

LUTHERANISM — *and* — OTHER RELIGIONS



A RESOURCE FROM *THE LUTHERAN WITNESS*

LUTHERANISM — *and* — OTHER RELIGIONS



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1333 S. Kirkwood Road | St. Louis, MO 63122
888-THE LCMS (843-5267) • [lcms.org](https://www.lcms.org)

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Introduction

'NO OTHER NAME'

*“And there is salvation in no one else,
for there is no other name under heaven
given among men by which we must be saved”*

(ACTS 4:12).

Scripture claims that salvation comes exclusively in the name of Jesus Christ. Many people object to this claim of the Christian faith. Instead, they think of Christianity as one of many options.

Such critics often use one of two metaphors to make their point. They might describe religion as a mountain. The religions of the world are simply different paths up to the same peak. Or, they might describe the various world religions as blind men investigating an elephant. One blind man might think an elephant is all trunk, another simply a massive thick leg, while another thinks an elephant is simply a spindly tail.

Both analogies reject the exclusive claims of the various world religions for a view that assumes everyone seeks the same deity, merely from different angles or perspectives. Both analogies also assume that the religious endeavor is primarily about men discovering God without any input from Him. The first analogy assumes that there is no map, and the second assumes that man is essentially blind, lost in the dark.

The second assumption is correct for man in his natural condition; he is alienated and separated from God.

God, however, has not left us without a witness. He has given us a fuller witness than the evidence of His majesty in creation; He has spoken to our fathers in many and various ways by the prophets, while now, in these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son (HEB. 1:1-2). The Holy Spirit whom He sends in the Word and water of Holy Baptism has opened our eyes and enlightened our minds and hearts to the truth of God as He reveals Himself in Holy Scripture. We have a map: His Word, which is also the lamp for our feet and a light for our path (PSALM 119:105). There is no other name by which we can be saved (ACTS 4:12).

The world's religions are not all different paths to the same God; we are not blind men feeling elephants in the darkness. A light has shined on those dwelling in darkness, and that light is Jesus Christ. Any teaching that turns our attention away from Him and the doctrine He has handed down through the apostles and prophets in His Holy Word must be marked and avoided. The danger is not merely a little bit of confusion, but of lies leading down the path to eternal damnation.

In this resource, we have provided a short introduction to the major world religions and the Lutheran confession to their teachings. To be clear: This is just an introduction. If you are regularly in conversation with those of another faith, we encourage you to look at Concordia Publishing House's "How to Respond" series. These books go into greater detail and provide advice on how to speak more knowledgeably to those of another faith. Our hope in this booklet is to whet your appetite to learn more to sharpen your own witness to Christ and Him crucified.

Nones

THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE UNAFFILIATED

Have you heard about the Nones? No, we're not talking about the habit-wearing counterparts to monks, but to those who mark "none" for the religious affiliation category on surveys of religious belief. Over the last two decades, the number of those who do not identify with any religious tradition has increased dramatically. They are often called, simply, the Nones.

History

In the broadest sense, this category includes those who deny God's existence (atheists) and those who refuse to say either way (agnostics). These are a relatively small minority, and their numbers have remained remarkably consistent over the years. For example, from 2009 to 2019 atheists and agnostics have each remained around 2–4% of the American population. However, in the same time frame, those who have disaffiliated (marked "none" for a religious affiliation) rose from just under 15% to 20% of the U.S. population.¹

These statistics leave us with a fascinating question: What does the remaining 16–18% of the "nothing in particular" crowd believe? A significant majority of this group that marks down "none" still believes a divine being exists or that there is some type of spiritual existence. In 2012:

Two-thirds of [the religiously unaffiliated] say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious" (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day.²

The intervening decades have only made the statistics more dramatic.

The cause of the dramatic rise in the Nones is not singular; numerous factors including increasing secularization, the drop in social desirability of the Christian religion and the rise of the

1 Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 31.

2 Pew Research Center, "'Nones' on the Rise" Oct. 9, 2012. pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise.

internet all play a role.³ Now, those who identify as religiously “none” number among the largest religious groups in the U.S.

Documents

Throughout this booklet, we examine the sacred texts of the various religions and how these religious groups identify with their texts. We want to know what external authority drives their actions or inaction.

A hallmark of Nones, however, is the lack of sacred texts, the lack of authoritative documents to guide their faith and belief. They build their system of thought on a rejection of external authority. They object to the external imposition of a religious belief from the outside, apart from their own preferences and desires. Rather than a religion built upon “stifling” creeds and sacred texts, Nones prefer the free, intuitive expression of personal spiritual beliefs and practices.

Today’s Remixed reject authority, institution, creed, and moral universalism. They value intuition, personal feeling, and experiences. They demand to rewrite their own scripts about how the universe, and human beings, operate. ... [T]oday’s Remixed don’t want to receive doctrine, to assent automatically to a creed. They want to choose — and, more often than not, purchase — the spiritual path that feels more authentic, more meaningful to them.⁴

The author of the above quote, Tara Isabella Burton, is discussing a broader category of folks that she called the “Remixed,” who prefer to mix and match their religious beliefs and preferences. The Nones are part of this Remixed group.

In short, the key “documents” of the spiritual practices of the Nones are personal experiences and feelings.

Key Beliefs

Since Nones primarily seek personal fulfillment and meaning in their experiences, their religious beliefs are difficult to pin down. A None might enjoy grandma’s church on Christmas Day, but use eastern meditation for his mental health throughout the week. That said, there are still some key frameworks that guide their beliefs.

³ Burge, *The Nones*, 35–49.

⁴ Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), 10.

The first key belief of the Nones is diversity and pluralism. Pluralism says that we must each coexist without critiquing the beliefs of another. Whereas, universalism says all religions go to the same place, pluralism says that you might be right and the others wrong — just do not criticize others. So, if you find meaning and purpose in life partially in eastern meditation, partially in video games and in performance theatre, all the better. Do whatever works for you.

This leads to a second key belief of the Nones about the purpose of religion. Religion is not about reconciliation with God and therefore also our brothers in Christ. Instead, religion is simply a way to find meaning and purpose in life. Burton identifies “four elements of human need” provided by religion: meaning, purpose, community and ritual.⁵ Religion, as defined by Burton, provides each of these four elements *entirely apart from the existence of God*. The None, then, seeks experiences that fulfill his spiritual needs.

As the Nones tend to focus on religion subjectively — that is, on themselves — so also, the Nones tend to find truth largely in their own feelings. Consider Merriam-Webster’s definition of the increasingly popular term “truthiness,” which does not refer to the truthfulness of something, but to a feeling of truth:⁶

A truthful or seemingly truthful quality that is claimed for something not because of supporting facts or evidence but because of a feeling that it is true or a desire for it to be true.⁷

Something is true when it “feels” true, irrespective of reality.

5 Burton, *Strange Rites*, 30–32.

6 James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 57–58.

7 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “truthiness.” merriam-webster.com/dictionary/truthiness.

— WE CONFESS —

One last feature of the Nones makes the work of faithfully confessing to them quite difficult: They are apathetic about the faith. They do not care. Despite the dramatic efforts of many churches to reach seekers, the Nones are simply not seeking.⁸ They happily live their lives with a general belief in the existence of God or some spiritual force that is largely not interested or involved in their daily lives.

The Lutheran confession to the Nones begins with a clear confession of who God is. And, for that, we look to the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods.” At its heart, the religious belief of the Nones is a belief in the self. Rather than a God who has given us His Word and enfleshed that Word in Jesus, the None believes that his own life experiences and intuitions serve as a guide for his spiritual beliefs.

We confess with Scripture that our own intuitions and reason, all of our knowledge, and in fact our very nature are corrupt from the moment of birth: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (PSALM 51:5). We have all received from Adam, our first father, a sinful and corrupt flesh.

The only way out of this condition is to be saved by someone from the outside. The confession of the Christian church, then, is that this truth is not found in myself, but only in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. He became man, suffered and died for our sins, and gave His Word to us in the Holy Scriptures.

As the following articles in this booklet demonstrate, the question and answer to many of these religions revolves around Jesus Christ. Who is He and what has He done for you?

8 White, *Rise of the Nones*, 26–27.

Atheism, Agnosticism and Scientism

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

History

Atheism, agnosticism and scientism are a few different ways of framing a view of the world that takes any active power or revelation of God out of the equation.

As a positive belief system such as that expounded by “New Atheists” like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, atheism is a fairly recent development. For most of human history, “atheism” has been an accusation leveled at various parties, signifying political dissent or moral weakness. The term *atheos* (“godless person”) arose in ancient Greece, and was actually applied to the earliest Christians who did not worship the state-endorsed deities, which was considered a grave offense, undermining the power and integrity of the state.

While there have certainly been those who have denounced God or “the gods” in every age, the modern manifestation of atheism gained a foothold in the ages of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. While public or scholarly assertions that there is no God would not have been acceptable prior to this age, the Wars of Religion in the 16th–17th centuries gave denouncers of divinity a leg to stand on: If God is not real, then all this killing can stop.

The actual prevalence of atheism during this period is vague and debated: In these centuries when the Christian church still held political and cultural dominance, almost any thinker accused of atheism — even thinkers like Thomas Hobbes whose *Leviathan* claimed that there are no incorporeal (spiritual) realities, and everything that exists is matter in motion — denied the charges. Those who were convicted of atheism could face harsh punishment, even execution.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw the dawn of open atheism and atheistic thought. Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, John Dewey and others openly questioned the existence of God, and numerous philosophical schools that branched off from their writing took atheism as an assumption — that is, without even having to deny God, He was no longer part of their subject matter, let alone a starting point in their discourse.

This latter framework serves as the basis for both agnosticism and scientism. The term “agnosticism” originated during the late 17th century, coming out of movements skeptical of traditional Christianity. Agnostic thought claims to ground itself in reason, not necessarily denying God’s existence, but accepting only those claims about Him that can be reached and substantiated through human reason.

Similarly, scientism, while not a particular school of thought (few would claim to subscribe to “scientism”), comprises a worldview arising out of the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, which excludes God from the foundation and premises of scientific thought, and places scientific thought as the ultimate source of knowledge.

In recent years, many popular and overt atheistic texts have arisen, often lumped into the category “New Atheism,” by authors such as Dawkins and Hitchens. While pop atheistic texts make the bestseller lists, a very slight number of Americans to this day would call themselves “atheists” — as of a 2019 Pew Research study, just 4%.⁹ (Though this is up from 2% in 2009, and in Europe the numbers are much higher.) The numbers for those considering themselves “agnostic” or “nothing in particular” stand at a staggering 26%, up from 17% in 2009.¹⁰

Documents

Since atheism, agnosticism and scientism are not religions, they have no sacred or authoritative texts. However, here is a smattering of the many writings that have been influential in the development of atheistic and agnostic thought over the past few centuries:

***Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume (1779)** —

In this book, Hume presents dialogues between three characters concerning the existence of God, and to what extent humans can come to know Him.

***On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin (1859)** — Darwin’s groundbreaking theory of the evolution of species was a landmark text in modern science, which laid the groundwork for many future arguments against “intelligent design” as a natural testimony to the existence of a Creator God, and against any significance or categorical primacy of humans within the cosmos.

9 Michael Lipka, “10 Facts about Atheists,” *Pew Research*, Dec. 6, 2019. [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/06/10-facts-about-atheists](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/06/10-facts-about-atheists).

10 Pew Research, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Oct. 17, 2019. [pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace](https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace).

***The Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud (1927)** — Freud discusses religion from a psychoanalytical point of view, defining it as an illusion, inherited from our “primal ancestors” and maintained through the enforced silencing of questions and our own psychological need for “wish fulfillment.”

***Why I Am Not a Christian*, Bertrand Russell (1927)** — A talk given by Russell, the text of which was later published, in which he laid out his arguments against belief in God, eternal life and many of the tenets of orthodox Christian theology.

***The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins (2006)** — This book is a landmark book for pop atheism, in which evolutionary biologist Dawkins denies the existence of a divine Creator and describes faith in God as a delusion held contrary to strong evidence.

***God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Christopher Hitchens (2007)** — In this deeply blasphemous book, Hitchens assumes the non-existence of God; lays out a biting case against organized religion, particularly Christianity; and calls for a “new Enlightenment” that would finish the job of killing off religion entirely.

Key Beliefs

The central (and only) key tenet of atheism is that there is no God. Religion may have utility for society, or it may be a great harm to society — but, one way or another, it is a farce or a delusion.

For the agnostic, it is possible that God exists, but He can be known to man only through human reason. This precludes most or all assertions about God’s role on earth or in relation to man, as found in revelation. The basis and limit of all knowledge for the agnostic is human reason.

Scientism simply excludes God from the conversation, claiming that only scientific and technological advancement can determine truth or improve the human condition. In other words, science fills the role of God. The basis and limit of all knowledge is observation and the scientific method.

— WE CONFESS —

CONTRA ATHEISM, our confession is clear: There is a God, and those who claim otherwise deny Him falsely, against the testimony of Scripture, the church and creation (PSALM 14:1; JAMES 2:19; JOHN 17:3; HEB. 11:6).

CONTRA AGNOSTICISM, we confess that “pleading the fifth” is not sufficient. God has revealed Himself in many and various ways, and those who have received this revelation — especially those who have heard the Gospel of Christ — and yet do not have faith, deny Him (PSALM 19:1–5; ROM. 1:20–21; MATT. 10:33).

CONTRA SCIENTISM, we confess that God created and is at work in the natural world, and an account of the operation of nature that excludes Him is incomplete. Any scientific assertion that conflicts with the clear testimony of Scripture, then, must be incorrect and cannot be accepted by Christians. True science and the testimony of Scripture should always work hand in hand (GEN. 1; JOB 38:4; ROM. 1:25; 2 PETER 3:4–7).

For more on the right relationship of science and theology, see the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations’s 2015 report, *In Christ All Things Hold Together* at lcms.org/ctcr.

Islam

A RELIGION OF SUBMISSION

Any conversation of religion is really a discussion of Jesus. Those who confess that Jesus is God in the flesh speak by the Spirit of God. Those who teach something else are imbued with a deceptive and false spirit.

Therefore, the primary question regarding Islam (from the Arabic word meaning “surrender/submit to God”) is its teaching and confession of Jesus. Islam denies that Jesus is the Son of God in the flesh. Islam affirms many good things about Jesus and some historical facts about His life, however it emphatically denies fundamental truths of Jesus, namely His divinity and His crucifixion for sinners.

History

Muslims, followers of Islam, believe that Muhammad (A.D. 570–632) was the final prophet from God. Around A.D. 610, Muhammad claimed to have begun receiving revelations from the angel Gabriel, which he then repeated to his companions who memorized and then wrote these revelations down. These writings became the Quran.

Muhammad began teaching in Mecca and stayed there until the authorities persecuted him for preaching monotheism (one God); the authorities made money on idol worship and pilgrimages. This led Muhammad and his followers to move to Medina in 612, from which place Muhammad continued to experience visions and expand his empire. Eventually, by the time of his death at the age of 62, Muhammad had consolidated much of the Arabian Peninsula under his rule.

Documents

The Quran (also written as Qu’ran or Koran) is the sacred text of Islam. This book, written in Arabic, consists of 114 Suras (chapters). The Quran is about 1/10 as long as the Bible, or 4/5 as long as the New Testament. Though the Quran may appear similar to the Holy Bible, which Christians confess as God’s Word, the differences are significant beyond the obvious differences in content.

Muslims believe that the Quran is the exact words of Allah through Muhammed. Because of this, the Quran can never be

translated, but must be read and recited in Arabic. Instead, all non-Arabic versions of the Quran are considered interpretations and cannot be read as Allah's true word.

Key Beliefs

The Quran says many things about Jesus; 93 verses mention Him. Christians will recognize some of the stories in the Quran, including Jesus' birth of the Virgin Mary (the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran). Mary holds a special place in Islam. She is mentioned 34 times in the Quran. The Quran teaches that God has chosen her, purified her and placed her above all women (Q 3:42).

In the Quran, Jesus teaches the truth to His followers, and He is raised to glory by God. Jesus is called the Messiah (11 times); the Prophet (once); the Messenger (three times); Isa, the Son of Mary (16 times); the Son of Mary (17 times); Privileged and Nearest to God (once); Blessed (once); and the Statement of Truth (once). Yet the Quran denies that Jesus was crucified.

Most importantly, the Quran denies that Jesus is God. The Quran affirms that Jesus was born of a virgin without a father, that He was responsible for several miracles and that He will return at the end of times. Yet Islam denies Jesus' divinity and the reality of His crucifixion.

Islam also denies the inspiration of Scripture, and instead draws a distinct separation between Allah and the creation. This strict delineation is one of the reasons for the denial that Jesus can be divine — a man cannot be divine, since he is created.

Islam's basic tenets are summarized in five pillars: (1) confession of faith: there is one God (Allah) and Mohammed is his prophet (messenger); (2) daily prayer — five times a day; (3) almsgiving; (4) fasting during the month of Ramadan; and (5) a pilgrimage to Mecca according to one's financial and physical ability.

Islam has no official clergy. Any learned Muslim is fit to lead public prayers. Those who lead the prayers and teach the Quran in public are called *imam*, which simply means "those who stand in front." Some imams are paid, especially those who lead larger mosques. There are some forms of Islam with a structured leadership, the most well-known of which is Shiite Islam. The leader of the Shiite community is the ayatollah.

Islam, like Christianity, is an exclusive religion. All who reject Islam are under God's judgment. Yet Islam has historically used the

term “people of the book” to describe the followers of Judaism and Christianity, since they accept the revelations to Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. Islam generally accepts the Torah (first five books of the Old Testament) and the Gospels (first four books of the New Testament) as true revelations, but reject both Jewish and Christian doctrines, especially the Christian teaching of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus.

Salvation in Islam is ultimately based on an individual’s works. The first pillar, confession of faith, must be accompanied by good works (the other four pillars), and those works will determine one’s eternal existence. There is no redeemer. There is no atonement. The only grace given is the teaching concerning Allah’s truth and the encouragement to live a better life. But the success or failure to live a life pleasing to Allah lies wholly on each person. This means the more than 1.8 billion Muslims in the world today must work daily to please Allah and hope that they can outweigh their evil deeds by performing enough good ones.

— WE CONFESS —

INSPIRATION

God inspired men to write His Word through His Holy Spirit. The writers of Scripture were not given dictation to write down but were inspired to write the truth of God's Word through their creaturely abilities. Thus, the different authors of Scripture wrote differently both in terms of vocabulary and genre, all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This teaching reflects the Christian confession that God works through His creation to deliver His grace and mercy to creation.

SALVATION

Though Muslims claim to believe in the existence of Adam, Abraham, Moses and David, they do not truly know or believe in the testimony of Scripture. Adam, Abraham, Moses, David and all others in the Bible testified to the fulfillment of God's love in Jesus

Christ. Faith in Jesus as God's Son and Redeemer of the world is given by grace through God's Holy Word in the Old and New Testament Scriptures, through Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This faith, a pure gift of God on account of the perfect life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, justifies a sinner before God and grants eternal life in the risen and ascended Lord Jesus. This is the one true faith.

TRINITY AND DIVINITY

The Scriptures testify to the Triune nature of God and the two natures of Jesus Christ, that He is both God and man in one person. These are not merely incidental teachings, but the heart and soul of Christian teaching. Apart from this faith, no one can be saved. But to those who cling to Jesus Christ and His atoning work, God promises grace and every blessing.

Hinduism

AN ANCIENT RELIGION

History

Hinduism is sometimes called the world's oldest living religion, and many scholars believe it dates back to 2000 B.C. or even earlier. Unlike many other religions, its founder is unknown. Instead, Hinduism likely arose among the people living along the banks of the Indus River, in what is now Pakistan. The term “Hindu” comes from the ancient Persian name for the river.

Since one of Hinduism's key concepts is that there is more than one way to experience the divine, the religion embraces many different beliefs and practices. There are also many gods and goddesses in Hinduism, the most notable of which are Brahma, the creator and supreme god; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer.

Hindus worship in temples, but they also may have shrines in their homes dedicated to specific gods or goddesses. Today, there are more than 1 billion Hindus around the world, according to Pew Research Center.¹¹ The majority of those live in India, although Nepal and Bangladesh are also home to a significant number.

Documents

Hinduism has many sacred writings. The two main groups of texts are:

Shruti, which means “*hearing*” — those texts spoken by god to people, who passed them down orally for generations before recording them. These include the Vedas and the Upanishads.

Smriti, which means “*remembered*.” This category includes the Ramayana (the epic story of Prince Rama) and the Mahabharata (the epic poem of two warring branches of one family).

Key Beliefs

Hindus believe:

There is one supreme being known as Brahman. Hindus believe Brahman is a real, limitless, transcendent power that pervades everything.

11 Pew Research, “Hindus,” April 2, 2015. pewforum.org/2015/04/02/hindus.

“Truth is one, but the wise call it by many names.” This translation of a Sanskrit line from the Upanishads speaks to the pluralistic nature of Hindu beliefs. Hindus believe that there is no single pathway to the divine, which is why Hinduism has been able to accommodate many different practices.

The soul (*atman*) is eternal, and it is involved in a continuous cycle of life, death and reincarnation (*samsara*). The goal of the soul is to realize its true nature and achieve liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of reincarnation. This is when the soul unites with Brahman.

A person’s thoughts, words and actions determine their fate in their next life (*karma*). Good actions will lead to good outcomes, either now or in the future, while bad actions will lead to bad outcomes. A person strives to achieve *dharmā*, which is a code of moral living that is specific to each person based on their age, social position and other factors.

— WE CONFESS —

While Hindus may accept Christianity as one pathway of many to the divine, Christians know that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation (JOHN 14:6). Unlike with *karma*, where each person must reap what they sow, Christians know that they receive salvation as a free gift. When God looks at us poor sinners, He sees only the perfect life of His Son. Although we are called to love and serve others, we know that no good works can ever earn our salvation.

Similarly, although all people are born into sin, we do not consider illness or disaster to be the result of some specific sin. When Jesus heals the man born blind in John 9, the disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” But Jesus answers, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (JOHN 9:2–3).

Furthermore, Christians and Hindus both believe in the existence of a soul that continues after physical death. But while Hindus think that all living things have an *atman*, Christians believe that God gives souls only to human beings — and that we live only one life here on earth. As Hebrews 9 says, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (v. 27). What a relief it is to know that our future does not depend on how many good or bad things we do in this life, but on Jesus Christ and what He won for us through His death on the cross.

Buddhism

THE PATH OF 'ENLIGHTENMENT'

History

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, a Hindu man born into an aristocratic family in present-day Nepal in the fifth or sixth century B.C. After venturing outside the walls of his lavish home, he encountered sickness, old age and death for the first time. Horrified, he abandoned his wealthy upbringing to seek an answer to the problem of suffering through asceticism. Ultimately, he abandoned asceticism, too, and discovered enlightenment — that a middle path, neither extreme poverty nor extreme wealth, is the key — while sitting under a Bodhi tree. He came to be known as the Buddha, meaning “enlightened one” or “awakened one.”

During his life and in the centuries following his death, his teachings spread throughout Asia and the rest of the world. Forms of Buddhism in practice today include Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. Pew Research Center estimates that Buddhists made up about 7% of the world’s population in 2015, with most adherents located in China and East and South Asia.¹²

Documents

The different branches of Buddhism have their own sets of scriptures, which overlap in some areas. Texts that are traditionally thought to have come from the Buddha directly, or from one of his main disciples, are called *sutras* in Sanskrit or *sutta* in Pali. The main scriptures are:

The Tipitaka (or *Tripitaka*) — This is thought to be the recorded words of the Buddha. These writings include rules for monks and nuns, the Buddha’s sermons, and other teachings on the meaning of life.

The Mahayana sutras — Written later, these contain stories as well as teachings, and Mahayana Buddhists consider them to be among the Buddha’s genuine teachings.

¹² Kelsey Jo Starr, “5 Facts about Buddhists around the world,” *Pew Research*, April 5, 2019.
pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/05/5-facts-about-buddhists-around-the-world.

Key Beliefs

Buddhism draws on some of the key concepts of Hinduism, including that people are involved in a cycle of rebirth (reincarnation) and that their fate in their next life is related to their good or bad actions in their previous lives (*karma*). A Buddhist's goal is to reach *nirvana*, a state of enlightenment characterized by finding inner peace and wisdom.

The Buddha is not a god, but he is considered an extraordinary teacher and example. The different branches of Buddhism also venerate other buddhas, beings who have attained an awakening of the mind, and divine beings who can impact a follower's path to enlightenment.

The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to break the cycle of reincarnation and reach nirvana. The Four Noble Truths are: (1) life is suffering; (2) the origin of suffering is desire; (3) deliverance from suffering can be found by letting go of desire; and (4) following the Eightfold Path is the way to end suffering. The Eightfold Path is a way of life that includes teachings on how followers can have: correct view, correct intention, correct speech, correct action, correct livelihood, correct effort, correct mindfulness and correct concentration. All together, these eight components help a follower learn how to avoid wrong actions, control the mind and gain wisdom.

— WE CONFESS —

Christians know all too well that life is full of suffering. Due to the fall of Adam and Eve, all people are born into sin and face the consequences: "The wages of sin is death" (ROM. 6:23).

However, Christians do not find consolation in reaching some metaphysical — and unattainable — state of perfect understanding. Instead, we find our peace in Christ. Jesus says, "I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (JOHN 16:33). We are also promised that "all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose" (ROM. 8:28).

There is no human way to achieve our own salvation. There is no amount of works that will ever achieve enlightenment. Instead, we confess Christ crucified and proclaim with Peter, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (ACTS 4:12).

Judaism

HEAR, O ISRAEL

History

Any visit to a local Jewish synagogue will reveal a number of differences between modern-day Jews and the Israelites of the Old Testament, not the least of which is the total absence, in modern-day Judaism, of any practice of physical sacrifice of animals.

The Israelite religion changed dramatically between the close of the Old Testament around 400 B.C. and the birth of Jesus Christ. Judaism changed even more dramatically when Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. As the center of sacrifice, the temple stood at the center of the Judaic faith; when the temple fell, Judaism moved to a focus on synagogues and the regular study of the Torah, in light of the Talmud.

Modern-day Judaism has three major strains, though there are many fine variations within each strain:

- › Orthodox
- › Conservative
- › Reform

Orthodox Judaism attempts to live in obedience to a set of over 600 rules found in the Torah, which includes strict observance of the Sabbath, kosher food rules and more. Reform Judaism, however, sees God's revelation as ongoing thus allowing for more diversity in belief and practice. Conservative Judaism attempts to walk the middle road between Orthodox and Reform.

Documents

The Tanach: What Christians call the Old Testament, Jews call the Tanach. The term "Tanach" is an acronym that, when translated into English, refers to the Torah, prophets and writings. "Torah" refers to the first five books of the Bible, "prophets" to the major and minor prophets, and "writings" to everything else.

Talmud: Written A.D. 200–600, the Talmud is composed of two works that comment and expand on the Tanach and effectively created rabbinic law. The original work, the Mishnah, was written around A.D. 200, and the Gemara, additional commentary on the Mishnah, continued for another 400 years. It forms the basis for Judaic belief today.

Key Beliefs

Judaism is monotheistic. The *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Judaism does not believe God is Triune. Jews reject the teaching that God is both one in essence and three in persons as impossible to understand. According to one Jewish apologist, God would not require belief in something beyond rational comprehension.¹³

Salvation, in Judaism, occurs through repentance. Jews reject the doctrine of original sin, as understood in traditional Lutheran thought. Jews believe humanity is essentially good with a proclivity to choose sinful actions. One atones for those actions by repentance, an opportunity afforded to believers on holy days, such as Yom Kippur.

Only Jews must observe the Jewish faith. Only those who have descended from Abraham received the promise; therefore, only Jews must live an observant, Jewish life. The Gentiles do not have to observe Jewish rites; rather, they receive eternal blessings by virtue of their good deeds in their earthly lives.

— WE CONFESS —

The fundamental question is this: “Who is Jesus?” God sent His Son to become man, suffer and die upon the cross to redeem man. In so doing, Jesus fulfilled numerous Old Testament prophecies that pointed to Him as the Suffering Servant (ISAIAH 52–53), the prophet greater than Moses (DEUT. 18:18), the promised seed of the woman who crushed the serpent’s head (GEN. 3:15), and more.

As for the incomprehensibility of the doctrine of the Trinity, Lutherans point out that even the Old Testament points to the limitations of human wisdom: “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable” (PSALM 145:3).

Finally, we also confess that Jews, like all others, need faith in Christ. In the 1990s, it became fashionable for Christians to deny that the Jewish people need to be evangelized, and to claim that they can be saved apart from Jesus Christ. In doing so, these Christians have failed to proclaim God’s truth to these their neighbors, opting instead to encourage them in their blindness.

Lutherans affirm that while the Israelites were indeed God’s chosen people (ROM. 9:4–5), their descendants in modern-day Judaism continue to stumble “over the stumbling stone” (ROM. 9:32), namely, Jesus Christ, who “is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (ROM. 10:4). True life is found only in Him.

¹³ David Berger and Michael Wyschogrod, *Jews and ‘Jewish Christianity’* (KTAV Publishing House, 1978).

Paganism and Astrology

A VAGUE 'RE-ENCHANTMENT'

History

Like atheism, paganism was until recently an accusation rather than a belief system. With roots in fourth-century Christianity, the term has historically been used to refer to non-Christian belief systems. The term always connoted a belief in false gods.

Only since the 19th century has anyone applied this term to themselves or used it to denote any sort of positive belief system. Post-Enlightenment thinkers, desperate for a “re-enchancement” of a world that felt desecrated, became enamored of various ancient myths and histories, leading to movements such as Druidry in 18th- and 19th-century Britain. The 20th century saw the dawn of “Modern Paganism,” a loose descriptor of various movements that incorporate various ancient or fabricated stories and practices.

Astrology has also seen a modern revival. Ancient practices of astrology are more accurately considered forms of early science since they sought answers to larger questions than modern astrology. When the scientific revolution answered these questions better, the practice died out.

The 20th- and 21st-century popular revival of astrology has largely been a symptom of the entertainment industry, with horoscopes being pushed out in newspapers, magazines and through the internet. There is no evidence to substantiate the claims of astrology or horoscopes, and yet, as of 2017, 29% of all U.S. adults (including 26% of Christians) said that they believed in astrology.¹⁴

Documents

As there are no set tenets of paganism, there are no sacred texts, and in fact its “adherents” are often critical of the idea of any scripture or canon.

However, there are many writings which serve as central source documents for many pagans, including:

14 Claire Gecewicz, “‘New Age’ Beliefs Common among both Religious and Nonreligious Americans,” *Pew Research*, Oct. 1, 2018. [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans).

Anthologies of myths and legends, including primary texts such as the *Irish Book of Invasions*, *The Mabinogion* and the writings of Hesiod; and retellings such as Bullfinch's *Mythology* and W.Y. Evan-Wentz's *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*.

Charge of the Goddess by Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente, as well as other works by these 20th-century figures in contemporary paganism, each of whom has their own following.

The writings of Alan Leo, the British author who contributed to a revival of astrology in the 20th century.

Key Beliefs

A central tenet (if you can call it that) of most strains of modern paganism is a rejection of all dogma. For that reason, there are no exact beliefs held by modern pagans as a collective. However, there are certain themes that many pagan movements share.

Nature and individual experience are the only standards for truth within modern paganism. Nature itself — plants, animals, the stars — is sometimes considered a source of wisdom and insight, but pagans reject a God outside of the natural world, working through revelation.

Mythology serves as the closest thing to a canon for modern paganism. Adherents find connections to the ancients or deep and fundamental truths through myth.

Many strains of modern paganism incorporate ritual practices, often revolving around “magic”.

— WE CONFESS —

Throughout recorded history, humans across cultures have found divine meaning in nature — from the trees to the sun to the night sky. Even Christians know that “the heavens declare the glory of God” (PSALM 19:1).

In our current day, which tends to be detached from both nature and the divine, void of any true understanding of the meaning behind the world or any supernatural force that may animate it, many people have become enamored with nature seen through the lens of the re-appropriated belief systems of an amalgamation of past peoples.

Christians believe that God does reveal Himself through nature, but He is not bound therein. God created the natural world (GEN. 1:1) and precedes it. Nature provides enough knowledge of God to condemn, but not to save (ROM. 1:20). Man's salvation is found only through the divine revelation of God found in Holy Scripture and in Christ (JOHN 14:6).

The statistic that 26% of Christians believe in astrology is of note. While checking your horoscope may seem harmless, remember that astrology is false, and false confidence is no small thing (2 TIM. 4:3–4). We cannot know our future or our present from the stars; our hope — in our lives and in eternity — rests in God's divine providence and Christ's redemption.

Seventh-day Adventism

MORE THAN CHURCH ON SATURDAY

Perhaps you have seen them gathering for church on Saturday. They do not smoke or drink; neither do they work on Saturday. Who are these folks? They could be Seventh-day Adventists.

History

The Seventh-day Adventist church grew out of the teachings of William Miller, a preacher during the period of America's Second Great Awakening who predicted that the second coming of Christ would occur on Oct. 22, 1844. When Miller's prediction did not come true (called the "Great Disappointment"), his followers — known as Millerites — split into several factions. One of those factions held a General Conference in Battle Creek, Mich., in 1863, formally establishing the denomination that would become today's Seventh-day Adventists. The church body, now headquartered in Silver Spring, Md., is organized hierarchically with the General Conference at the top of the hierarchy and additional levels — union, local and church — below it. Each level follows a democratic process for determining its policies, procedures, leaders and delegates to the General Conference.

In addition to Miller, early leaders of Seventh-day Adventism were Joseph Bates and James and Ellen White, whose 19th-century accounts of visions she claimed were from God are credited with much of the young church's early growth.

Documents

Seventh-day Adventists subscribe to **Holy Scripture** and the **"28 Fundamental Beliefs,"** which put forth the church's understanding of Scripture.

The 28 beliefs are divided into six doctrinal categories: God, man, salvation, the church, daily Christian life and "last-day events." The preamble to the 28 beliefs states:

Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. ... Revision of [the 28 Fundamental

Beliefs] may be expected at a General Conference Session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word.

Key Beliefs

Seventh-day Adventists take their name from their belief that the second coming of Christ has already begun and their adherence to observing the Sabbath on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. They believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, six-day creation and Christ's atoning work on mankind's behalf.

They do not believe, however, that Christ's work to save sinners is complete. Instead, they believe that Jesus, after His death and resurrection, returned to heaven (called the "heavenly sanctuary") to continue that work. In 1844, the date that the Millerites expected Christ to return to earth, He instead moved from the Holy Place, or the first room of the heavenly sanctuary, to the Most Holy Place, or the second room. That is where He is today, working to purify the heavenly sanctuary, which is "contaminated" with a record of humanity's sins.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that when someone dies, he enters a period of unconsciousness. When Christ returns, those who died with faith in Him will be raised at a first resurrection and will go to heaven. After a thousand years have passed, a second resurrection will occur, at which time those who rejected Christ will be annihilated in "a final death that lasts forever." Every human has free will during his life to choose whether to accept or reject God's gift of grace.

Seventh-day Adventists practice Baptism and Communion, but neither is considered a means of grace. Baptism is an outward show of a believer's commitment to follow Christ. Communion, which is open to all who profess faith in Christ, is a commemoration of Christ's sacrifice and an expression of Christian community.

— WE CONFESS —

In contrast to the views of Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans confess the biblical truths that:

- + Christ's work is not ongoing but finished;
- + Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not symbolic but are physical means by which Christ's people receive His gifts;
- + Faith is not a choice but a gift from God; and
- + The soul is eternal. All souls will be judged and sent to one of only two possible destinations for all eternity: heaven or hell.

Mormonism

THE CHURCH OF THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Since 1980, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) has nearly doubled in size. Members of this organization place tremendous focus on family and adherence to church doctrine. Nicknamed “Mormons,” they are a significant influence in American life today.

History

The LDS church traces its beginning to the publication of *The Book of Mormon* in 1830. The church’s founder and first president, Joseph Smith (1805–1844), claimed to have been visited in his teens by an angel named Moroni who led Smith to the discovery of golden plates with an ancient text written by Moroni’s father, Mormon, in the fourth century A.D. Mormonism spread rapidly through the U.S., gaining sizable footholds in Ohio, Missouri and Illinois.

Smith was arrested multiple times and charged with various crimes in several states. He was murdered in prison in 1844 while awaiting trial for alleged treason against the state of Illinois. After Smith’s death, the church divided, with one faction following its leader, Brigham Young, from Illinois to Utah. Young founded Salt Lake City and became the first governor of Utah and the second president of the Mormon church, which is still headquartered in Salt Lake City today.

Documents

Mormons claim adherence to four foundational writings:

The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, which claims to tell of God’s dealings with inhabitants of the American continent between 2000 B.C. and A.D. 400;

The Doctrine and Covenants, a collection of writings by Smith and other Mormon “prophets” with instructions for establishing and running the church;

The Pearl of Great Price, a collection of Smith’s writings; and

The King James Version of the Bible.

Key Beliefs

Mormons believe:

The Bible is an inspired text, but improper translation can compromise its accuracy. A translation's accuracy can be tested by comparing it to other Mormon documents.

God's revelation to humanity is ongoing.

The president of the Mormon church is a prophet who has the authority to bring forth new doctrine as he receives it through divine revelation.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three different gods with different origins and roles.

God the Father was a mortal who became a god. All human beings have the same capacity to become divine.

The soul is eternal. After physical death occurs, the soul enters a period of preparation and waiting. All souls will be resurrected, but not at the same time. A soul's final destination will be determined by how the individual lived on earth as well as on the period of preparation after death. Only those souls who do not repent after death will ultimately end up in everlasting hell. Some Mormons will have the opportunity to attain the highest level of heaven (which Mormons call "celestial glory") and live eternally in God's presence. Everyone else, both Mormons and non-Mormons, will spend eternity in one of two other realms that exist between heaven and hell.

— WE CONFESS —

Members of the LDS church consider themselves to be Christian. Many Mormon beliefs, however, directly contradict Christian — and Lutheran — teaching. Lutherans believe that God, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, has completely revealed and carried out His plan for the salvation of mankind. Because doctrine is nothing more than the pure exposition of that plan as revealed in God's Word, there can be no changes, subtractions or additions to true doctrine. Church leaders are not the source of doctrine; God's Word is.

That Word is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and in Holy Scripture, which, as the inspired Word of God, can only be measured against itself. Jesus, the Son of God, is coequal with the Father and the Holy Spirit, not three Gods, but one God with three Persons who are distinct but indivisible. The death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished for mankind what we could not accomplish for ourselves: payment for sin and reconciliation with the Father. Those who trust in Christ will share in His righteousness and enjoy all the blessings of being a child of God, including eternal life with the Father. Those who reject Christ will suffer eternal separation from God.

NOTES

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