



ARE RELIGIONS ALL THE SAME?

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Are all religions the same? Are all religions good? These are important and fundamental questions that have been variously asked, but poorly answered.

Given the great variety of religions on this planet, it's important to gain a clear understanding of what exactly we're dealing with.

Firstly, religion is a way of providing moral structure to human existence (what is good, what is bad; what is right, what is wrong). Only secondly does religion seek to speculate as to what comes after death.

All-too-often, people who criticize religion as being incompatible with modern life, focus on the secondary aspect of religion, because it's easier to criticize something that has been labeled a "fairy-tale" or "a myth," or utter nonsense.

As a result, religious discourse today falls into two categories: a thing to scoff at, or a thing to venerate and respect.

But never do we really see any criticism of the primary aspect of religion – that which provides a moral structure to life in this world.

Indeed, the very essence of each religion is found in this moral structure, which should be critically examined. Is the moral structure that one religion provides good for life in the here and now?

So, which religion provides the best moral structure for life? This is a question that no one asks.

But first, a summary of the kinds of religions that exist.

There are [shamanistic religions](#), which function on the notion that spirit-forces greater than the individual must be continually appeased. Here, the moral content is very limited, since shamanistic religions focus solely on negotiating a safe place for human beings within the realm of spirits, who are always more powerful, forever whimsical, and thus harmful to humans.

[Indian religions](#) (Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism) seek to understand the role of the self within the universe. Thus, the moral content they provide is entirely self-centered and therefore self-absorbed. The focus is on finding a personal way to get out of the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth (here the material world is thoroughly evil).

Thus, you have to become your own savior. All the religions "created" in India deal with this fundamental issue, and all of them present their "take" on how to save yourself, or how to get out of this cycle of birth and rebirth.

[Buddhism](#) provides the most extreme answer, because it works from the premise that there is no God -

only natural/universal law - and so the way to save yourself is to find a way to withdraw from the functions of this law and simply stop existing (*nirvana* means, "not being"). In brief, morality is the removal of the self from the material world which is irredeemable because it is fully evil.

The [religions of China](#) (Confucianism and Daoism) certainly grapple with the issue of moral content, but they often get "side-tracked" by politics. Thus, human existence is all about duty and social obligation, which are seen as the glue of society. This makes morality into expedience in order to manage the world properly.

The [native religion of Japan](#) (Shinto) is a form of ancestor worship and is an elaboration of Shamanism. There is no greater moral code in Shintosim than doing one's duty, and entirely effacing oneself. Such is the content of Shinto morality.

Now, which of these four religious systems provide the best moral structure for living in this world?

This brief analysis of the diversity of religions leads us to the three remaining ones, namely, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

[Islam](#) is theocratic in nature, as it maintains the idea that Allah is high and mighty who deigns to let humanity exist only by way of very rigid rules that he has established as proper conduct, that is, the Shariah.

Morality, in Islam, is the enforcement of Allah's might by legal means (the Shariah). Humanity is secondary; which means that Allah does not need people - rather, people need him. He is remote and inaccessible and known only by way of the Shariah.

The good Muslim is one who strictly follows Allah's Shariah no matter what. The prize of such compliance is a materialistic paradise, which is awarded by way of a point-system - the more strict the adherence, the greater the paradisiacal reward. Sin is neglecting Shariah.

There is also a secondary reason for following the Shariah - Allah can get angry if his law is ignored or not properly followed. Thus, strict adherence to Islamic law has a worldly benefit as well - it keeps Allah's anger and the subsequent punishment at bay.

The moral structure of Islam is based upon three principles:

- appeasement of Allah by following the Shariah
- abasement to Allah by following the Shariah
- obedience of Allah by following the Shariah

Given the Shariah, the "logic" of Islam is intimately tied up with the reward system.

Allah keeps a great ledger, in which the names of all human beings are recorded. Daily he records the good deeds (Shariah-compliance) and the bad deeds (Shariah-noncompliance) of each man (largely men - Islam is rather vague about what happens to women after death).

And on the Day of Judgment, Allah will tally up the score and hand out the reward (paradise) or the punishment (Hell). When it comes to mankind, Allah is only and purely a judge. Nothing more.

Therefore, morality in Islam is always personal. It does not concern anyone other than the individual. There is no Golden Rule. There is only the drive to rack up points in this life, through appeasement, abasement, and obedience, in order to win paradise.

So, does Islam provide the best moral structure for life in this world?

Let us move on to [Judaism](#), which is a very dignified religion, because it understands God by way of justice. This justice is described in the Laws, that is, concepts of moral behavior in the world, which are both personal exhortations and social obligations (to love your neighbor as yourself).

The Judaic God is not a tyrant, but is a reasonable being who understands that in order to have perfect justice, there must be perfect understanding or perfect wisdom - one must know the "ways" of God - and these ways are found in the Laws.

Unlike the Shariah, the Law in Judaism is not about compliance but about building moral character (righteousness), because the notion of paradise is either absent or it's very vague. So, in Judaism, it's all about living a righteous right now, in this world.

The God of the Jews is not a tyrant. He does not force himself upon anyone. He understands that in order to have justice there must be free will. People must choose to be good. If they cannot choose, they cannot truly be good. It is a very important difference from Islam (which has no free will).

More importantly, the Jewish God has not tied up His laws to a system of rewards (we only have to look at the story of Job). A good human can and does suffer. Rewards are not part of God's systems. People must be good without an appeal to their baser emotions and desires (which is what Islam overtly offers).

Thus, Judaism has a very high moral content. However, it is a religion that is lacking something essential - something that Christianity provides. Thus, Christianity "completes" Judaism.

[In Christianity](#), everything is about morality. Christianity breaks away from a God hedged by rules and laws, and presents one entirely defined by love. "God is love." No other religion says that.

But how do we know that God is love? Does God simply say that he is love? No, first he says he is love - and then he demonstrates this love - by becoming a human being, through Jesus, who suffers horribly

and dies miserably like some many human beings undergo.

The Christian God is neither a tyrant nor a judge in this life; rather he is like us, because he is one of us. The Christian God knows what it is to be human. He knows what it is to fear, to love, to suffer, and to die.

The Christian God does not set rules that He Himself does not follow. Rather, He becomes a human being in order to show a way of life that is entirely built upon morality - a morality based on selfless love.

Thus, the good works that people may engage in, in this world, are not done to garner points that can be cashed in for a heavenly reward. Rather, the good deeds are done because once love fills the individual so completely (and constructs a moral character which is entirely governed by love), then that love cannot help but flow out to better others. Thus bettering the lives of others is the visible demonstration of this love.

And how does God demonstrate love?

He frees human beings from trying to save themselves. Salvation is simply a divine free gift to all mankind. Anyone can have an afterlife by simply believing in the message of Jesus (the God incarnate). Strict rules are needless and useless. Human beings no longer have to "compete" for heaven.

And why does God do this? Because his real law is love.

As for other religions, using the observation, "you shall know them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:16), we can now ask: What kind of societies have Shamanism, Confucianism, Daoism, Shintoism, the religions of India, and Islam created? What kind of society has Christianity created?

The answers to these questions will lead us to the truth - and it is truth which always sets us free (John 8:32).

The photo shows, "Hope in a Prison of Despair," by Evelyn De Morgan, painted in 1887.

