months that followed, the treaty was violated when allies of the Meccans attacked allies of the Medeans, leading Muhammad to denounce the treaty and, in 630, Muhammad marched on Mecca with a substantial army. He met no resistance, laid claim to Mecca, and entered the Kaaba, where he smashed the hundreds of pagan idols he found to prevent further pagan worship in the now Muslim-controlled city.

Over the coming years, Muhammad would extend his empire to the Syrian border, receiving the submission of the various tribes in his territory. Muhammad would make one more pilgrimage to Mecca in 632, a pilgrimage which is reenacted every year by hundreds of thousands of Muslims in honor of their founder. Muhammad suffered a brief illness in the spring of 632 and, on June 8th of that year, he breathed his last. His body was taken and buried in the mosque of Medina.

Because he did not select a successor prior to his death, division immediately arrived in the growing community of faith as various figures jockeyed for the now vacant Muslim throne.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Muslim Beliefs.

God. Muslims believe in Allah, the only One, Unique, and Incomparable God of the universe. Allah has no partner, is the Creator, and the only One worthy of worship. Allah is eternal, immortal, all powerful, and all knowing. Everything comes from Allah, and nothing can occur unless Allah allows it. Muslims believe that Allah is the same Abrahamic God worshiped by Jews and Christians, however, they also believe that our views, theology, practice, Scriptures, and history have all been irredeemably corrupted by Islam's enemies, accounting for the differences between us.

Humanity. After Allah created Adam and Eve, he put them in a garden paradise and instructed them not to eat from a certain tree. Satan - a rebellious **djinni** who refused to kneel before Adam and Eve - entered the paradise to tempt Adam and Eve. The **djinn** are creatures formed from smokeless fire and granted free will by Allah, and this belief is the source for Middle Eastern legends about genies. Adam and Eve jointly decided to eat the forbidden fruit in hopes of becoming angels or like Allah. When they failed this test, Adam and Eve repented, and Allah forgave them. Still, they were punished for their sin by being ejected from paradise and sent to earth to learn submission to Allah from their mortal existence. Muslims reject the notion of original sin, believing that all human beings are born good and equal in the eyes of Allah.

Scripture. Only the Quran is holy to Muslims, as they believe it contains the

infallible, inerrant, inspired, word-for-word will of Allah. Muhammad had no part in its creation, only in its recitation, which Allah aided him in doing perfectly. Although the Quran is the only correct book currently in the world, Allah had made His will known in the past through books handed to other prophets. These books became corrupted over time and are no longer accurate, which is why only the Quran can be trusted. Other holy books inspired by Allah include the **Torah**, the **Psalms**, the **Gospel**, the **scrolls of Abraham**, the **scrolls of Moses**, and the **book of John the Baptist**.

In addition to the Quran, Muslims possess a collection of accounts from Muhammad's friends, relatives, and leaders called the **Hadith**. The Hadith is not viewed as Scripture per se, but it is believed to contain the **sunnah of the Prophet**, or "the Prophet's way of life." Muslims disagree on which Hadith accounts are genuine and which are forgeries, which is why the Hadith is considered helpful, interesting, practical, and open for debate, but is not authoritative as Scripture. The Hadith is also where some of the stranger beliefs from fringe Islamic groups come from. Obscure verses from the Hadith may seem to support the violent actions of terrorists and national extremists, but ironically, the Quran itself actually condemns such acts and the men who perform them.

The Supernatural. Muslims believe in the existence of an unseen world of heaven and hell, of angels, demons, Allah, djinn, the devil, human spirits, witchcraft, and sorcery.

Prophets. Muslims believe that humanity is stuck in a cycle of sin, corruption, enlightenment, faithfulness, and new disobedience. This cycle begins with humanity becoming corrupted by sin and not following the ways of Allah. Thus, Allah sends a prophet with an inspired book that teaches humanity the ways of Allah. Humanity listens, repents, submits, and follows Allah for a time, only to become corrupted once again. The cycle repeats itself until the arrival of the final and greatest prophet, Muhammad. Many figures from Christian and Jewish Scriptures are hailed as prophets by Muslims.

These are the prophets of Islam:

- Adam
- Seth
- Idris (Enoch)
- Nuh (Noah)
- Hud
- Saleh (Methusaleh)
- Ibrahim (Abraham)
- Lut (Lot)
- Ismail (Ishmael)
- Ishaq (Isaac)
- Yaqub (Jacob)
- Yusuf (Joseph)
- Ayyub (Job)
- Shu-ayyb (Jethro)
- Musa (Moses)
- Harun (Aaron)
- Dhu'l-Kifl (Ezekiel)
- Dawud (David)
- Sulaiman (Solomon)
- Ilyas (Elijah)
- Al-Yasa (Elisha)
- Yunus (Jonah)
- Zakariyya (Zechariah)
- Yahya (John the Baptist)
- Isa (Jesus)
- Muhammad

Judgment, Eternity & the End of the World. Life itself is meant as a test for mortals in which we must learn to submit to Allah. Muslims believe that all people will be judged by Allah upon their death, that the faithful will be sent to paradise for eternity and the wicked who rejected Allah's guidance will be punished in eternal Hell. A final climactic battle between good and evil will take place. Once Allah is

victorious against evil, all other religions will be banned from the earth except Islam, and Allah's people will live in perpetual peace.

Jesus. Muslims believe that **Isa** (aka. Jesus) is the true Messiah and the second greatest prophet of all time, but not the son of God and not divine. Instead, he was a prophet chosen by Allah to call his 1st century contemporaries to return to the way of Islam. Jesus preached, performed miracles, and was crucified, but Allah intervened to rescue him before he actually died, sending him to paradise instead. Muslims also believe that, at the end of time, Jesus will return to fight the antichrist to the death, to smash all crosses and do away with non-Muslim food laws, and to command Christians to convert to Islam by abandoning their beliefs that Jesus is the Son of God.

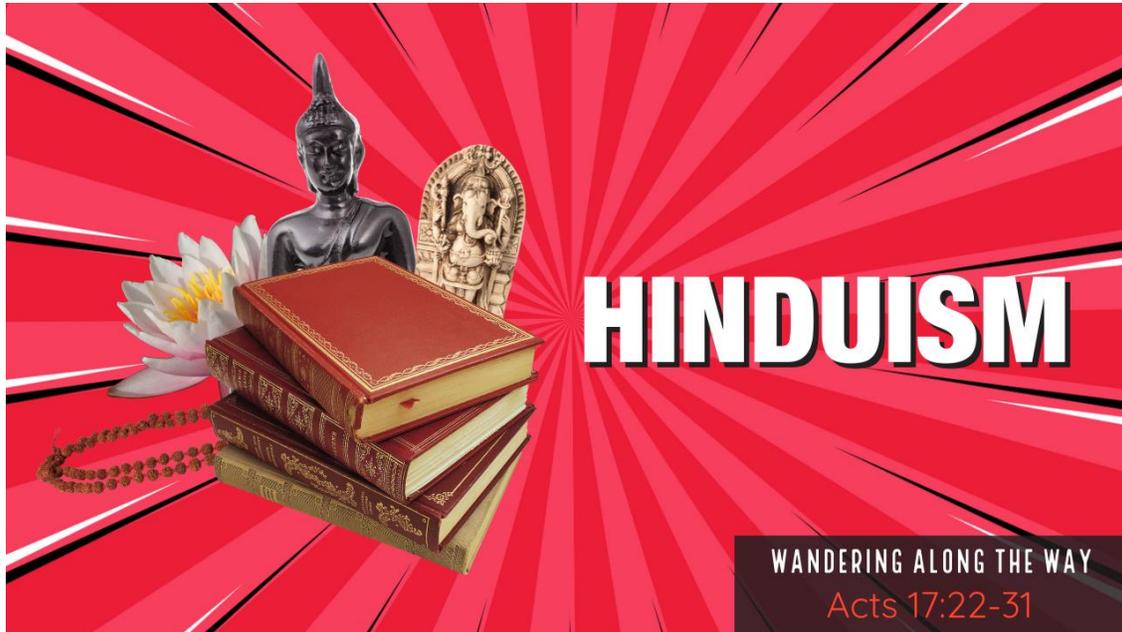
Muslim Practices.

The Five Pillars. The core practices of Muslim faith include:

- **Shahadah** (declaration of faith): One becomes a Muslim when one declares "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of God."
- **Salat** (prayer): The Muslim prays to Allah five times daily (dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and night) in Arabic while facing Mecca.
- **Zakah** (alms): The Muslim gives 2.5% of their wealth to those in need.
- **Sawm** (fasting): The Muslim participates in the annual festival of **Ramadan**, during which they fast from dawn to dusk during the 9th month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It is a time for meditation, study, and charity.
- **Hajj** (pilgrimage): The Muslim makes pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca at least once during their lifetime for a festival commemorating Muhammad's final pilgrimage.

Additional Muslim practices include:

- weekly messages and ritual prayer services
- animal sacrifice (during the hajj)
- use of prayer mats for five daily prayers
- modest clothing & head coverings
- observation of Shariah Law (in certain countries)
- passing of peace
- blessing the names of Allah and the Prophet whenever they are used
- refusal to paint, draw, or otherwise artistically represent Allah or the Prophet, for fear of committing idolatry
- assigning special status and privileges to Christians and Jews as "people of the Book" (for example, a Muslim man can marry a "woman of the Book" but not a pagan)
- ablution (ritual washing of hands, feet, and head) prior to prayer
- Abstinence from alcohol and non **halal** foods



- 4 -

I find Hinduism kind of confusing.

Because Hinduism isn't a single religion; it's more like a family of interrelated religious traditions. Hindu beliefs, practices, and cultures are incredibly diverse. Therefore, providing a summary of Hinduism is a challenge, but I am going to do my best. With this goal in mind, let's talk about the world's third-largest religion, **Hinduism**.

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship - and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."

Acts 17:22-23

Hindu History.

In our studies of Islam, Mormonism, and the Jehovah's Witnesses, we began by considering each religion's founder, but Hinduism has no such person to study. In fact, Hinduism doesn't embrace a single set of beliefs, ideals, or texts either. Instead, Hinduism encourages the seeker to go on their own spiritual journey, following one of a multitude of possible pathways leading to the divine.

Scholars believe that Hinduism began some time between 2300 and 1500 B.C. as the result of a melding of two cultures in the Indus Valley of southwestern Pakistan and western India. According to Hindus, however, their faith has existed since the dawn of time. In either event, the religion is quite old and credited by some to be the oldest religion in the world.

Some time in the mid-16th century B.C., a race of Indo-Aryan people migrated to the Indus Valley and integrated with the indigenous peoples living there. During this period (called the "Vedic period"), the **Vedas** were composed.

The Vedas are ancient Sanskrit scriptures of the Hindu religion, scriptures which worshipers claim were revealed to early Aryan seers by the gods and preserved through oral tradition before being finally written down. The Vedas are organized into four collections containing songs, philosophy, and religious instruction for proper worship of the gods. Religious practices at this time emphasized ritual sacrifices and chanting.

Between 500 B.C. and 500 A.D., the Hindu religion continued to develop by emphasizing the worship of specific gods, gods like **Vishnu** (the god of preservation), **Shiva** (the destroyer), and **Brahma** (the god of creation). From 500 to 1500 A.D., new Hindu scriptures emerged and were added to the canon, including the war epics **Mahabharata** and **Ramayana**, the philosophical works **Samkhya Sutra** and **Mimamsa Sutra**, and **Brahma Sutras**, the legendary **Puranas**, the **Abhinavabharati** commentary, and more.

In the 7th century, Muslim Arabs began a conquest of portions of India, which resulted in centuries of Muslim persecution. New Muslim rulers - who abhorred

pagan religion - did not permit the Hindus to worship the gods, smashed their idols, and reduced some of their temples to rubble.

From 1757-1947 A.D., the British controlled India, opening the way for Christian missionaries to seek the conversion and westernization of the Indians. In 1947, India secured independence from Great Britain and divided into two separate nations, India and Pakistan. Within 15 years, Hindus immigrated to North America and Europe, and Hinduism became a global religion. Since 1947, Hinduism has remained the dominant religion of India, and **94%** of the world's **one billion** Hindus live there.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Hindu Beliefs.

The gods. Hindus aren't really monotheists nor polytheists. Instead, they are what we call **henotheists**. This means they believe in the existence many gods but choose to worship only one or a handful of them, just as the ancient Greeks did.

Brahman is the ultimate reality, the divine soul underlying all things. Hindus believe that there are many paths which lead to Brahman, and the Hindu is encouraged to choose a path to find it. The ultimate goal of the Hindu is to break the cycle of **reincarnation** and become one with the Brahman. In this sense, Brahman is the supreme spiritual reality.

From 500 B.C. to 500 A.D., there were three major gods at the center of Hindu worship: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Brahma is the god of creation, who was born from a golden egg (or Vishnu's navel, depending on the tradition) and created the earth and all that is in it. Vishnu is the god of preservation, who appears throughout history as a number of **avatars** to provide salvation to humanity. Shiva is the god of destruction, who destroys worlds in order that Brahma can recreate them.

Together, these three gods form what many call the Hindu Trinity, but unlike the

Christian Trinity, these three gods are wholly distinct from one another, not one God in three persons.

Vishnu and Shiva are still worshiped today, but Brahma's legend waned over time, and he was eclipsed by **Durga**, the fierce demon-slaying mother goddess of knowledge, art, and music. There are a few stories explaining why Brahma fell out of favor. One legend suggested that Brahma's role of creation had been completed and was no longer needed. Another suggested that Brahma was cursed for pursuing an incestuous and unrequited relationship with one of his own creations.

The number of gods which Hindus believe exist varies from believer to believer and from one Hindu scripture to another. Some Hindus believe in just one god, others believe in three, others believe in thirty-three, and still others believe in 330 million. Because many paths lead to Brahman, Hindus can essentially choose how many gods to believe in or worship.

Other Important Hindu gods include:

- Krishna - god of love and compassion, an avatar of Vishnu
- **Rama - god of truth and virtue, an avatar of Vishnu**
- Hanuman - the monkey god, lord of strength, perseverance, service, and scholarly devotion
- **Ganesha - the elephant god, lord of success, knowledge and wealth, the destroyer of obstacles**
- Lakshmi - goddess of purity, beauty, domesticity, wealth, and prosperity, wife of Vishnu
- **Indra - king of the gods, god of storms, guardian of the east**
- Parvati - a complex figure both feared and adored, goddess of death and of new life, both vicious and nurturing, wife of Shiva
- **Sita - goddess of devotion, self-sacrifice, courage, and purity, wife of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, a form of Lakshmi, and heroine of the epic Ramayana**
- Agni - the goat-riding messenger god of fire
- **Kartikeya - the peacock-riding, spear-wielding god of war**

- Kama - parrot-riding archer god of erotic love, desire, and pleasure

Humanity & Life After Death. Rather than seeking heaven on earth or a spiritual paradise, Hindus believe in the idea of **samsara**, the cycle of birth, life, death, and reincarnation. Every living creature has an **atman** (a soul) and is part of the atman of the universe, the Brahman. The Hindu seeks to live a life of dharma (a life of good actions and morality). By living a life of **dharma**, the Hindu can break the cycle of reincarnation and achieve salvation (called **moksha**), which results in the worshiper's soul becoming one with the Brahman. One's actions in this life determine whether one will achieve moksha or if he/she will be reincarnated once again, perhaps as an inferior creature.

Scripture. Hindu scripture is subdivided into two categories: the "revealed texts" and the "remembered texts". The revealed texts are the Vedas and believed to have originated as revelation from the gods. The remembered texts are those which were authored by humans after the Vedic period, which lasted from 1500-500 B.C.

The revealed texts include:

- **Rig Veda**
- Sama Veda
- **Yajur Veda**
- Atharva Veda

The remembered texts include:

- **Upaveda (Applied Knowledge)**
 - **Ayur Veda (Medicine)**
 - **Dhanus Veda (Military Science)**
 - **Ganharva Veda (Music)**
 - **Shilpa (Mechanics and Architecture)**
- Vedangas (Limbs of the Vedas)
 - Shiksha (Phonetics)

- Chhanda (Song)
- Vyakarna (Grammar)
- Nirkuta (Vedic Glossary)
- Jyotishsa (Astronomy)
- Kalpa (Household & Religious Rites)
- **Darshanas (Schools of Philosophy)**
 - **Nastika (Atheist Philosophy)**
 - **Charavaka (Materialist Philosophy)**
 - **Astika (Theism)**
- Dharma Shastras (Law Books)
 - Niti Shastras (Morals of Baddena)
 - Smritis (Verses by 18 Teachers)
 - Kautilya Shastra (Economics, Politics, and Law)
- **Upapuranas (Mythology)**
- Itihasas (Epics)
 - Ramayana
 - Mabharata

Karma. Karma is the universal force of cause and effect. If one does good in this life and in previous lives, then one will receive good things now and in the future. If one does evil in this life and in previous lives, then evil will come to them now and in the future.

Animals. Because all life contains a spark of the Brahman, Hindus revere life in all its forms, and consider cows to be sacred. Shrines are constructed and rituals observed around the veneration of many animals, even rats. Many Hindus are vegetarian as a result of their devotion to the Brahman.

The Om and the Swastika. Before Adolf Hitler reappropriated the symbol for his Third Reich, the swastika was a long-standing symbol of good luck in Hinduism that can be found on the walls of various centers and temples throughout India. The **om** is made up of three Sanskrit letters (A-U-M) and is one of the most sacred

symbols of Hinduism. It is believed to represent the sound of creation and to be connected to the Brahman. This is why some Hindus chant the om as a part of their regular meditation.

Ishu. Hindus beliefs regarding the teacher **Ishu** (whom we call Jesus) vary. Some believe that Jesus was an enlightened **acharya**, a holy teacher. Others believe that Ishu was actually divine, one of many avatars (incarnations) of Vishnu, sent on a divine mission to provide salvation to humanity.

Some Hindus also believe in certain elements of Jesus' biography, including that Ishu was born in a cowshed, performed miracles, walked on water, and gave a sermon from a mountain.

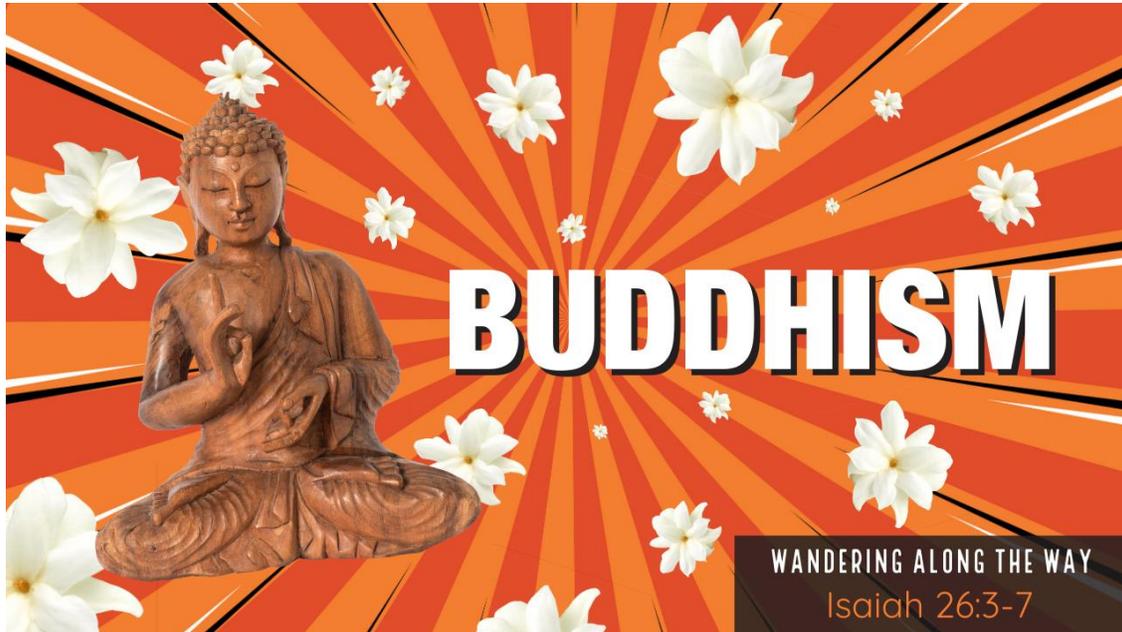
Salvation. The Hindu understanding of salvation is quite different from that of the Christian: the avatar does not provide atonement or rescue humanity from sin and death, but rather enlightens and instructs humanity to pursue and achieve dharma (a life of good deeds and morality).

Hindu Practices.

Hindu Practices vary significantly from follower to follower because, again, Hinduism is more like a family of traditions than a defined, systematic religion. Of these varied practices, the following may be included:

- worship ceremonies
- animal/grain sacrificial offerings
- magical rituals
- ritual washing
- study of sacred texts
- prayer (individual and in gatherings)
- use of prayer beads and idols

- festivals such as Diwali, Ram Navami, Holi, and more
- chanting
- yoga
- charity work
- meditation
- pilgrimage to Hindu temples
- abstaining from certain meats, especially beef; in some cases, vegetarianism or veganism are observed
- marriage (often arranged; in certain periods, polygamy was practiced)
- **tilak** markings on the foreheads, hands, necks or chests of men
- **bindi** dot on the foreheads of women
- nonviolence
- rites of passage (birth ceremonies, initiation, marriage, rites for the dead, etc.)
- cremation funerals
- wearing of the **sari**
- henna body art
- body piercings
- fasting



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Is it a religion or philosophy?

This question sometimes arises when discussing Buddhism because Buddhism is unlike other major world religions. It doesn't have a "divinely revealed" text to study. The biography of its founder may or may not be historically accurate. There is no particular god which is worshiped, although worship of a god can be a part of it. Much like Hinduism, Buddhism is driven by the individual.

So, let's talk about the world's fifth-largest religion, **Buddhism**.

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal. He humbles those who dwell on high, he lays the lofty city low; he levels it to the ground and casts it down to the dust. Feet trample it down— the feet of the oppressed, the footsteps of the poor. The path of the

righteous is level; you, the Upright One, make the way of the righteous smooth.

Isaiah 26:3-7

Buddhist History.

According to Buddhist tradition, **Siddhartha Gautama** (aka Shakyamuni) was born to a wealthy royal family living in a palace near the Himalayas in the late 5th century BC. Gautama's father provided well for his son's needs and education but would not allow him to leave the palace grounds. As a grown man, he married a beautiful princess and enjoyed the luxuries of royal life yet remained unsatisfied. At the age of 29, Gautama left the palace on four separate journeys into society, where he hoped to find greater meaning in life. Each trip had a massive impact on the young prince as he came face to face with the suffering of the real world.

On his first trip, he met an old man who had trouble walking.

On his second, he met a sick man suffering painfully.

On his third trip, he saw a dead body.

On his final excursion, he came upon a wandering monk.

Buddhists call these four life-changing adventures the "**Four Sights**".

Inspired by the wandering monk and desiring to grasp the meaning of the human suffering he witnessed and how to relieve it, he left his wife and newborn son in the care of the palace servants to become a wandering ascetic.

After a six year spiritual journey of wandering, poverty, and fasting, Gautama concluded that he was no closer to understanding the meaning of life or of suffering, and so determined to live more moderately. While in a village called **Bodh Gaya**, he meditated under a tree and there at last experienced enlightenment, gaining the ability to see his former lives, to understand the cycle of death and rebirth, and to eliminate all desire and ignorance

within himself. Thus, Siddhartha Gautama became the **Buddha**, a title which means "enlightened one".

The Buddha shared his revelation with the other ascetics he had journeyed with (this first sermon is called **The First Discourse**) and they became his disciples. The Buddha traveled through Indian villages for 45 years, spreading his message of enlightenment until his death at 80 years of age.

From these humble beginnings, Buddhism spread throughout India, to China, and around the world.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Buddhist Beliefs.

The gods. Some Buddhists believe in divine beings, but others don't. Like the Hindus, Buddhists see faith as a matter of individual choice rather than corporate creed or orthodoxy. In fact, as Buddhism has spread throughout the world, it has been common for Buddhists to incorporate religious beliefs from the areas in which they live. For example, Indian Buddhists might worship Hindu gods, Japanese Buddhists might worship their ancestors, and American Buddhists are often agnostic. Some Buddhists even worship the Buddhas (enlightened teachers, like Gautama) themselves.

The Four Noble Truths. The Buddha laid the foundation of his teaching with four key tenets, which are...

1) Life is suffering.

Life is suffering because even the best moments are fleeting.

2) Suffering is caused by craving.

The fleeting nature of life comes from desire and attachment.

3) Suffering can have an end.

By renouncing and releasing our cravings, suffering can be escaped.

4) There is a path which leads to the end of suffering.

This path is the way of the Buddha.

Dharma. The teachings of the Buddha which, if followed, allow Buddhists to escape suffering through meditation and a disciplined lifestyle. If this term sounds familiar, it's because it also appears in Hinduism, where dharma essentially means "right way of living". In Buddhism, the "right way of living" is prescribed by the Buddha.

Creation & Life After Death. Buddhists don't spend much time worrying about the origin of the universe, which is where many religions derive their understanding of the purpose of humanity. Because Buddhism has no specific creator god, they focus more on the interrelatedness of all things in the past, present, and future. Thus, like Hindus, Buddhists believe in **reincarnation** and **karma**.

Reincarnation. The belief that a dying person is reborn as another creature. This new creature might have a better or worse existence than the life which came before it, depending on the karma of past lives. Thus, one of the major symbols of Buddhism is a **wheel**, representing the continual cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

Karma. The impersonal force of cause and effect in the universe. The Buddhist believes that one who does good will receive good in this and future lives; those who do evil will experience evil in this and future lives. The karma of past lives and the current life determine a person's current experience and future rebirths. You might become a horse or a fly, a prince or a pauper, the next Buddha or a hungry ghost. It all depends on your karma.

Nirvana. The goal of the Buddhist is to escape the cycle of reincarnation through enlightenment, which leads to **sunyata** (nothingness). This escape is what Buddhists call **nirvana**.

Unlike the Hindu who hopes to escape reincarnation to become one with the **Brahma**, Buddhists hope to escape reincarnation in order to escape suffering. By escaping suffering, the Buddhist ceases to exist. There is no soul, no afterlife, no spark of the divine within us. The end goal is the end of suffering, and thus, the end of self.

Some holy Buddhist saints are said to reach enlightenment and have the opportunity for nirvana, but they instead choose to reincarnate and so continue to spread the teaching of the Buddha until all life escapes the cycle of suffering.

Teachings. Buddhists follow the teachings of Gautama, which were originally transmitted verbally, memorized, and handed on as oral tradition. As Buddhism spread, these verbal teachings were taken to different cultures and eventually written down.

These teachings are not treated as divinely inspired Scripture, but rather as very human lectures, rules, and wisdom sayings of the Buddha offered to those who would pursue and achieve enlightenment. In that sense, the Buddhist texts are the dharma in written form.

The oldest version of the dharma comes from a Buddhist council which met in Sri Lanka in 25 BC and is written in the Pali language. The teachings were separated into three sections within this canon, and are called the **Tipitaka**, or, **Three Baskets**.

The Eightfold Path. Describes the eight principles by which a Buddhist must live to reach nirvana....

- 1. Right Speech:** refrain from deceit, verbal abuse, and malicious talk
- 2. Right Action:** do not steal, kill, or act promiscuously
- 3. Right Livelihood:** do honorable work which doesn't involve killing or magic
- 4. Right Effort:** take active steps to prevent/eliminate evil and to promote good

5. **Right Mindfulness:** be intentional and attentive
6. **Right Concentration:** eject evil thoughts; become calm and diligently aware
7. **Right Thought:** be selfless, loving, and nonviolent
8. **Right Understanding:** accept the 4 Noble Truths and so understand reality

Animals & Pacifism. Buddha calls on his followers to end suffering rather than cause it. As a result, Buddhists renounce all violence, and many choose to live as vegetarians.

Jesus. Some Buddhists believe Jesus was simply a good man. Some believe he was a **Bodhisattva**, a Buddhist saint who had reached enlightenment but delayed his departure into nirvana to reincarnate and share the path to enlightenment with more people stuck in the reincarnation cycle. A Bodhisattva would make Jesus a divine being on par with Gautama and thus worthy of veneration, but not the son of God.

Buddhist Practices.

Buddhist practices may include:

- chanting of mantras
- reading or singing Buddha's teachings
- meditation, sometimes making use of mala beads or a singing bowl
- offering ceremonies
- bowing (a sign of respect)
- funerary rites
- holiday celebrations such as **Wesak** and **Parinivara**
- spiritual retreats
- veneration of the Buddha & Buddhist saints
- compassionate ministry

Let's return to our initial question: is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? If it is simply philosophy, then can there be such a thing as a Buddhist Christian?

Although some have tried to claim that Buddhism and Christianity are compatible, the two religions make opposing claims.

For example, Christianity teaches us to be forgiven of sin, be emptied of all wickedness, and be filled with the Holy Spirit to gain **eternal life**, but Buddhism teaches us to completely empty ourselves of **everything**, achieve enlightenment within the resulting existential vacuum, and become **nothing**.

This is one example, but it serves to demonstrate the common adage that "Buddhism is just a philosophy which a member of any faith can embrace" is tacitly false. Buddhism makes religious claims to the exclusion of other religions, and it's important to recognize it as such.



- 6 -

“Go with the flow.”

If I wanted to describe **Taoism** (alternatively spelled, **Daoism**) in a single phrase, then that would be it. Let’s learn more together.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Taoist History.

The story of Taoism begins with its legendary founder, **Lao-Tzu** (also spelled Laozi), who was reputed to be the curator of the Chu Chinese Royal Library in the 6th century BC.

Lao-Tzu was a naturalist philosopher who believed that there is a cosmic force called the **Tao** (or Dao) which flows like a river through all things. This Tao maintains the necessary natural balance of the universe: light and dark, cold and warm, noise and silence, etc.

According to Taoists, one side of any given scale can only be appreciated and understood by comparing and contrasting it with a balancing force: we cannot have satisfaction without hunger, sweetness without bitterness, silence without noise, or health without sickness.

Therefore, the Taoist does not embrace traditional Western notions of good and evil. For the Taoist, there is instead that which is natural and that which is unnatural.

Undesirable circumstances only appear to be evil because people are self-interested. These supposedly "evil" circumstances are perfectly natural if the Tao holds them in balance with circumstances which a self-interested observer would describe as "good". This same principle is true of the opposing forces of death and life. Everything comes and goes, only to come around again and be lost again. This is the flow of the Tao.

Therefore, humanity's goal is to avoid attachment, cultivate peace, and live in harmony with the Tao by embracing the natural comings and goings of everyday life. Only when we resist natural change do we run the risk of trying to promote the artificial or unnatural, which causes unnecessary suffering and chaos.

Because of the central imagery of cosmic balance, many Taoists utilize the symbol of the **yin-yang** as an icon of their religion. The yin-yang itself represents the opposing yet interconnected forces of existence and absence out of which the

ever-changing universe was believed to have emerged. It is also worth noting that the yin-yang itself is an enduring Chinese folk-religious symbol which predates Lao-Tzu and his philosophy by nearly 1,000 years.

As the story goes, Lao-Tzu shared this philosophy with others, but eventually grew disillusioned with society due to governmental corruption and the resistance of others to embrace the Tao. So, Lao-Tzu decided to exile himself and live alone in nature.

As he was leaving China, a gatekeeper of the western pass requested that Lao-Tzu write a book of his wisdom before departing. Agreeing to the request, Lao-Tzu sat on a nearby rock and began writing. When he was finished, he handed a book entitled the **Tao-Te-Ching** to the guard. He then disappeared into the mists beyond the gates, never to be seen or heard from again.

This guard took the Tao-Te-Ching (meaning, "The Book of the Way" or "The Way and its Power") back into China to have it copied. This became the primary philosophical text of Lao-Tzu's followers, the **Taoists**.

And the rest, as they say, is history... **sort of**.

Scholars believe Lao-Tzu was a legendary figure who probably never existed, like Old John Henry, Molly Pitcher, King Arthur, or Robin Hood. If true, then where did the Tao-Te-Ching actually come from?

Most of the teachings of the Tao-Te-Ching can be found in other, earlier Chinese sources. Thus, most have concluded that the Tao-Te-Ching is a grouping of ancient folk Chinese philosophical, proverbial, and religious resources brought together into one, convenient text (similar to Proverbs, which is the Bible's book of collected ancient Near Eastern wisdom).

Unlike Proverbs, the Tao-Te-Ching is believed to be a book of human wisdom and not a book of divinely inspired Scripture, so the historical explanation creates no problems and would be just as satisfactory to a Taoist as the legend of the gatekeeper.

Taoism spread throughout China and became the official religion of the Tang Dynasty (7th-10th century AD), however, this privileged position did not last. The alternative faiths of Buddhism and Confucianism gained popularity, and the Communist revolution further complicated matters for Taoist expansion in the 20th century. Despite this, the World Religion Database estimates there are **8.7 million** practicing Taoists around the world today.

Taoist Beliefs.

Divine Beings & Spirits. Taoism arose out of the folk religious beliefs of the ancient Chinese. Such beliefs included worship of gods, spirits, and departed ancestors, and these practices continue today. Divine beings arise from and are considered a part of the Tao, just like everything else.

Creation. Taoists don't believe in a Creator. Instead, they think the cosmos arose out of the balancing forces of chaos and order, existence and nonexistence. Again, everything arises from the impersonal cosmic force of the Tao, including the universe itself.

Humanity & Life After Death. Because the Tao is constantly re-balancing the complimentary forces of the universe, death is not believed to be the end. When someone dies, they continue to live somewhere else, on another spiritual plane of existence. We emerge from the Tao and return to the Tao, re-emerge and re-return, and so on. There is no need for salvation or to escape a cycle of reincarnation, as humanity's responsibility is to "go with the flow" of the ever-evolving Tao.

Harmony. The mind of the Taoist should be calm and free from worry, finding a state of pure tranquility mirroring the nature of the Tao itself. The Taoist seeks to learn the Tao, to cultivate the Tao, and to practice the Tao. In essence, this means

to go with the natural flow and live in harmony with all.

Virtues. Taoist virtues vary depending on the school of thought, country of practice, etc. Some Taoists combine their faith with principles from Buddhism, Confucianism, or animism, and this necessarily impacts the view of the Tao and how to embrace the cosmic flow. Generally speaking, Taoists pursue virtues such as harmony, spontaneity, moderation, integrity, humility, and compassion.

Chi. Chi is the binding energy within all things, including human beings. The term "chi" comes from the Chinese word for "breath". Hence, the Tao breathes into all things, and we breathe out; the Tao breathes in, the Tao breathes out, and we breathe in again. This is the circular energy flow of the universe through which everything is connected. Focusing and cultivating a healthy chi results in better health, harmony, and contentment in life.

Taoist Practices.

Taoist practices may include:

- meditation
- ritual offerings of fire, incense, oil, fruit, or flowers
- prayer to gods, spirits, and ancestors
- practice of martial arts
- bowing (a sign of respect)
- cultivation through rhythms of physical exercise, rest, bathing, etc.
- holiday celebrations (such as the **Lantern Festival** or the **Nine Emperor Festival**)
- magical rites, purity rituals, and mystic spells
- special clothing, hairstyles, etc. to align with the natural flow of Tao
- study and recitation of the Tao-Te-Ching as well as other Taoist writings
- pilgrimage to sacred temples and shrines

- a modified, balanced diet (often limiting or entirely abstaining from meat, grains, and alcohol)
- **breathing exercises**
- education

There are some interesting connections between Christianity and Taoism, such as the belief that everything originates from a source, that breath brings life, and that we ought to live in harmony with the direction of the Source of All. However, unlike the Taoist, the Christian believes this Source of All is personal, a God of justice and love and peace and redemption. We only "go with the flow" if God is the one directing the river.

The Christian believes there are competing flows in this life, and it is necessary to swim up certain currents, even if other folks describe them as "natural". Good and evil are very real forces which are not in balance but competition; they will never - nor should ever - reach equilibrium. Instead, we believe God will obliterate evil because evil is not necessary to appreciate and understand good. We do not follow the way of least resistance; we follow the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Our faith makes us distinct from the Taoist. Thankfully, we can and should still show one another compassion and respect despite these differences, even as we discuss important values, ideas, and convictions.



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Seventh-Day Adventists are Christians.

True story.

Although I've heard a few teachers say that Seventh-Day Adventists are a cultish offshoot of tried-and-true Christianity, their views seem to be based on misinformation and misunderstanding. Let's clear it up.

When distinguishing Christian denominations from other religious groups, we use Scripture and the early church creeds as our guide.

The early church laid out Christianity's most basic, critical beliefs in the creeds. Such beliefs include the Trinity, Christ's atonement for the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, etc. Although we may have disagreements over minor issues, the creeds are universal, crossing denominational lines and uniting Christ's global Church throughout time as one family in orthodox belief.

Taking the Scriptures and creeds as our metric, we can confirm that the Seventh-Day Adventists are a legitimate American Protestant denomination, although they

do embrace some traditions and peripheral beliefs which feel foreign to us.

And that's ok.

The key idea to remember is this: we experience the same sense of foreignness whenever we consider our Catholic, Baptist or Congregationalist friends. We share our core convictions, but disagree on our traditions.

So, as we look at the **Seventh-Day Adventists** in this chapter, I would encourage you to consider them with that same lens, and I think we'll be off on a good footing. And so, let's talk about one of the more unique branches in our religious family tree, **Seventh-Day Adventism**.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

Exodus 20:8

Seventh Day Adventist History.

As we discussed previously, a preacher named **William Miller** grew to prominence on the American prairies in the early 1800s. He was a veteran of the War of 1812 and a religious skeptic, but converted to the Baptist faith sometime between 1820-1830.

The early 19th century was an important period in American religious history because Christians no longer had to wait for an itinerant preacher to ride into town

to learn from the Scriptures. Thanks to the proliferation of American Bible societies, the Bible had become readily available to anyone who desired a copy of their own.

Miller was an ambitious student of the Scriptures, focusing his efforts primarily on analyzing and interpreting the apocalyptic prophecies found in Daniel and Revelation. At the end of his studies, Miller became convinced that Christ would return sometime between March 21st, 1843 and March 21st, 1844. In 1831, Miller began preaching about this imminent return of Christ and, over the following decade, he gathered a sizable following.

The name of Miller's movement and the key doctrines he taught would later be described as **Adventist**, coming from the familiar Latin term **adventus**, which means "coming".

Although Miller's claims were initially supported by the appearance of a nighttime comet in March of 1843, his prediction of Christ's return ultimately proved incorrect. Disappointed by his miscalculation and derided by his detractors, Miller admitted to his mistake and stepped away from the movement. **Samuel Snow** stepped into the void left by Miller, recalculating the date of Christ's return and placing it on October 22nd, 1844. He too was incorrect.

This period is described as the **Great Disappointment**, where many Millerites left the movement to return to mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations, yet a remnant of the movement endured. In 1845, the **Mutual Conference of Adventists** gathered to discuss the best way forward, forming a group called the **Evangelical Adventists**.

Three of Miller's devout followers became central to the preservation of the Adventist movement. This trio included **Joseph Bates**, **James White**, and his wife, **Ellen Harmon White**.

These three Adventist pylons concluded that Miller had interpreted Old Testament prophecy correctly but had misunderstood what would happen on the projected date. Instead of Christ's physical return, they believed Miller had predicted Christ's entry into God's heavenly temple to cleanse it in preparation for his second

coming. Conveniently, this also meant that Christ's activity on this date would be invisible to the human eye, accounting for why that day seemed typical and uneventful on the earth.

In the Adventist view, this hidden temple cleansing marked the final development prior to Christ's advent. He could come any day and at any time, so the Christian must always be ready. Over the next two centuries, the Adventist movement gave birth to a number of denominations (such as the Seventh-Day Adventists) and unorthodox religions (such as the Jehovah's Witnesses).

One of the Adventist groups identified Ellen Harmon White as a prophetess, and her teachings became authoritative. Among her teachings, a conviction emerged that the sabbath must be observed on Saturdays instead of Sundays in accordance with Jewish tradition, and thus, the movement became known as the "Seventh-Day Adventist Church".

Today, there are approximately **22,000,000** members of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and nearly **100,000 churches** globally.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Seventh-Day Adventist Beliefs.

The Triune God. Like all orthodox Christian denominations, Seventh-Day Adventists believe in one God, the Almighty, the All-loving, the All-knowing, who created the heavens and the earth. They believe that this one God is known to us in three coequal and coeternal persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the past, some Seventh-Day Adventists attempted to reject the concept of the Triune God and there was heated debate over the doctrine, but as it stands today, trinitarianism is the normative Seventh-Day Adventist view.

Creation. Seventh-Day Adventists are young-earthers, believing that God created the world in six 24-hour days and then rested on the seventh day, and that this creation occurred just a few thousand years ago.

Sin & Salvation. Humanity is broken due to sin and unable to save itself from God's judgment. Thankfully, Jesus Christ came as our substitute, taking our place on the cross and accepting our punishment. Because Jesus died for us, we are able to repent and be forgiven of our sins.

Christ's sacrifice is able to save all who receive it, but only a minority of humanity will accept his grace. Those who refuse it are eternally lost and will be completely annihilated into nonexistence at the judgment day of the wicked. Those who do receive his atonement will be rewarded with eternal life on the restored earth. Salvation is thus by grace through faith alone, not works.

Life After Death. Seventh-Day Adventists believe that all those who have died in the past are in a state of stasis: they are not in Heaven nor in Hell, just asleep and awaiting Christ's return. At Christ's coming, he will resurrect the righteous, gather them with the righteous who are still alive on the earth, and take them together to be with him in his heavenly kingdom for 1,000 years.

During this time, the earth will be a desolate place, ruled by Satan and his minions. After the thousand years, Christ will descend with his saints and holy city to resurrect the wicked dead for judgment. The wicked dead will join Satan's army for an assault on God's holy city, but they will be destroyed by fire from heaven and obliterated from existence. Then, God's people will live in peace for eternity on a restored earth.

Note that, in Seventh-Day Adventist theology, there is no physical or spiritual place of eternal punishment. Instead, they believe God's final judgment will completely wipe the wicked from the universe, that they will cease to exist. Thus, Seventh-Day Adventists are what we call **annihilationist** in their view of God's judgment.

Scripture. Seventh-Day Adventists are adamant about the study and authority of the Bible. They believe the Scriptures are the inerrant, revealed word of God, and provide all we need to know to be saved, sanctified, and glorified. All beliefs, doctrines, and prophecies are evaluated with Scripture as the ultimate standard.

The Sabbath. Seventh-Day Adventists believe the Church made a mistake when it chose Sunday as the Lord's Day. Instead, they hold we must follow the Old Testament prescription for the Sabbath, which remains binding. Thus, a Sabbath day of rest, instruction, and worship is observed exclusively on Saturdays.

The Body. Based on a literal reading of 1 Corinthians 6, Seventh-Day Adventists take great care in the health of the physical body. They emphasize healthy rest and exercise, and abstain from alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and meat (which they believe pollute the body).

Prophecy. Because the movement was founded on the predictions of William Miller and sustained on the prophecies of Ellen Harmon White, it makes sense that Seventh-Day Adventists emphasize this spiritual gift above others.

For Seventh-Day Adventists, prophecy is a special spiritual gift given to a few which allows them to speak on God's behalf, delivering accurate predictions and authoritative teachings. That is why Seventh-Day Adventists believe the true mark of the remnant church is prophecy.

The Sacraments. Seventh-Day Adventists observe two sacraments: **communion** and **baptism**. Communion is observed with juice in lieu of wine, and baptism is only practiced via immersion (sprinkling or pouring are not recognized). After communion, Seventh-Day Adventists frequently observe foot washing as a sign of unity, love, and humility.

Male Clergy. Although the Seventh-Day Adventist movement was largely founded on the prophetic ministry of a woman, surprisingly, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church refuses to ordain women as ministers.

Seventh-Day Adventist Practices.

- observation of a weekly sabbath on Saturdays
 - abstaining from alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and meat
 - prayer
 - Bible study
 - holiday celebrations such as Easter and Christmas
 - evangelism and overseas missions
 - publication of religious and educational tracts and magazines
 - baptism by immersion
 - communion served with grape juice
 - weekly worship services
 - community service and charitable giving
 - regular exercise and rest as spiritual discipline
 - meditation
 - tithing a tenth of all income
-

If we were to extract the emphases on a Saturday sabbath and physical health, then a reader might think we were learning about Baptists, the Reformed, or Evangelicals this week, and that's sort of the point. Yes, the Seventh-Day Adventists have some views and practices that might seem a little strange or foreign to us, but all the pillars of solid Christian faith are present, and our Seventh-Day Adventist friends pass the Scriptural and creedal tests of orthodoxy.

They meet on Saturdays, we meet on Sundays.

Not a salvation issue.

While we eat meat with most meals, they abstain.

A major bummer for them, but not a salvation issue.

They baptize by immersion alone, but we are willing to practice immersion, sprinkling, or pouring.

Not a salvation issue.

These folks are our cousins, and like cousins at a family reunion, some of what they do may seem odd, but we're still family!



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Syncretistic Esotericism.

That's your \$5 phrase of the day, and it is an apt description of the New Age movement. Let's break it down:

Syncretism: fusing together ideas, practices, and beliefs from diverse religions, cultures, or philosophies into one system.

Esotericism: the belief that hidden, mysterious knowledge can be uncovered through special revelation or disciplines. Typically, esoteric knowledge remains hidden from the uninitiated public, being held instead by an elite, secretive group.

Put together, **syncretistic esotericists** believe they can gain access to deep, mystical, spiritual knowledge through a grab-bag approach to religion and philosophy. A little tarot card interpretation here, some Zen meditation there, a few readings from the Quran with a dash of hallucinogens, and you might discover the recipe for spiritual awakening.

In this chapter, let's talk about the psychedelic movement of the **New Age**.

"After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Mark 1:14-15

New Age History.

In the late 1800s, a Russian author named **Helena Petrovna Blavatsky** declared that a "new age" of cooperation and enlightenment was on the horizon.

Blavatsky was a **theosophist** (from Greek, meaning, a "**lover of divine wisdom**") and a critic of science and organized religion. She claimed that her knowledge of this coming new age was revealed to her through mystical revelation from one of the "**Masters of the Great White Brotherhood**", which were invisible spiritual creatures who controlled the future of the world.

Although she was later accused of being a fraud, she maintained her innocence and sincerity of belief unto her death in 1891. Successors to Blavatsky's movement included **Annie Besant** and **Alice A. Bailey**, who predicted that the new age would be preceded by the coming of a messiah from India, but these messianic hopes went unfulfilled.

Despite these setbacks, the movement continued to evolve, and new leaders and beliefs emerged. One such belief suggested that we could collect divine energy and dispense it into the natural world with great effect. For example, a group of Scottish spiritualists claimed they could dispense energy to improve crop yield. Further claims of revelation from spiritual beings also emerged, especially in reference to the aforementioned angelic Masters of the Great White Brotherhood.

The hope for a new age continued to build, and in 1976, an American theosophist named **David Spangler** published **Revelation: The Birth of a New Age**. This was

his first in a series of books through which Spangler would shape the New Age movement as we know it today.

Spangler believed he was living on the precipice of the new age due to potent reserves of spiritual energy which had become available through an astrological shift in the earth's position. He called this period of abundant spiritual energy the **Age of Aquarius**.

While Blavatsky and her successors had taught that the new age would appear as a result of independent spiritual forces, Spangler believed humanity was critical to its arrival. As such, he called on his followers to collect and use their spiritual energies to birth the new age. Through his literature, videos, and talks, his view became widely accepted in the West, New Age spiritual disciplines were adopted, and the movement was born.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

New Age Beliefs.

Because New Age folks are syncretistic (i.e., they can grab pretty much anything from any faith or philosophy they like and add it to their personal pantheon), they are pretty diverse. However, it seems that all New Age folks share at least a few beliefs in common:

The New Age. New Ageists espouse the belief in a coming New Age of enlightenment, peace, and prosperity. Many believe this New Age will bring about the end of racism, poverty, sickness, war, etc.

Human Responsibility. New Ageists believe they can participate in the birth and life of this New Age by seeking their own spiritual transformation. The practitioner's path to this personal transformation varies from person to person.

Hidden Truth. New Ageists generally believe there is transformational truth or reality beyond the view of the common public. Access to this hidden knowledge may be found through meditation, experimentation with drugs, teachings from the gurus, expressions of free love, etc.

Eastern Influence. Although the New Age movement is largely Western in origin, its core ideas are often borrowed from Eastern religions and philosophies. For example, beliefs regarding reincarnation and pacifism come from Hinduism and Buddhism, but they are very common among New Age practitioners. Similarly, the necessary balance of opposing forces comes from Taoism, spiritual revelation comes from the Abrahamic religions, and modern forms of fortunetelling have roots in ancient near eastern paganism. Thus, the New Age movement's respect for Eastern traditions over Western ones is hard to miss.

Spiritual Energies. New Ageists generally believe in the existence of nebulous spiritual energies which, if tapped into, can transform society, nature, or the individual.

New Age Practices.

New Age practices are as diverse as their practitioners, and may include:

- meditation
- experimentation with mind-altering substances or sexual expression
- special diets and exercise regimens, such as vegetarianism or yoga
- pilgrimage to Eastern holy sites, monasteries, and communities
- adherence to the selected teachings of gurus, rabbis, or teachers
- fortunetelling
- magical rituals
- tarot card reading
- astrology

- naturalist healing using crystals or homeopathy
 - philosophical discourse
 - prayer
 - fasting
 - publication of New Age literature and film
 - emphasis on the arts or nature
 - spirit channeling
 - nudism
 - reading of selected scripture(s)
 - seeker gatherings
 - psychology / psychotherapy
-

New Age... Christians?

There is an undercurrent of New Ageism growing in American Christianity. Understandably, this causes folks to ask if New Ageism and Christianity are symbiotic.

As a trained theologian and ordained minister, I've concluded that one cannot be both a New Ageist and a Christian. Those who try to do so seem to end up as a lousy New Ageist and a decent Christian or (more likely) a lousy Christian and a decent New Ageist.

Here are some reasons why these two views are incompatible.

1) The New Age is supposed to be manifested by humanity.

Christians believe that a new age of peace, enlightenment, and cooperation has come and will be completed through Jesus Christ (a reality which we call **The Kingdom of God**), but we emphasize that God alone is responsible for bringing this reality about. We believe the Kingdom (or any other utopian vision of the earth) did not and cannot arrive through human effort.

2) Practical New Ageism includes beliefs and behaviors prohibited by Christian faith and Scripture.

Here are a few examples:

- a) Christians: there is **only one** Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth.
New Ageism: **choose your truth**, whatever that might be.
- b) Christians: the messiah has **come**.
New Ageism: a messiah is **coming**.
- c) Christians: the Spirit of God is **powerful, alive, and active**.
New Ageism: spiritual energy is **impersonal** and can be **manipulated**.
- d) Christians: "free love", witchcraft, drunkenness, and magic are **sinful**.
New Ageism: such disciplines can be **enlightening**.

The ideas presented are mutually exclusive. As such, they can't be held simultaneously.

3) For the Christian, there is no "Jesus and..."

Some Americans consider incorporating the New Age movement into their Christian faith for the same reason that people have considered adding on parts of other faiths for the last two millennia: people are debating whether Jesus is enough for them or not.

Haitian immigrants believed Jesus provided for their eternal salvation, but that he didn't cover their day-to-day needs. This is why they prayed to other spirits and their ancestors in addition to Jesus.

Thus, they became a people of "Jesus and voodoo".

Similarly, Bolivian workers of the Cerro Rico mine are devout Catholics, but whenever they enter the treacherous depths of the mine itself, they pray to **the devil** for protection and worship him instead. They believe the mine is his territory and that they are at his mercy, out of Jesus' reach.

Thus, they are a people of "Jesus and the devil."

In the USA, the fear of missing out on what life can offer leaves religious Americans getting drunk and high on Friday night, waking up in a strange bed on Saturday morning, and, somehow, going to God's house guilt-free for worship on Sunday.

Thus, they are a people of "Jesus and pleasure."

But when Jesus said in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will obey what I command", he wasn't speaking to the air or whistling Dixie; he was calling us to follow him because he is the Way and the Truth and the Life. There is no Way to God apart from Jesus himself. Therefore, there is no "Jesus and ..."

We don't need astrology, crystals, tarot cards, or talismans; any online articles describing their benefits are snake oil.

We mustn't repeat the sin of Adam and Eve, seeking enlightenment through prohibited means.

We don't need to experiment with everything to experience something.

We can't usher in a new age, but here's good news: Jesus has done it for us!

So, although our goal in these chapters is to learn and become more compassionate for our neighbors, it is also necessary to remember what sort of people God has called us to be: we aren't a people of "Jesus and..."

Instead, we're a people of **just Jesus!**



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Pentecostalism is a form of what we call "charismatic" Christianity.

The term **charisma** comes from Greek, and it means "favor" or "gift". Thus, it should come as no surprise that **Pentecostals** and other charismatic denominations prioritize spiritual gifts in their doctrine, creating a distinction from other Christian traditions and denominations. In this chapter, let's talk about one of the biggest charismatic branches of our family tree, our cousins, the **Pentecostals**.

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."

Acts 2:1-4

Pentecostal History.

Towards the end of the 19th century, dissatisfaction with traditional Christian denominations was growing among a subset of Americans. The upper middle class had become too comfortable in their pews. Revivals faded. Worship services became more intellectually rigid and less emotionally improvised. The sincere messages of fiery lay preachers were replaced with academic discourses from well-educated professionals. Those looking back on the high-energy camp meetings of the past wondered where the American Church was headed.

In this weedy field, the seeds of Pentecostalism were sown.

In the early 20th century, **Charles Fox Parham** served as director of **Bethel Bible College** of Topeka, Kansas. Having been influenced by the **American Holiness movement**, Parham called on his students to overcome the complacency of American religion by committing themselves to fasting, prayer, and the study of the Scriptures, and to patiently await the Holy Spirit's blessing. Parham believed that the arrival of the Holy Spirit would be signaled by the outpouring of apostolic spiritual gifts (such as discernment, prophecy, healing, etc).

His students were faithful in their spiritual disciplines, and one day, a student claimed to have received the baptism of fire. On January 1, 1901, **Agnes Ozman** was "filled with the Holy Spirit" during a campus revival and began to speak in an unknown language; several of Parham's students claimed to have similar experiences later. Parham became convinced that this speaking in tongues was sufficient evidence that someone had received the Holy Spirit. Further, he and his students concluded that they were signs that they were living in the last days.

Early efforts to spread their movement were rebuffed by detractors and doubters until, in 1903, Parham reintroduced the practice of **faith healing**. Like many evangelists to follow, Parham claimed that Christ's atonement was sufficient to heal any physical ailment, if the recipient had sufficient faith. The addition of faith healing to his revival meetings led to great success in gathering a sizeable following in the American South and Midwest.

In 1906, a simultaneous charismatic movement broke out during the **Azusa Street**

Revival at the **Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission** in Los Angeles. Ministers and laymen journeyed to California to be a part of the movement and, through the Holy Spirit, to become more like the Christians of Acts 2, "Christians of the Pentecost," hence, "Pentecostals."

Mainline denominations provided great resistance to the Pentecostal movement in the years to come. Despite this considerable opposition, Pentecostal churches were successfully planted in storefronts, apartment complexes, and rural barns. As the nation marched into WWI, the movement continued to grow and spread, eventually becoming an international affiliation of churches.

Today, there are hundreds of millions of Pentecostals around the world, though their loose denominational structure makes an accurate population count difficult to estimate. Among the largest Pentecostal denominations are the **Assemblies of God**, the **Apostolic Church**, and the **Foursquare Church**.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Pentecostal Beliefs.

Pentecostals are orthodox Christians. As such, they embrace the core beliefs of Christianity. These include the belief that:

- there is only one Triune God, known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
- God's good creation was corrupted by sin,
- sin leads to death,
- Jesus provided atonement for our sins,
- salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone,
- the Holy Bible is divinely inspired,
- the Spirit makes the Church holy,
- Jesus will come again,
- the body will be resurrected,
- the living and dead will be judged,
- the righteous will go on to life everlasting,

- the wicked will go on to eternal punishment,
- all believers are part of a common priesthood, etc.

The Second Outpouring. Like participants in the Holiness movement, Pentecostals believe that God's Holy Spirit wants to do a second work in us following salvation, a work of sanctification. However, Pentecostals and Holiness denominations (such as the **Church of the Nazarene**) disagree about what the second outpouring of the Holy Spirit produces.

While Holiness folks believe the baptism of the Holy Spirit repairs the corrupted human nature which is bent toward sin, Pentecostals believe it enables the use of ancient spiritual gifts. Without the presentation of these gifts, the Pentecostal doubts in the validity of a professed sanctification experience.

Glossalalia. Among their list of spiritual gifts, Pentecostals place a premium on a gift called **glossalalia**, which is the professed ability to speak in an unknown heavenly language under the Spirit's direction. This gift is different from **xenoglossy**, which is the gift where the believer speaks in a language he/she may not know, but which exists in a foreign nation or culture.

For example, if a person is sanctified and begins speaking Swahili for the first time, then a Pentecostal theologian would call it xenoglossy.

If a person is sanctified and begins speaking what sounds like Martian, then a Pentecostal theologian might call it glossalalia.

While the Church of the Nazarene affirms xenoglossy as a spiritual gift wielded successfully by the apostles at Pentecost, we do not affirm the Pentecostal practice of glossalalia because we don't believe it is encouraged by Scripture. We believe glossalalia is instead a well-meaning, human (not spiritually-gifted) practice.

Meanwhile, some Pentecostals believe so strongly in glossalalia that they may call into doubt the validity of any Christian's testimony if it does not include speaking in tongues.

Spiritual Gifts. In addition to glossalalia, Pentecostals practice the spiritual gifts of...

- interpretation of tongues,
- words of knowledge,
- words of wisdom,
- miracles,
- discernment/distinguishing spirits,
- prophecy,
- faith, and,
- xenoglossy.

Exuberant & Spontaneous Worship. Pentecostal practices grew in part as a response to a 20th century critique of passionless worship in mainline denominations. As a result, Pentecostal worship is known for high levels of emotional and artistic expression, spontaneous testimony, exhibitions of the Spirit's power, improvised sermons, and vocal prayer.

Pentecostal Practices.

Pentecostal practices may include:

- meditation
- prayer
- fasting
- speaking in tongues & other spiritual gifts
- organic worship services
- laying on of hands
- faith healing services
- Bible studies
- compassionate ministry
- alms for the poor
- tithing
- emphasis on evangelism

- baptism
- the Lord's Supper
- marriage & funeral ceremonies

As with the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Pentecostals have some practices and beliefs which differ from our own, but I don't perceive them to be issues of salvation.

While the Pentecostals practice glossolalia, we think they're just jabbering.

While we believe the Holy Spirit repairs our broken nature, they believe it's just wishful thinking.

We disagree on such matters.

But more importantly, we both believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. We both believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord. We both believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Church, the forgiveness of sins, the communion of the saints, the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting, amen.

And thus, we are both Christian, even if we think the other has some funky beliefs. Whenever we engage in a discussion with a Pentecostal friend, this is the foot we ought start off on.



- 10 -

Roman Catholicism is one of the oldest expressions of orthodox Christianity.

The early church remained relatively unified until 1054 AD, when it split for the first time due to cultural and political disagreements between the churches in the eastern and the western regions of the Holy Roman Empire. The two resulting churches were named the Greek Orthodox Church and the **Roman Catholic Church**. We'll talk about the Greek Orthodox Church in a later chapter, but now, let's focus on the **Roman Catholics**.

"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Matthew 16:18-19

Catholic History.

A date for the origin of the Catholic church depends on who you ask. Non-Christian and Protestant historians would probably say it started in 1054 AD with the split between the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholics, but Catholic historians would argue that it dates further back to the ministry of Jesus himself.

For such historians, the Church was **always** Catholic; other Christian denominations simply broke off from Mother Rome.

Here's how they tell the story.

Following Pentecost, the Catholic church quickly found itself the victim of brutal persecution. Despite the efforts of her enemies, she continued to spread and grow across the Roman empire. After two centuries of struggle, **Emperor Constantine** unexpectedly converted to Christianity and issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which established permanent religious tolerance for Jesus' followers.

Constantine further assisted the church to institutionalize by clarifying Christian theology, uniting believers, constructing churches, providing resources, and organizing church leadership structures. In the years to follow, Christianity would become the official religion of the Roman Empire and sacrifice to pagan deities would be outlawed. Thanks to the support of the Roman government, these developments changed the church forever.

No longer was this a grassroots Jesus movement operating in defiance of the largest empire in the world.

Now, she was **married** to that empire, and their relationship would have global consequences for centuries to come.

Cynical commentators attempt to characterize the Catholic Church in the days of the Holy Roman Empire as some sort of mustache-twirling villain, but that's probably unfair. Over the course of 1,000 years, there were certainly many leaders in the Catholic church who did abjectly wicked things, but those leaders weren't

really Christians to begin with. Instead, they were power hungry ladder-climbers and drunken socialites seeking religious offices as a means of gaining power.

In the Holy Roman empire, there were three sources of political clout: the **State**, the **Church**, and the **College**. Thus, a high church office could provide a sincere believer with the opportunity to serve God and the world in meaningful ways, but for a villain, the Church was an easy path to wealth, women, and legacy.

Accordingly, some of the archbishops and popes were great men of God responsible for pivotal developments in history, but others were murderers, philanderers, gluttons, liars, manipulators, cowards, thieves, poisoners, and abusers.

For example, **Pope John XII** was said to have died while enjoying a sexual encounter with a married woman outside of Rome. Sources are uncertain whether he died from apoplexy or being thrown out of an upper window by the enraged husband of his mistress.

Wicked men like John XII would use their position to gain favor with secular politicians and royals. In response, the secular leaders would use their power to benefit sympathetic religious leaders.

The emperor could name a pope; the pope could crown an emperor.

The emperor could make the pope wealthy; the pope could provide positions to the emperor's relatives in high church offices.

The emperor could fight the pope's wars; the pope could excommunicate the emperor's enemies.

As it is in American politics today, Roman politics were such that one hand was poised to wash the other. Eventually, after centuries of corruption and failed reform, an idea took root, a notion that Church and State affairs should become **separate** from one another. We are familiar with the phrase "separation of Church and State," but this is not an American invention; it actually comes to us,

like many Western innovations, from the Catholic church.

This development led Catholicism in a better direction, but like the monarchy of Old Testament Israel, the allure of power was a difficult temptation to silence, and human beings are fragile. Even into the modern era, the Catholic Church has had good leaders and bad ones, healers and abusers, reforms and recessions.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

The Name.

The story behind the "Roman Catholic" name is pretty simple.

First, the apostle Peter is believed to be the original pope and leader of the early church. Peter also lived in the capitol city of Rome and was martyred there in the mid-to-late 1st century AD. In the centuries following his death, Rome became the primary seat of power for the Western Church.

Hence, **Roman**.

Second, when the Great Schism occurred in 1054, the two resulting churches embraced new names. **Orthodox** comes from Greek (orthodoxos) and means "right worshiping" or "right believing". **Catholic** comes from Latin (catholicus) and means "universal" or "general".

Hence, **Catholic**.

The origin of these names strikes me as a little silly, given that the Orthodox Church self-describes as the one that "worships correctly", and the Roman Catholic Church calls themselves the one "universal" church. They remind me of little kids bragging and calling each other names in the school yard. In any event, the name of the Western Church has remained for a thousand years unchanged: the **Roman Catholic Church**.

Roman Catholics hold that their beliefs, traditions, and structures developed as the result of **apostolic succession**. Apostolic succession is the idea that Jesus gave his apostles (specifically, Peter) the authority to lead, make decisions for, and hold people accountable in his Church. When the apostles died, their apostolic authority was handed onto their successors. When these successors died, the authority was handed onto their successors, and so on.

For a Scriptural foundation, Catholics will commonly point to Matthew 16:13-19, where it is written...

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, *"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"*

They replied, *"Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."*

"But what about you?" he asked. *"Who do you say I am?"*

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

While Protestant denominations (such as the **Church of the Nazarene**) reject the notion of apostolic succession, the whole existence of the Catholic Church rests on it. Thus, if Peter didn't have apostolic authority, or if his successor didn't inherit it, then the Catholic Church is an unburned candle, but if apostolic succession is real, then the Catholic Church is the bearer of the flame of God.

This is why, on occasion, you might hear about a Catholic practice or belief, and think to yourself, "I don't think that's in Scripture... where did they get that idea?"

Usually, the answer has something to do with apostolic succession and the Catholic doctrine of **dogma**. Dogma is when, somewhere along the line in Catholic

history, someone in authority made a declaration to institute something new or revise something from the past. Because this leader retained apostolic authority, his declaration was treated as though it were uttered by God Himself.

*Something Protestants should note: Catholics don't believe the pope can make up whatever nonsense he wants, claim dogma, and then expect God to go along with it. Instead, Catholics believe that God reveals truth to the pope, who then has the authority to declare and enforce it on earth.

Dogma would not be a problematic idea if the pope is a righteous and honest man of God. A good pope wouldn't cook something up, get his archbishops behind it, and claim it comes from heaven. But a bad pope...

What if he's abusive in the use of his power?

What if he finds a way that he can benefit himself?

What happens then?

In just a few words?

You get the Protestant Reformation.

Catholic Beliefs.

Catholics are orthodox Christians. As such, they embrace the core beliefs of Christianity. These include the belief that:

- there is only one Triune God, known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
- God's good creation was corrupted by sin,
- sin leads to death,
- Jesus provided atonement for our sins,
- salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone,
- the Holy Bible is divinely inspired,
- the Spirit makes the Church holy,

- Jesus will come again,
- the body will be resurrected,
- the living and dead will be judged,
- the righteous will go on to life everlasting,
- the wicked will go on to eternal punishment, etc.

Apostolic Succession and its Fallout. Many other Catholic beliefs are rejected by Protestants and the Orthodox because we disagree on the aforementioned doctrine of the apostolic succession of the Catholic leadership. Such contentious beliefs include:

- **Purgatory**, a third realm of the dead in addition to Heaven and Hell,
- Catholic baptism being necessary for salvation,
- the **infallibility** of the pope,
- the equal authority of church tradition and Scripture,
- prayer to the saints,
- establishing the center of church authority in Rome,
- structure and process of election of church leaders,
- observation of seven sacraments instead of just two,
- the **perpetual virginity** and **immaculate conception** of Mary,
- celibacy among the clergy,
- **transubstantiation**, which is the belief that the bread and wine of communion become the literal body and blood of Jesus once consumed,
- canonization of saints, etc.

Catholic Practices.

Catholic practices may include:

- meditation
- personal and corporate prayer
- prayer to the saints

- use of articles in worship such as beads, icons, holy water, crucifixes, candles, vestments, and liturgy
- **fasting**
- Bible studies (note: Catholic Bibles have 7 more books than Protestant Bibles)
- **liturgical worship services**
- marriage & funeral ceremonies
- **compassionate ministry**
- alms for the poor
- **tithing**
- infant and adult baptism
- **confirmation**
- Eucharist
- **confession**
- anointing the sick
- **ordination of priests, monks, and bishops (men only)**
- spiritual retreats
- **holiday celebrations and seasons such as Christmas, Ash Wednesday, All Saints Day, Candlemas, Easter, and more**
- Christian greetings, doxologies, benedictions, and blessings
- **practice of penance**
- worship through song
- **use of the sign of the cross**
- evangelism and mission work

Like the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Pentecostals, Roman Catholics have practices and beliefs which feel strange to us, but this doesn't mean they are severed from the Christian family tree.

Catholics practice confession; Nazarenes have accountability partners.

Catholics ask dead saints to pray for them; Nazarenes ask living friends to pray for us.

Catholics have a pope; Nazarenes have six general superintendents.

We disagree on such matters.

But we all love Jesus. We all worship the same God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. We all believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Church, the forgiveness of sins, the communion of the saints, the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting, amen.

And thus, we are both Christian, even if we disagree on our traditions and how they are formed.



- 11 -

Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world.

Christianity is the largest world religion, followed by Islam, then Hinduism, and then Buddhism. While most Westerners have at least some familiarity with these four faiths, **Sikhism** remains a mystery for many, and it isn't uncommon for an American to mistake a follower of Sikhism for a Hindu or a Muslim.

In this chapter, we are clearing up that misunderstanding by learning more about the adherents of the 10 sacred gurus, the **Sikhs**.

"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."

Hosea 6:6

Sikh History.

Sikhism began with spiritual seekers (in Punjabi, **Sikh** means "**learner**") drawn to the teachings of a guru. This guru was named **Nanak**.

Nanak was born to a merchant family in 1469 AD. His family lived in Talwandi, a village located in what we now call Pakistan. Once Nanak was grown, he moved to Sultanpur to work as a clerk. He married and had two sons of his own. Life was going as expected until one fateful day when the 30-year-old Nanak experienced a mystical revelation.

According to the Sikhs, Nanak suddenly disappeared while taking a bath in a local river with one of his friends. His friend searched the waters frantically for Nanak, but to no avail. Grief stricken, the friend took Nanak's clothes and returned to Sultanpur to announce that Nanak had been swept away and killed.

Meanwhile, Nanak was transported to God's heavenly court, where he was given a sweet nectar to drink. On drinking the nectar, he learned the name of God and was sent back with the mission of preaching the divine name to the world. He reappeared in the river from which he was taken, and as he came up out of the water, he announced, "There is neither Hindu nor Muslim." To his surprise, three days had passed since he entered the river for his bath and, to the amazement of those who were mourning him, he returned safely to his home.

In the following years, Nanak traveled throughout India (some sources claim he made it all the way to the Middle East) as a **guru**. He preached the divine name in the form of hymns and songs, winning many converts to his fledgling religion. In his musical **shabads**, Nanak taught that there is only one God, that all people are equal, and that empty ritual is worthless. Such teachings ran against the grain of both his polytheistic, caste-based Hindu neighbors and the ritualistic Muslims.

His travels complete, Nanak returned to settle down on a farm with his family. He established the first Sikh village of **Kartarpur**, and lived out the rest of his days disciplining the Sikhs who joined him there. Just before his death, Nanak identified one of his disciples as the second guru and his successor. This pattern of the guru

identifying his successor would repeat itself a total of ten times.

Sifting between legend and historical fact becomes very difficult at this point, as even Sikhs admit some of the early accounts regarding Guru Nanak and his successors are very likely fabrications. While at least some of the travels, writings, and messages of the gurus are likely historical, these legends also include grand stories of miracles, signs, and anachronisms that certainly didn't happen.

For example, according to Sikh legend, there was dispute over what to do with Nanak's remains following his death: his Hindu friends wanted to cremate him, but his Muslim friends wanted to bury him. Prior to his death, Nanak gave instructions to lay his body under a sheet and place flowers on either side. One set of flowers represented his burial and the other his cremation. If the flowers on the side representing cremation wilted, then he was to be buried, and vice versa. So, his friends laid his body under the sheet and placed flowers on either side. When they returned the next morning, the flowers on neither side had wilted, but his body had disappeared.

Or so the legend says...

The Sikh community would continue to grow, flourish, and develop, eventually coming into conflict with the various Punjabi religious groups and political authorities in the years to come. In response, **Guru Gobind Singh**, the 10th leader of the Sikhs, called on his followers to draw the sword and rein in the wicked rulers of their day. Their militaristic and political efforts had mixed results.

Following the death of the 10th Guru in 1708, it was announced that the holy text of the Sikhs (the **Sri Guru Granth Sahib**) would thereafter serve as guru in place of a human leader. In 2023, at the end of more than five centuries of history, culture, development, conflict, and peace, there are at least **25 million Sikhs** in the world, more than **95%** of which live in **India**.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Sikh Beliefs.

Monotheism. Unlike their Hindu neighbors, Sikhs believe there is only one formless Almighty God in the universe. They further believe that all religions attempt to worship this same God: God is Allah, Yahweh, Vishnu, Bondye, the Great Spirit, etc.

Reincarnation. Like their Hindu and Buddhist neighbors, Sikhs believe in an eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. It is the goal of the Sikh to live a holy life through good deeds, avoidance of sin, and meditation on the divine name. If one is successful in this, one will be able to break the cycle and be united to God for eternity.

Incarnation of the Divine Guru. Sikhs believe that the "voice" through which the truth of God is uttered is the spirit of the **Divine Guru**. As each earthly Guru passed away, the spirit of the divine would pass on to the next Guru and speak through him. This continued until the voice settled on the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which became its permanent physical vessel. Thus, the holy text embodies the voice of the divine for Sikh believers today.

The Holy Text of Sikhism, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The Sikh holy text was primarily composed by the Guru Nanak. Years after Nanak's death, infighting within Sikh leadership led to the attempted publication of counterfeit scriptures. So, the fifth holy Guru, **Guru Arjan**, collected and canonized the official version of Nanak's hymns, poetry, and teachings, which is the Sikh scripture as we have it today. In addition to Nanak's teachings, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib also contains writings from other various Sikh Gurus, saints, and leaders.

The Holy Name. Sikhs believe that meditation (called **naam japna**) on the holy names and attributes of God produces internal transformation and can lead to escape from the cycle of reincarnation. Naam japna is a daily practice required of

all Sikhs. The holy name of God most commonly used by Sikhs is **Waheguru**, which means, "**Wonderful Teacher**."

The Five K's. There are five outward symbols through which a Sikh may be identified, and they are colloquially called the "Five K's" because the name of each symbol begins with a k in Punjabi. The Five K's are as follows...

- **Kesh - The Uncut Hair.** Sikhs do not cut their hair in honor of 10th Guru Gobind Singh, who had long uncut hair. Likewise, Sikh men do not trim their beards. These serve as a symbol of respect for God's creation, in which the hair continues to grow naturally. The Sikh's hair is usually wrapped in a turban for practicality, tidiness, and as a sign of religious fidelity.
- **Kangha - The Wooden Comb.** Sikhs wear a comb in their hair under the turban. It is retrieved twice a day to maintain and pull tangles out of the kesh. It is a symbol and reminder for the Sikh to live a life of tidiness and cleanliness.
- **Kara - The Metal Bracelet.** Sikhs wear a metal bracelet (usually iron or steel) as a reminder that their hands are to be used in accordance with the will of the Guru. Because the **kara** has no beginning and no end, it further symbolizes the eternal nature of God. The kara also represents community, as each bracelet is considered a link in the chain which the community creates.
- **Kachera - The Undergarment.** Initiated Sikhs wear a simple tie-knot undergarment. While other Indian undergarments take time and effort to put on, the simplicity and mobility of the kachera means that the Sikh is always ready for battle or defense. The kachera further reminds the Sikh to protect himself/herself against lust, which is a cardinal sin in Sikhism.
- **Kirpan - The Ceremonial Dagger.** A weapon to be used in defense of self and the innocent, the kirpan is a dagger with a narrow hilt and wide blade that ends in a sharp angle. The kirpan symbolizes justice and protection; it is the Sikh's honor-bound duty to always come to the rescue of a neighbor in need, even if it entails the risk of personal injury or death.

Worship, Initiation, & Other Ceremonies. Despite their founder's aversion to Muslim and Hindu forms of ritual, the Sikhs embrace several holy rituals and rites of passage. These include:

- **Regular Worship Services.** All attendees enter with bare feet and covered heads, bowing before the sacred scriptures. All notions of caste are rejected, and worshipers sit in a straight line of equality. Hymns are sung and prescribed prayers are offered. Services conclude with the distribution of a sacred food called **karah prasad**, which is made from wheat flour, clarified butter, and raw sugar.
- **Birth & Naming Ceremony.** Once a mother is well enough to rise on her own and bathe, a special naming ceremony is held for newborns at the local **gurdwara** (the Sikh house of worship). A hymn is selected at random from the scripture, and the parents name their child using the first letter of the hymn selected. Singh is added as the second name for males, while Kaur is added for females. Singh means "lion" and Kaur means "prince" or "lioness".
- **Weddings.** Called the **anand karaj** ("blissful union"). Within this ceremony, the bride and groom march four times around the holy scripture while reciting a hymn to set them apart from the Hindu tradition of walking around a sacred fire.
- **Ceremony of Initiation into the Khalsa.** The **khalsa** is the term used to refer to both the community of Sikh faith and those individuals who have been initiated into it. The ceremony of initiation (called the **amrit sanskar**) is the most important of Sikh rituals, and it requires six initiated Sikhs to perform. The initiate must not appear unbathed, bear signs of any religion besides Sikhism on their person, or fail to bring any of the Five K's. Scripture is read by a narrator and responses are given by the initiate. The initiate commits himself/herself to follow the way of Sikhism. A large bowl of nectar (a sugar water called **amrit**) is stirred by the initiated Sikhs with a blade throughout the ceremony. The initiate drinks from the bowl and is sprinkled with the nectar five times on the eyes and hair. Together with the initiate, the initiated Sikhs finish the bowl of nectar by drinking it together. The initiate promises to avoid the four cardinal sins, which are sexual intercourse with another person's spouse, cutting the kesh,

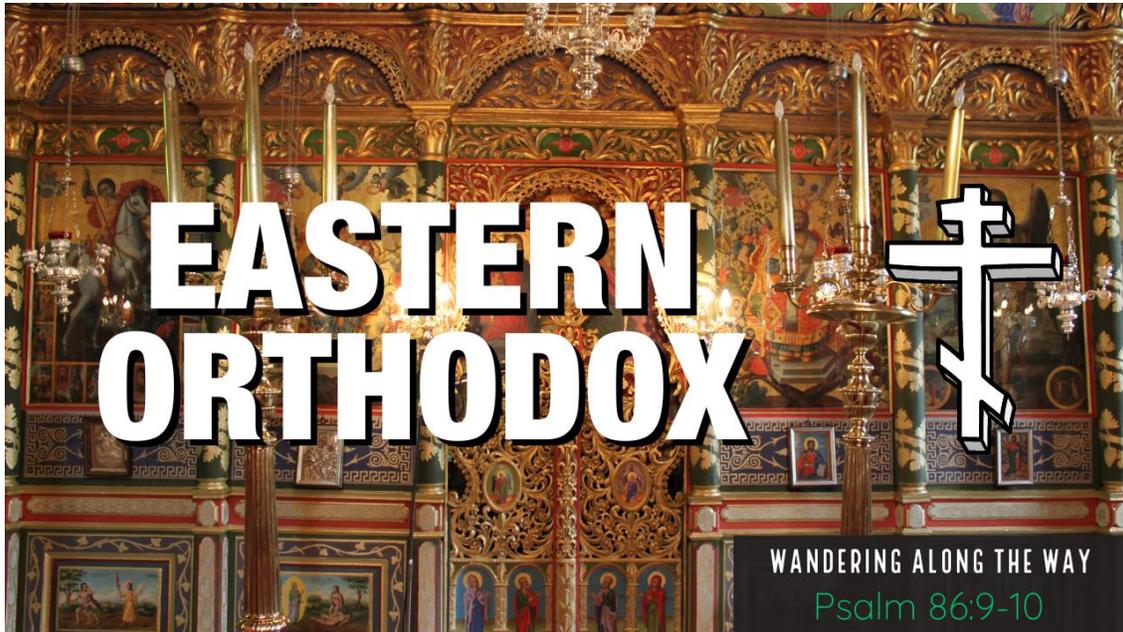
eating **halal** meat, and using tobacco. If the initiate did not undergo the Sikh birth & naming ceremony as an infant, a Sikh name is conferred on them. The ceremony ends with the distribution and consumption of karah prasad.

- **Funerals.** Typically by cremation and the spread of ashes, or sometimes by burial. No headstone or grave marker is permitted, since Sikhs believe the soul of their departed has already (a) reunited with God or (b) been reincarnated in a new body. The body itself is merely an abandoned vessel of the eternal soul.

Sikh Practices.

Sikh practices may include:

- meditation on the divine name
- personal and corporate prayer
- donning the Five K's
- regular worship services at the local gurdwara
- fasting
- study of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib
- martial arts & soldiering
- marriage & funeral ceremonies
- compassionate ministry
- hymn singing
- participation in the rites of passage
- special attire, including turbans and certain colors
- rejection of traditional Indian caste norms
- pilgrimage to holy sites
- holiday celebrations and seasons such as Diwali, Maghi, Hola Moholla, and more
- Sikh greetings and blessings



- 12 -

Eastern Orthodoxy is one of the two oldest branches of Christ's Church.

Yet many folks living in the west know virtually nothing about our cousins to the east. This is because the Orthodox Church is concentrated in the Balkans, Middle East, and former Soviet nations. Meanwhile, the other oldest branch of Christ's Church (the Roman Catholics) is more common in nations such as Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Italy, and the USA. So, let's talk about our ancient Christian cousins, the **Eastern Orthodox**.

"All the nations you have made
will come and worship before you, Lord;
they will bring glory to your name.
For you are great and do marvelous deeds;
you alone are God."

Psalm 86:9-10

Orthodox History.

After the assassination of **Emperor Severus Alexander** in 235 AD, the Roman Empire fell into disorder, nearly collapsing under the weight of barbarian invasions, plagues, political infighting, economic destabilization, and peasant rebellion. In 284 AD, this crisis finally began to abate when a man named **Diocles** ascended to the throne.

Emperor Dicoletian (as he was known thereafter) began to restore order by reorganizing the government into a bureaucratic **Tetrarchy**. He divided governance of the empire in half, installing a fellow officer as his co-emperor to the east. As for Emperor Diocletian, he retained control over the west. He then subdivided leadership of the two empires again, and each co-emperor installed a **caesar** to rule each of the remaining sections.

Having reorganized the once-massive Roman Empire into more manageable quarters, Diocletian went on to reform governmental structures, economics, leadership, politics, and more. Diocletian was successful and relative stability was restored to the empire by the time his rule ended in 305 AD.

But among the gallery of his many successes, Diocletian did produce a few notable failures, one of which was his inability to wipe Christianity from the face of the earth.

The **Great Persecution** aimed at the forced conversion of Christians to Roman paganism began under Emperor Diocletian and **Caesar Galerius** in 303 AD and lasted until 311 AD. By imperial decree, churches were ordered to be destroyed and their scriptures burned. Christians of high Roman office were put on notice that their staffs would be released and their offices lost if they did not recant their Christian faith; if they persisted even after these corrective measures, then they were to be imprisoned. Further edicts targeted church leaders by imprisoning them and seeing them “coerced by every possible means into offering (pagan) sacrifice.” (Eusebius, History of the Church [VIII.2])

Despite the best efforts of Diocletian and Galerius, the faith continued to spread

throughout the known world in the third and fourth centuries, planting churches in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Ironically, Galerius eventually softened his position when he became violently ill in 311 A.D., describing the persecution as a failure and encouraging Romans to pray to the god of the Christians, hoping that He would ensure the security and health of the empire. Caesar Galerius died of his illness in May of 311.

Relief from Roman persecution finally arrived in 313 AD when Emperor Constantine issued a rule of religious tolerance called the **Edict of Milan**. With Christianity now legal to practice, the faith continued to grow until it became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 AD. But as the age of tolerance progressed, more and more cultural conflicts emerged between the eastern and western churches.

In the west, Latin was the preferred language for church activities; in the east, it was Greek.

Western leadership fell to the pope, who then delegated to bishops and priests in a top-down structure. Meanwhile, eastern leadership fell to a council of coequal **patriarchs** and decisions were made by consensus.

The west emphasized theological systems, but the east emphasized mystery.

Although these differences led to ecclesiastical headbutting, the church managed to hold together as one unified body of Christ... until 1054 AD.

In 1054 AD, the infamous **Great Schism** occurred, which was the first major split in the history of Christianity. It came about as the result of the western church attempting to make doctrinal changes to one of the earliest Christian creeds without the input of the eastern churches. When the Patriarch of Constantinople, **Michael Cerularius**, challenged the western church's decision, **Pope Leo IX** responded by excommunicating him. Patriarch Cerularius responded in kind, excommunicating the pope.

By excommunicating their opponents, the papacy and the patriarchy effectively

split the Church in half. The western church adopted the name of **Roman Catholic Church**, and the eastern church adopted the name of **Eastern Orthodox Church**.

Since 1054 AD, the two churches have operated independently of one another, and the schism has never been fully healed. However, at **Vatican II** in the mid-1960s, the legitimacy of the sacraments of the Eastern Orthodox was officially validated by the Roman Catholics. This represented massive progress and both churches can be said to be “in good standing” with one another, but there is no significant forward momentum to restore the unity of the two churches at present.

There are approximately **260 million** Eastern Orthodox Christians around the world, with the majority living in European countries like Russia, Greece, Latvia, Bulgaria, and Serbia. Today, about one out of every ten Christians in the world is a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Orthodox Beliefs.

The Eastern Orthodox are Christians. As such, they embrace the core beliefs of Christianity. These include the belief that:

- there is only one Triune God, known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
- God's good creation was corrupted by sin,
- sin leads to death,
- Jesus provided atonement for our sins,
- salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone,
- the Holy Bible is divinely inspired,
- the Spirit makes the Church holy,
- Jesus will come again,
- the body will be resurrected,
- the living and dead will be judged,
- the righteous will go on to life everlasting,

- the wicked will go on to eternal punishment, etc.

Leadership Structure & Clergy.

All Eastern Orthodox Churches are independent congregations which gather as an ecumenical body.

At the highest level, the Eastern Orthodox Church denomination is led by a council of patriarchs. Each patriarch is associated with a geographical area of importance, such as Antioch or Jerusalem. Although the patriarchs are considered co-equal, the **Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople** is held in highest respect and often viewed as leader of the Orthodox patriarchy. As in the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church, all the patriarchs are unmarried.

Below the patriarchs, there are three classical church offices: **bishop, priest,** and **deacon**. After patriarch, bishop is the highest office to which a clergyman can be elected, and any priest elected to the office of bishop must be unmarried. Traditionally, bishops are elected from among the Orthodox monks.

Below the bishop, priests are the traditional pastors of the local church. Below the priesthood, deacons serve to assist in teaching and liturgy, typically as preparation for becoming priests. Unlike the Catholic church, any single, widowed, or **married** man may become a deacon or a priest. However, a single or widowed man **may not** seek marriage **after ordination**. If he does, he must relinquish his ministry. Sadly, women are not eligible to be ordained in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Scripture. The holy scripture of the Eastern Orthodox Church is the Christian Bible, however, the Orthodox Bible contains an organization and contents different from the Catholic and Protestant versions.

The Protestant Bible (which we use at **HNC**) contains 66 books. The Catholic Bible contains these 66 books plus an additional 7 books called the **Apocrypha**. The Orthodox Bible is the largest, containing 79 books total.

The variance in these Bibles boils down to history, culture, and traditions surrounding what it means for Scripture to be “inspired”.

For example, the original Old Testament canon was written in Hebrew and contained 39 books. This is the canon which Protestants adopted into their Bibles. The Orthodox and Catholics, however, place a premium on the early church and Greek translations of the Hebrew text. The Greek Old Testament canon picked up a few extra books somewhere along the way, and so, the Catholics and Orthodox embraced these books. Because the Protestants don’t equate tradition to inspiration, we stuck to the original Hebrew canon.

Mystery Over Systems.

In the west, we like systems: every idea, every conviction, every belief needs to be woven together into a single tapestry with no hanging threads. We emphasize logic and structure over emotion and experience. In the east, they are not only comfortable with emotion and the unknowable, they embrace it enthusiastically.

For example, Christians believe that God is triune, one God made known in three persons. How can something be both singular and plural simultaneously?

The westerner will search for an apt metaphor to answer:

- God is like a three leaf clover
- God is like an egg
- God is like a man who is a father, husband, and son
- God is like a triangle
- God is like the different phases of water

Another westerner will then arrive to complain that each of these metaphors has a critical shortcoming that may point to heresy. The two will argue, trying to find an answer where everything fits **just so**, leaving no unexplained or problematic elements to remain.

In the east, they will simply say “God is a mystery”. Then, they sit in awe-inspired

worship of God together, no further explanations needed. Eastern Orthodox Christians are also more open to mystical forms of meditation and worship as a result.

Sacraments. A **sacrament** is a sacred symbol and outward sign instituted by Jesus to reveal God's grace in a special way. In the Nazarene Church, we practice only two sacraments - baptism and the Lord's Supper - but the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox practice five sacraments in addition to ours: **confirmation, confession, anointing the sick, matrimony,** and **ordination.**

As with the statement about Scripture, the differences between the number of sacraments in the Protestant and Orthodox Churches comes down to history and tradition. Protestant churches affirm the practices of confirmation, confession, anointing, matrimony, and ordination, but because they are not officially **instituted** by Jesus in Scripture, we do not define them as sacraments. Instead, we think of them as holy moments in the life of the church.

Orthodox Practices.

Orthodox practices may include:

- meditation
- personal and corporate prayer
- liturgical worship services
- fasting
- Bible study
- marriage & funeral ceremonies
- compassionate ministry
- hymn singing
- participation in the seven sacraments
- liturgical attire for clergy with golden robes, symbolic affectations, etc.

- pilgrimage to holy sites
- holiday celebrations such as Christmas and Easter
- Orthodox greetings and blessings



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What is the Bahá'í Faith?

Honestly, before studying for this chapter, I had no idea whatsoever.

And I am excited to share what I learned with you!

Let's talk about the Iranian religion of the 19th century, the **Bahá'í Faith**.

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14:6

Bahá'í History.

In 1844, an Iranian merchant named **Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad** of Shiraz founded a new religion called **Bábism**.

Bábism taught that there is only one absolute God of the universe who has achieved his will through a series of dispensations, progressive revelation, and an endless line of prophets called the **Manifestations of God**. According to 'Ali-Muhammad, all the major prophets of the world's great religions were Manifestations of God and taught about the same spiritual realities.

After making his first convert, 'Ali-Muhammad named himself the **Báb** (which means "the Gate", and is also the origin of his fledgling religion's name) and would later lay claim to the loftier Muslim title of **Mahdi** ("guided one").

According to the beliefs of **Shi'a Islam**, the Mahdi is a figure similar to John the Baptist who is supposed to appear at the end of time and announce the return of the great prophet **'Isa** (the Muslim name for Jesus Christ). It is a title of great importance, and laying claim to it is no small matter.

Because of this claim and their unorthodox beliefs, the Báb and his followers were declared heretics by Muslim clergy and violently persecuted. The Báb himself was arrested, imprisoned, and executed in 1850.

Although the Báb's tenure as a prophet was brief, the influence of his ideas carried on well after his death. The Báb would be viewed as the forerunner to the **Bahá'í Faith**, and the majority of **Bábists** would later convert to **Bahá'í**. Here's how it happened.

One of the Báb's early followers, **Mírzá Husayn 'Alí Núrí**, was repeatedly persecuted, exiled, and harassed as a result of his Bábist faith. In 1863, he told his friends and family that he had received a revelation from God while in a Muslim prison, a revelation which declared that he was the next Manifestation of God.

Husayn 'Alí Núrí took on the prophetic title of **Bahá'u'lláh** (which means "the glory

of God") and began his career as a prolific author, producing more than 18,000 works in his lifetime. To introduce himself as God's prophet, he even wrote letters to major historical figures such as Pope Pius IX, Napoleon III, and Queen Victoria. Bahá'u'lláh continued to suffer Muslim persecution, being exiled to various locations around the Middle East until he finally landed in Israel, where he lived until his death in 1892. In his will, he declared that leadership of his religion would fall to his eldest son, **'Abbás Effendi**. Effendi came to be known as **'Abdu'l-Bahá** ("Servant of Bahá").

Not only did he inherit his father's leadership and legacy, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also inherited his persecution, remaining imprisoned until 1908. Following his release, 'Abdu'l-Bahá traveled the world to spread his father's teachings.

Today, there are approximately **eight-million** followers of the Bahá'í Faith spread over **200 countries**, with growing populations in Iran, Latin America, Africa, India, and Vietnam.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Bahá'í Faith Beliefs.

One God. Bahá'ís believe there is only one, eternal, all-knowing God and creator of the universe who is only accessible to humanity through prophets called the Manifestations of God. God and the universe are both eternal, having no beginning or end.

The Unity of All Religions. Bahá'ís believe that all the world's major religions originally pointed to the same ideas and truths, and worship the same God. Thus, all the major religions are a united faith made known in different cultures, eras, and circumstances.

Dispensations, Progressive Revelation, & the Manifestations of

God. Metaphorically speaking, we can consider the Bahá'í history of the world as a book, and the chapters of that book are called **dispensations**. God interacts with the world differently in each chapter, periodically calling a Manifestation of God to preach and teach a new perspective of God's will. As each dispensation passes and a new one begins, a more complete understanding of God is revealed.

If we consider the Bahá'í view in this way, then the "table of contents" of world history would look like this:

5,000 BC: the **Jewish dispensation** and the Manifestation of God, **Abraham**.

3,200 BC: the **Hindu dispensation** and the Manifestation of God, **Krishna**.

700 BC: the **Zoroastrian dispensation** and the Manifestation of God, **Zoroaster**.

500 BC: the **Buddhist dispensation** and the Manifestation of God, **Buddha**.

1 BC: the **Christian dispensation** and the Manifestation of God, **Jesus**.

570 AD: the **Muslim dispensation** and the Manifestation of God, **Muhammad**.

1863 AD: the **Bahá'í Faith dispensation** and the Manifestation of God, **Bahá'u'lláh**.

Bahá'ís believe that the message of God in each dispensation is essentially the same but that each Manifestation of God updates the content for the current culture and expands humanity's understanding of the divine. These teachings may or may not be handed down accurately through history as humanity encounters novel challenges, which is why a new dispensation is needed every few centuries or millennia.

This belief is very similar to the Muslim doctrine about Allah sending prophets with holy books throughout history to correct corrupted humanity, however, the followers of the Bahá'í Faith believe these dispensations and prophets are **cyclical** and **endless**. While Muslims believe that Muhammad was God's final prophet, Bahá'ís believe Bahá'u'lláh was not the final Manifestation of God, just the most recent.

Scripture. The holy scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith are the many, many, many texts written by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. These texts (a very small fraction of which have been translated into English) are considered to be inspired by God, as are the teachings of the other Manifestations of God. Furthermore, the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his successor, Shoghi Effendi, are considered the authoritative interpretation of the Bahá'í texts.

Life After Death. The followers of the Bahá'í Faith believe in the rational soul of man, which seeks as its highest goal to become close to the Almighty through prayer, devotion, and obedience. Notions of "heaven" and "hell" are symbolic, representing one's closeness to God in this life and beyond. These notions do not represent physical or spiritual locations of reward or punishment. Instead, the rational soul separates from the body on death and continues its journey towards the Maker.

Sacraments, Clergy, & Structure. Most Bahá'í worship occurs in personal prayer and in home group gatherings, though temples and centers of worship are becoming more common. In communal worship gatherings, songs may be sung, prayers presented, and scriptures read, but there is no formal clergy, no sermon, and no sacraments. All Bahá'ís participate in a time of worship, communication, and fellowship every 19th day of the Bahá'í calendar. This is called the **19th Day Feast**.

Leadership of the Bahá'í Faith is determined by election, with boards (called **Spiritual Assemblies**) serving locally, nationally, and internationally. The highest elected council is called the **Universal House of Justice**, and, since 1963, it has served as the supreme elected authority of the Bahá'í.

Bahá'ís believe Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, their successors, and the Universal House of Justice represent an unbroken line of divine authority, that every word from their mouth holds the same weight as a word from the mouth of God himself.

Despite claims to absolute equality of the genders, it's interesting to note that

women are not permitted to serve on the Universal House of Justice, though women may serve in lower positions.

Global Unity: The Oneness of Humanity. Bahá'ís seek a heaven on earth marked by the complete dissolution of all discriminatory barriers in the world. Such barriers include government, politics, religion, social standing, caste systems, and the economy, which divide. By converting the whole world to the Bahá'í Faith, adherents hope to abolish these national systems in favor of a peaceful, unified one-world government.

In addition, followers of the Bahá'í Faith seek the end of racism, sexism, classism, nationalism, and all other forms of division. Equality and unity are the highest virtues and the core of the Bahá'í message. Humanity is **one**.

Bahá'í Faith Practices.

Bahá'í Faith practices include:

- [19th day feast celebrations](#)
- daily prayer
- [scripture reading](#)
- fasting
- [abstinence from alcohol, narcotics, and anything else which compromises the mind, except for medicinal purposes](#)
- practice of heterosexual monogamy (transgender relationships are permitted if gender reassignment surgeries have been completed)
- [obtaining consent from parents prior to marriage \(even if they aren't followers of the Bahá'í Faith\)](#)
- worshiping through song (no instruments are permitted)
- [making financial donations](#)
- compassionate ministry
- [abstinence from partisan politics](#)

- spreading the Bahá'í Faith through non-confrontational teaching, rejecting classical forms of persuasion, rhetoric, apologetics or evangelism



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Japan is an archipelago of three faiths.

Although many Japanese folks claim no religious affiliation, most abide by Confucian ethics, observe Buddhist funerals, and attend **Shinto** holiday celebrations. This phenomenon can be reasoned on the basis that all three faiths have enduring ties to Japanese culture and history. That's why we're now going to take a look at the indigenous religion of Japan, **Shintoism**.

“Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.

Jeremiah 32:17

Shinto History.

Shintoism is the "way of the gods".

There is no definitive history of the Shinto faith, a feature which is typical of most **folk religions**. A folk religion is a faith that is centered on an ethnic group and falls outside the mainstream forms of organized religion. Instead of holy books, systematic theology, prophets, or an organized network of clergy, folk religions rely on local shamans and priests, traditions, and magical rituals to facilitate contact with the spiritual.

The earliest references to the Shinto faith can be found in the **Kojiki** ("An Account of Ancient Matters" compiled in 712 AD) and the **Nihon Shoki** ("The Chronicles of Japan" compiled in 720 AD), which are two of the oldest surviving Japanese written works. These texts contain the Japanese creation myth, legends about the origins of the **kami** and humanity, pseudo-history, and the chronicles of the early Imperial line.

The Kojiki and Nihon Shoki serve as primary sources for Shinto thought, but would not be considered inspired Scriptures like the Quran of Islam, Bible of Christianity, or Book of Mormon of the Latter Day Saints.

In the Japanese creation myth, the eternal formless void of the cosmos separates itself into the heavens above and the muddy earth below. Between these two realms, divine beings called **kami** spontaneously come into existence. As with many mythologies, each kami is usually associated with natural elements, forces, or ideas, such as the sun, the moon, storms, agriculture, medicine, business, luck, etc. over which they exercise power.

Seven generations of kami are eventually produced in the gap between heavens and earth, including **Izanagi** and **Izanami**, who are kami of great importance. From a heavenly bridge above, Izanagi and Izanami stir the waters of the formless earth with a cosmic spear and, from the brine that drips from the spearhead, create the first of the islands of Japan. They descend to the island and decide to marry. As a result of their union, the rest of the islands of Japan are created, as are a plethora

of kami. Unfortunately, Izanami eventually dies giving birth to their youngest child, the kami of fire. The angered Izanagi cleaves the guilty child into pieces with a sword, forming volcanoes and yet more kami.

Grieved by the loss of his love, Izanagi descends to **Yomi** (the underworld) to retrieve her. He finds his bride shrouded in darkness, and attempts to save her, but learns she cannot return to the land of the living because she has already eaten food from Yomi. Izanagi lights a fire to see her face and is horrified by her appearance, which is like a ghastly, decaying corpse.

Rejected, Izanami flies off the handle and sends demons to seize her former husband, but Izanagi manages to escape the polluted underworld. Izanami curses humanity in response, vowing to take 1,000 lives every day. To thwart his wife and ensure the future of Japan, Izanagi promises to bless and produce 1,500 lives every day.

Safe in the daylight, Izanagi realizes that he has become covered in a spiritual pollution and must purify himself. He accomplishes this by bathing in a river on the island of Kyushu. More kami are created as a result of his bath, the three most important being **Amaterasu** (kami of the sun), **Tsukuyomi** (kami of the moon), and **Susanoo** (kami of storms). Izanagi then gives rule of the heavens to Amaterasu, rule of the night to Tsukuyomi, and rule of the seas Susanoo, though Tsukuyomi and Izanagi soon have a falling out, and Tsukuyomi is exiled.

From these mythical beginnings, the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki go on to describe further legends of the kami and early Japan, and then tell the story of the rise of the Imperial family, arriving at its terminus with the reign of **Empress Suiko** in 628 AD.

Today, there are approximately **three-million** self-described Shintoists in the world, though most Japanese participate in some Shinto rituals.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Shintoism Beliefs.

Creation and the Musubi. Shintoists believe the act of creation was random, originating from the **Musubi**, which is the impersonal creating force of the universe. Like many pagan mythologies, important features of the cosmos and even the kamis themselves were created seemingly by accident in Shintoism. This is in stark contrast to many western religions, which hold that the act of creation was an intentional decision by a motivated divine source.

The Kami. Kami are invisible spirits of power who, if appeased, are willing to assist, bless, and bring good fortune to their worshipers. The kami take diverse forms and come from many sources, thus it feels insufficient to describe them as "gods" in the traditional sense. Kami are the progenitors of the human race, shapers of the earth, and shepherds of the natural elements.

Kami can be born from other kami. They are immortal, yet they can die. Humans can become kami upon death if they lived a particularly good life or were born into the right family. Some kami spontaneously manifest from ideals.

Kami are powerful, but their area of influence is limited. Some kami are benevolent, some are malevolent. Some are peaceful, some are violent. Some are divine, some are demonic.

Kami are believed to make their dwelling in physical artifacts, structures, and natural wonders around which Shinto shrines are built. Kami can live in trees, mountains, mirrors, jewels, and swords. There is even one kami said to live in a robotic arm in one of Japan's many factories.

Japanese mythology claims there are eight-million kami in the cosmos, but this round number is intended to communicate that the number of kami in the cosmos is essentially infinite.

Humanity & Life After Death. Human beings were benevolently created by the kami. On death, the spirit of the deceased enters the spirit world. There are different places and hues within the invisible spirit world, but there is no definitive judgment of the divine, reward of Heaven, or punishment of Hell. It is simply the abode of the dead, the holiest of which is called the "other world of heaven".

In Shinto thought, the natural world and all that is in it is essentially good, including human nature. Rather than original sin, Shintos believe humanity becomes spiritually polluted, which can be resolved through a ritual purification of washing, one of the most iconic of Shinto practices.

Amulets, Sacraments, Clergy, & Shrines. As previously mentioned, most of the structure familiar to western religion is absent in folk religious contexts. Shintoism has no scripture, no prophets, and no seminaries. The majority of Shinto faith practice is instead characterized by shrines, rituals, and local priests.

Shinto practitioners believe in luck and good fortune. By appeasing the kami, they believe they can find success in business, life, and family. Thus, Shintoists have been known to call on local priests to purify and bless new cars, homes, businesses, and factories, and to empower special amulets and charms intended to ward off bad luck.

There are approximately 100,000 shrines in Japan today. Some shrines are quite small, roadside attractions, while others are grand works of beautiful architecture. Most have a special artifact at the center in which a kami is believed to live. Shintoists visit the shrines as needed, usually a few times a month or a year, but some Shintoists visit their local shrine every day. Most shrines have two parts: the first section is only accessible to the priests and contains the local kami's artifact, but the second section is open to the public for washing, worship, making donations, and prayer.

In addition to facilitating Japanese holidays and purification rituals, Shinto priests are primarily responsible for the maintenance of these shrines.

Because shrines are viewed as sacred sites of prayer and intercession, modern developments are sometimes forced to give way to Shinto tradition. For example, in 1972, plans to expand a Kayashima train station were protested when it was revealed that a 700-year old sacred tree of a kami would need to be cut down. The locals won their lawsuit and the expansion had to be built around the kami's tree.



Love of the Natural World. Humanity is meant to live in awesome appreciation of the natural world, to care for and preserve it. This Shinto conviction arises from the idea that Musubi is in all things and, ultimately, created all things. Therefore, humanity should embrace the unifying energy of the cosmos and live in harmony with it. Even in grand, sprawling cities like Tokyo, stretches of nature have been preserved to honor the natural world.

Purification. Arguably the most important ritual in Shintoism, ritual cleansing is generally accomplished by using a wooden ladle of water at the local shrine to wash each eye and rinse out the mouth, as Izanagi did when he exited Yomi. Shintoists seeking a grander form of purification have been known to wash in the ocean, rivers, springs, and even under thundering waterfalls. At sumo wrestling matches, it is common for participants to begin by throwing salt around the ring to

purify it and ward off evil. Priests also purify locations, objects, and shrines with ceremonial fans of white feathers.

Holidays. Shintoists go big on holidays. Rituals vary, but can include parades, sumo matches, horseback archery contests, public prayer, pilgrimage, ritual purification, magical rites, and more. Similar to the ancient Jews and the Ark of the Covenant, some holidays even involve the local priests collecting the kami's artifact from the local shrine in a miniature mobile shrine which is then paraded around the city and ceremonially cleansed by washing in the ocean, lakes or rivers. Shinto holidays include new year's, **Seijin-no-hi** (a coming-of-age ceremony for 20 year olds), **Setsubun** (a festival for the beginning of spring), the **Festival of Dolls**, the equinox, and more.

Ethics. A feature common to most religions which is absent from Shintoism is the teaching and practice of an established ethic. Shintoism has no Ten Commandments, Golden Rule, Five K's or Law of Karma. Instead, it seems ethical implications for the Shintoist arise from Japanese cultural expectations and the influence of Buddhism and Confucianism.

Torii Gates. Torii gates are an iconic Japanese symbol usually found at the entrance to a shrine. This gate represents the physical separation between the holy and the common, that the worshiper is entering a sacred space and must honor it as such. Prior to entering the torii gate, the visitor is expected to bow in honor of the kami.

Shintoism Faith Practices.

Shinto practices include:

- shrine visitation
- prayer, which includes ceremonial hand clapping and bowing
- ceremonial washing
- holiday celebrations
- use of amulets, charms, tickets, etc. for good luck
- priestly blessing
- donations to local shrine
- creation and use of idols
- hanging the **shimenawa** rope, which designates the spiritual purity whoever/whatever it is wrapped around
- construction of torii gates



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The term "pagan" originates in 4th century Latin.

Although first used to describe something "rural" or "rustic", the term came to refer to a "heathen" in Christian circles. Today, the term is used to describe folks who practice forms of religion outside of the mainline, often with roots in extinct animistic spiritualism, ancient folk religions, or ethnically centered polytheistic spiritual practices. Although paganism largely died out as a direct result of influence from the Holy Roman Empire, it saw a significant resurgence in the last century. The largest branch of this neopaganism is **Wicca**.

"Do not practice divination or seek omens."

Leviticus 19:26

Wiccan History.

Wicca are more defined by the nature of the rituals they practice than they are by a static set of faith beliefs. This is why Wiccans do not call themselves believers, but rather, **practitioners**.

Some Wiccans make the claim that their religion is the revival or continuation of ancient practices, but most historians agree that it is more accurate to describe it as a modern religion with some influences from ancient traditions.

Wicca's modern origin can be traced to **Gerald Gardner**, a British government retiree who lived from 1884 to 1964 AD. Gardner was a world traveler, spent much of his life among the indigenous peoples of Asia, and was familiar with many of the esoteric and folk religious traditions of the east. He was also influenced by infamous modern British occultist **Aleister Crowley**.

In 1939, Gardner claimed to have discovered a group of pagan witches meeting in England's **New Forest**. In the years to come, Gardner would develop a religious tradition around the supposed practices of the New Forest witches, though historians doubt whether this coven ever existed. If it did, most agree the coven was probably founded in the 1930s, not from antiquity, as Gardner had claimed.

Gardner's writings would go on to inspire Alexander Sanders, Victor and Cora Anderson, and others to create their own Wiccan traditions in 50's and 60's. By the 70's, Wiccan traditions were emerging around advocacy for the feminist, LGBT, and environmentalist movements in America. By the end of the 70's, the once conservative-dominated culture of Wiccan religion had become outnumbered and replaced by the liberal culture which remains dominant today.

Wiccanism received revitalized interest among teenagers in the 90's and early 00's thanks to popular media representations of neopaganism such as **Buffy the Vampire Slayer**. A second wave of interest broke out from 2010 to the present day thanks in large part to personalities on social media outlets like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Wiccanism remains a popular form of counter-cultural self-expression among our nation's youth.

There are at least a **million** self-described Wicca in America alone, although it is difficult to get an accurate population estimate due to the very private and individual nature of the religion itself.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Wiccan Beliefs.

The Divine. Because Wiccans are defined more by practice than they are by belief, ideas concerning the divine are diverse. Wiccans can be atheists, monotheists, polytheists, agnostic, henotheists, or pantheists. Some believe in a nebulous spirit-world which is home to all kinds of spiritual beings. Some Wiccans believe the gods of old (Thor, Zeus, Neptune, Ra, Baal, etc.) actually exist; others believe they are mere symbols or archetypes worthy of worship, but ultimately non-existent.

Wiccans are highly individualistic and, as such, choose who or what to worship. Much of Wiccan symbolism is based on the traditions from which they draw, such as Druidic, Norse, Celtic, Greek, or Egyptian mythology.

The Devil. Although many 70's Evangelical Christian talking heads portrayed Wiccans as Satanists, Wiccans have consistently pushed back against and resent this misnomer.

Most Wiccans have no interest in Judeo-Christian views of Heaven, Hell, Scripture, demons, angels, the devil, crossroad deals or Faustian bargains. Instead, they embrace a non-mainline cosmology of nature, spirit, and magic.

With that being said, Wiccan belief is highly individualistic. Therefore, a Wiccan could theoretically choose to worship the devil as a literal or metaphorical being if they so desired, so long as their worship did not seek to curse or do harm. Such a Satanic-Wiccanism would remain within the bounds of their Wiccan orthodoxy, but

it would be incredibly uncommon. Most Wiccans tend to choose the **mother Goddess**, the **horned God**, or one of the old gods as their patron deity instead.

Sympathetic Magic. Wiccans are modern witches. As such, many Wiccans believe they can influence the natural world through rituals, trinkets, drafts, symbols, spells, prayers, amulets, and the like.

To perform a ritual, Wiccans commonly sit in a circle at the home of a coven member. Some covens impose a dress code for their rituals (some opt for nudity), but others don't. They utilize focusing articles such as incense, a chalice, a knife, and/or a wand to collect and send the combined power of their wills to effect physical change in the world. Like Haitian Voodoo, some Wiccan rituals seek the possession of one of the practitioners by a divine spirit to receive that spirit's advice, rebuke, or blessing. A fellowship meal often follows.

Targets for a magical ritual may include someone's occupation, buying a home, the weather, good luck, healing, fertility, protection, and more. Unlike the popular depictions of Wiccans in film and TV, the guiding rule which most Wiccans follow is "harm no one, do what you will." As such, magic is never to be used as an instrument of harm but can otherwise be performed as individualistically as desired.

Covens. Although Wiccan practices are highly individualistic, many choose to unite with other Wiccans in collectives called **covens**. In covens, Wiccans partake in fellowship, offer advice for rituals, share spiritual discoveries, and participate in communal spells and holiday celebrations. An ideal coven has a high priest(s) or priestess(es) and 13 members total, since they believe the number 13 has symbolic power.

Life After Death. Wiccan views vary, but may include belief in life after death (sometimes called the **Summerland**), belief in reincarnation, belief in the afterlives described in ancient religions, or complete doubt in an eternal spirit or afterlife.

The Wheel of the Year. Many Wiccans participate in eight festivals annually based on the seasonal calendar. They call these festivals **sabbats**, a term borrowed from the Hebrew *shabbat*, or in English, sabbath. Each sabbat marks a significant event in the solar cycle or the midpoint between events.

Wiccan Practices.

Wiccan practices include:

- magical rituals, circles, amulets, etc.
- prayer to gods/goddesses of their own choosing
- sabbat holidays
- dress codes or nudity (in some covens)
- meals for the dead
- communal meals