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Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism,
Christianity, Islam

Among some of the world's greatest religions there exists a wide variety of views, beliefs and doctrines that act in unique support of each system. And while there are many differences amongst these structures, there are often many similarities that can be found as well. By examining and critically evaluating these likenesses, we are able to accurately construct a succinct typology classifying each religion by their nature and principle concerns. For clarity purposes, this typology will be divided into three main aspects of religion; which include: 1) religious nature, 2) views of God, and 3) principle concerns.

There are nine "great" religions that will be the focus of our discussion, and they include: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, and Islam. In respect to the religious nature of each of these religions, there are four main categories that they can be divided into. These categories include: 1) pluralism, 2) skepticism, 3) relativism, and 4) absolutism. Before classifying each religion into their appropriate category, it is first necessary to precisely define what each of the terms mean. By doing so, we can avoid unnecessary misinterpretations, and also aim toward a clearer understanding of why each religion has been given its classification.

The first in our classification list for religious nature is pluralism, which is the view that a wide range of religions can each possess valuable truths. This view emphasizes that it can be edifying to learn from other religions besides your own, so there is no need to be exclusive and only take truths from only one specific religion. Religions that fall under the pluralistic religious nature are Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Taoism.

Hinduism expresses religious pluralism through their central principle view that "many paths lead to the summit." This view can be shortened to say "many paths, one summit." Basically, the message is that there is no right or wrong path to the ultimate summit, which is enlightenment. Each path is unique to the person traveling on it, and each person will eventually reach enlightenment. This view is considered pluralistic because it acknowledges that people have different spiritualities, and thus requires different religious truths or "paths" to obtain enlightenment.

Jainism expresses religious pluralism best through its analogy of "the six blind men and the elephant." In this analogy, a group of blind men are brought in the presence of an elephant, and then are asked to each touch one part of the elephant. After each man had experienced the elephant, they were to report back to each other, share their experiences, and determine what it is they felt. Inevitably, because each man had touched a different part of the elephant (the tusk, the leg, the ear, etc.), they group is in complete

disagreement. This story is used to show how reality is dependent on one's perspective, and how one "truth" from one's perspective cannot be considered to be an absolute truth. It is an effective illustration of why the Jain's believe that reality consists of a multiplicity of truths from different perspectives, not just one set of truths from one religion.

Sikhism expresses religious pluralism by believing that there are many ways of reaching the same God. Similar to the Hindus, the Sikhs believe that there is one summit (in this case, God) and that there are many paths that can lead you there. "Students of the Sikh faith are told to accept all leading faiths as possible vehicles for attaining spiritual enlightenment, provided the faithful study, ponder and practice the teachings of their prophets and leaders. The holy book of the Sikhs (the Sri Guru Granth Sahib) says, "Do not say that the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran are false. Those who do not contemplate them are false." ³ What this means is that other religious systems are not seen as false and invaluable, but rather it is the people that don't consider these other religious truths that are not on the right path to God.

Finally, Taoism expresses religious pluralism with its view that everyone has intuitive access to knowing and following the Tao. While the Tao has a unique set of beliefs on how one can realize the Tao and become one with it, there is no discrimination for any religion that teaches some of the same qualities. For example, in the same way that the Sage of the Tao Te Ching teaches to be just, honest, and humble, the Bible teaches the same principles. The emphasis is not how one acquires these principles, but what is important is that these principles are followed.

The second classification in our list is religious skepticism, and it is the view that due to the nature of religious claims, particularly about the supernatural, we do not currently have the capacity to learn any religious truths. This has been said to be the "weaker" position of skepticism, as it leaves the door open to *possibly* one day uncover religious truths. The stronger position that can be held by religious skeptics is to claim that we will *never* have the capacity to learn religious truth, claiming that not only do we not have the capacity now, but also due to our human limitations we will never in the future have this ability. The religion that falls under the religious nature of skepticism is Buddhism.

Buddhism is categorized under religious skepticism because of the views of its founder, Buddha. Buddha taught that one should not concern himself with God because God is something that can never be known for certain. He emphasized the idea of "noble silence" which means that, "An ordinary person who is still unenlightened might have a lot to say, but all of it would be sheer conjecture based on his imagination." ⁴ Basically, the Buddha found the explanation of God meaningless and also that any explanation of such would contribute great misunderstanding to one's spiritual development.

The third classification is religious relativism, which is the view that there is no universal, absolute, eternal, religious truth. Instead, religious truth is completely relative to 1) an individual, and 2) a society. Individual religious relativism claims that religious truths are subject to the individual, and social religious relativism claims that religious truths are subject to the society. Some have argued that the position of a religious relativist is just a

means of tolerance, however that is not the case. To be religiously tolerant, one must have an opposing set of views. With religious relativism, different views exist however within each of those views shares the idea that it is not right or wrong for others to have opposing views. Religions classified under religious relativism are Zen Buddhism and Confucianism.

Zen Buddhism is considered to be religious relativism mostly due to the fact that it does not contain any absolute truths. While there is a guideline of how one can achieve enlightenment, it is not a set absolute path. Zen Masters emphasize that the truth is not something that can be taught to someone, but that one must be directed toward the truth so that they can experience it on their own. "Koans," or "riddles," were among some of the methods used to help Zen students along the path to the truth. Koans such as, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" and "What did you look like before your mother and father were created?" are examples of riddles that were used to help the Zen student deeply examine the elements of reason. How the student uses their reason to solve these riddles is entirely up to them, the purpose of the Zen Master is simply to direct them toward it.

Last on our list of classifications for religious nature is religious absolutism, which is the belief that there is only one set of truths and only one religion possesses these truths. Hence, any other religion, to the degree that it disagrees, is false. Religions that embrace absolutism are Christianity and Islam.

Christianity clearly demonstrates religious absolutism with its belief that there is only one God, and that there is only one way to ultimately reunite with that God. These beliefs are supported by the Bible both in Matthew 6:24; "No one can serve two masters, because either he will hate one and love the other, or be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and riches!" and in Matthew 7:13; "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it." Matthew 6:24 is supporting that there is only one God, and that nobody can serve more than one God, and Matthew 7:13 is stating that there is only one way to get to heaven while there are several ways that lead to hell.

Islam demonstrates its religious absolutism in almost the exact same way that Christianity does. They believe that there is only one God (Allah), and that there is only one way to ultimately reunite with Allah. Christians and Muslims differ on what that one path is that leads to salvation, but as far as religious nature is concerned, both Christianity and Islam undeniably represent religious absolutism.

The second main aspect of religion concerns the nature of God, and just as the nine religions previously discussed represent the different natures of religion in general, they also share similar and dissimilar views about the nature of God as well. There are six categories that classify the nine religion's nature of God, they include: 1) polytheism, 2) dualism, 3) monotheism, 4) pantheism, 5) agnosticism, and 6) monistic.

Polytheism is the view that there are many gods. It is the idea that there are many divine powers, and that divinity ultimately resides in individual entities or beings. Gods in a polytheistic religion are typically wise, just, immortal, and often manifest in natural forces, matter, and energy. The wisdom and the power of the gods is what forms the cosmos, and each are considered equally divine, uncontrolled by any other entity or power. Religions that express polytheistic views of God are Hinduism and Confucianism.

Hinduism reveals polytheistic traits by the way that multiple Gods are worshiped. In Hinduism, God is viewed as one and as many. There are many individual gods that are worshiped, including Indra, the god of sky and thunder, Aghi, the god of fire, Varuna, the god of cosmic order, etc. There are several of these celestial gods, but the ultimate god is Brahman and it is Brahman that encompasses all gods and all things. Brahman is everything, found everywhere, here, there, visible, invisible, above, below, etc. Brahman is one and many simultaneously.

Confucianism expresses polytheism in the way it holds a role for celestial gods. Because Confucius' system was man-centered and relied on man's self-effort, the goal of life was to live properly within a society. There was no need for a single divine being. The emphasis of his teachings focused on how to live now and had little concern for the after life.

Religious dualism is the belief that there are two gods, one good and one evil, roughly of equal power. A dualistic religion has the ability to blame bad things on the evil god and good things on the good god. Additionally, the dualistic belief can be used to explain the duality of human existence, making it easy to explain why humans are naturally torn on some issues. For example, imagine that you are faced with the decision to go out and celebrate your birthday, or stay in and study for an exam. An angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other are often used to illustrate this dilemma. In a dualistic religion, the evil god (the devil) would be telling you to go out and party, but the good god (the angel) would be equally influencing you to stay in and study. A religion that practices dualism is Jainism.

Jainism reveals its dualistic ways by how it views matter and souls to be two entirely different types of substances. Jains believe that the universe is eternal, and that there are many different celestial gods that can be worshiped, however they do not believe in a single creator god. Followers of Jainism believe in karma and reincarnation, karma representative of matter and reincarnation made possible through the existence of souls. The world is composed of matter and souls, equally uncreated and eternal.

Monotheism is the view that there is only one God, often said to be omniscient, omnipotent, omni benevolent, and sometimes the creator of the cosmos. It is important to note that not all monotheistic religions believed that God was the creator of the cosmos. The belief that there is only one God is sufficient enough to classify it as monotheistic. Examples of monotheistic religions are Sikhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion because it teaches that there is just one single true creator God. Sikhs believe in predestination and that every being has a purpose, while also believing in reincarnation and karma. They believe that the more karmic debt one has, the more lives they will live, and that the less karmic debt they have the closer they are to reuniting with God. It is only once a Sikh has completely rid himself of all karmic debt that he can achieve this union with the sole creator God.

Christianity and Islam are very representative of the monotheistic nature of God. Both religions believe in the same single-creator of the cosmos God, and also hold the belief that once they die they will rejoin with God in his kingdom.

Pantheism is the view that God and the physical universe are equal, meaning that the physical universe and God are one in the same. A pantheistic religion also believes that this God is impersonal or transpersonal. Contrary to a personal God, an impersonal or a transpersonal God is one who is not subject to, or possessed of, a human-like personality. They believe that God is not like a human, and to go a step further, God is unlike anything we can understand. A religion that represents pantheism is Taoism.

Taoism expresses pantheism very clearly in its primal doctrine the Tao Te Ching. Of the five main divisions that the Tao Te Ching can be divided into, the Tao, Yin Yang, The Sage, Wu Wei, and Te, the Tao division is the area most representative of a pantheistic view of God. The Tao states that we are all the Tao, that we should return to the Tao, and that the way to return to the Tao is by realizing we are already part of the Tao. The Tao is said to be “the way” and “the path,” that it has no beginning or end, that it is beyond form, and also that it is the source of all things. Taoists believe that the Tao is the universe, that the universe is the equivalent of god, and that all people are equal parts in the universe as well.

Agnosticism is very similar to the religious nature of skepticism in that it is the belief that due to the nature of religious claims, we either 1) do not currently possess the knowledge to make claims regarding God’s existence, or 2) will never possess the knowledge needed to make claims about God’s existence. Same as in religious skepticism, the view that we do not *currently* possess the knowledge to make such claims is much weaker than saying we will *never* have the knowledge. Saying that we *currently* do not have the knowledge leaves the door open for a shift in beliefs making it the less definitive and therefore weaker argument of the two. Religions representative of Agnosticism are Buddhism and Zen.

Both Buddhism and Zen Buddhism are categorized as agnosticism because of their skeptical position of the nature of God. Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, held the belief that the idea of God is not something that one should concern himself with. He believed that any opinion of God could never be formed because one would never be for certain either way. Instead of concerning yourself with things that you cannot know, one should focus in the now and concentrate on things that can be attained, like enlightenment.

The third main aspect of religion concerns the principle concerns, and just as the nine religions have represented the different natures of religion in general and of God, they also share similar and dissimilar principle concerns. There are four categories that classify the nine religion's principle concerns, they include: 1) enlightenment, 2) reuniting with god, 3) conformity, and 4) role in the cosmos.

The majority of the religions discussed share the principle concern for enlightenment; they are Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Zen Buddhism.

To the Hindu, enlightenment can be obtained through the liberation of reincarnation. Though Hindus do not have a single system for obtaining this liberation, they have the Yogas, which are methods and disciplines that can be used for assistance. By practicing the four Yogas, a Hindu will be able to rid themselves from bodily desires, worldly desires, self-pleasures, ignorance, and the illusion. Once liberation has been obtained, a Hindu is then reunited fully with Brahman, and ultimately has "being." Being is a term used to reference the knowledge that we are all just one being in an overwhelming world in an overwhelming cosmos.

For the Buddhist, enlightenment is obtained through practice of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. By the achievement of these steps the Buddhist experiences Nirvana, which is the salvation from the sufferings on earth and most importantly the salvation from the cycle of reincarnation. Thus, by achieving Nirvana the Buddha has consequently also achieved enlightenment and reached his final destination in the cosmos.

The Jain religion has the principle concern of obtaining enlightenment as well. Followers of Jainism believe that by virtue of following the five great vows of ahimsa, truth telling, no theft, no sensuality, and no attachments, one can liberate the soul by ridding himself of all bad karma. Once all bad karma has been eliminated, enlightenment is obtained and consequently one becomes omniscient or "all knowing."

Zen Buddhism also shares the principle concern of enlightenment, believing that one who searches deep within himself has the capacity to obtain full consciousness through meditation practice. This deep introspection differs from Buddhism in that there is little reliance on written works or teachings. The Zen Buddhist believes that the best way to achieve awakening is to practice just as the Buddha did, through deep meditation and no written works. It is through that method alone that one can gain the same insights of enlightenment as the Buddha did.

Next to enlightenment, a reuniting of the soul with God is the second most principle concern among the nine great religions. Religions that share this belief are Sikhism, Christianity, and Islam.

The Sikh religion's principle concern is to ultimately reunite the soul with God. The Sikhs believe that there is one true creator God, and that once they have broken free from the cycle of reincarnation by liberating their souls from bad karma, that the soul will then be reunited with God for eternity.

Christianity also holds the principle concern of reuniting the soul to be with God, the creator of all things. Christians believe that by having faith in Jesus Christ, that he is the savior and the redeemer of all sins, that God will award them righteousness and award them an eternal life in His kingdom (heaven).

Islam too shares the principle concern of reuniting the soul with Allah. Muslims believe that by living a life pleasing to Allah and by genuinely believing in Allah, that they will be rewarded with an eternal life with Allah in His kingdom. As a consequence of this belief, Muslims are inspired to live a life of good deeds and to genuinely repent to Allah when they sin.

Conformity is the third principle concern of the nine great religions, and the religion that holds this as most important is Confucianism.

Confucianism is a religion that acts more like a set of rules. The primary focus of Confucianism is to lead a life full of inner moral qualities such as ideal relationships, virtue, goodness, benevolence, love, humanity, etc. Confucius developed a grand list of rules in which to follow in order to attain this ultimate state of Jen, or propriety. Confucians believe that the ultimate goal of human life is to live and contribute to an orderly and perfect society, which can only be achieved when there is a universal practice of propriety, the guidelines of which are detailed in Li.

Lastly, the fourth principle concern of the nine great religions is that which focuses on a role in the cosmos. Taoism is the religion that most concerns itself with this principle.

Taoists follow the Tao Te Ching, and believe that the Tao is equivalent to the cosmos and also that everyone is the Tao. The ultimate goal of Taoism is to become one with the Tao (or the cosmos), and that state can only be achieved once one realizes that they are already part of the Tao. By living a life according to the Tao, one learns how to act in accordance with nature and ultimately what their role in the cosmos is. Once one realizes that they are part of the Tao, they then become one with the Tao, or in other words, one with the cosmos (since the Tao is the cosmos).

In addition to their religious natures, views of God, and principle concerns, each of the nine great religions can also be related to four main divisions of philosophy. These divisions are 1) metaphysics, 2) epistemology, 3) ethics, and 4) social aspects. A diverse range of practices and viewpoints are expressed in each division, and inevitably there are several similarities and dissimilarities (as also seen in the typology given earlier). To ensure a clear understanding of what each division entails, it is first necessary to give an intelligible definition of each before attempting to illustrate the individual roles each religion plays in them.

The first division of philosophy is metaphysics, which is the study of reality. It is the study of abstract studies such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time and space. Also related to metaphysics are the ideas pertaining to God, the soul, after life,

reincarnation, and the cosmos. It is these ideas that will be discussed first, in our effort to thoroughly examine each of the nine great religions.

In Hinduism, the idea of God is an infinite perfect being in the cosmos that decided one day to create the world. They believe that multiple gods exist, each with their own unique purpose and characteristics. The infinite perfect being is referred to as Brahman, and is not so much a separate being as he is the compilation of all of the gods put together.

The Hindu term for soul is “atman” and is believed to be eternal and “Tat Tuam Asi,” meaning, “That Thou Art.” The soul is viewed as the equivalent of Brahman (the term that represents of all the gods), and Hindus also believe that the ultimate truth that we are all aiming to is an understanding that we are all gods. In essence, all gods make up Brahman, and Brahman is the equivalent to the soul. Because Brahman is the equivalent of the soul, every soul is equivalent to the gods. Ultimately, it logically follows that if each soul is equivalent to the gods, then each soul is also equivalent to Brahman, which encompasses everything. This order of reason provides a rational ground for a Hindu to believe that we are all gods.

Followers of Hinduism also believe in reincarnation and an afterlife. They hold that one will remain in the cycle of reincarnation until they are able to rid themselves of all karmic debt (also known as bad karma). Once one is able to completely free them from bad karma, their soul will be liberated from the curse of reincarnation and reunited with Brahman, the infinite perfect being.

In Buddhism, the existence or even belief in God are not discussed. Buddha has been quoted to say something of the following, “Do not concern yourself with God because you can never know for certain.” This type of thinking is often referred to as Buddha’s “noble silence” meaning, he chose not to ponder such questions about reality based on the fact that he did not deem them to be capable of leading to true knowledge. This viewpoint is a representation of agnosticism, in that it neither affirms nor denies the existence of god, but rather suspends judgment on both cases.

Buddhists do not believe in any type of soul or metaphysical entity. They believe there is no permanent self or “anatta,” but rather you are a composition of many things. But although there is no belief in a soul, the Buddhists still believe in reincarnation and an afterlife. Somewhat similar to Hinduism, the Buddhists believes that one will reincarnate until all bad karma has been terminated, and once that happens, one will be liberated into a state of Nirvana. Nirvana is also known as the “paradise realm,” where one reaches a state of being unborn, un-originated, uncreated, and unformed. Basically, a person that has attained Nirvana is liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth, and is released back into the uncreated, unformed state of existence, also known as the cosmos.

On the idea of the cosmos, the Buddhists believe that there are three planes involved: desire (the lowest), material (the middle), and the immaterial (the highest). The immaterial or the highest level of the cosmos is infinite, and not believed to have been created by any superior force or power. Similar to how Christians and Muslims believe

that God is an eternal being, the Buddhists believe the universe and everything in it are eternal.

A follower of Jainism is one who believes that there is no creator god. Jains believe in reincarnation and karma, and that once all bad karma is dropped from the soul (moksha) that one can be liberated and achieve Siddha-Sila, or “home of the perfect ones.” Although Jainism does not teach about any creator god, it does state that everyone who achieves Siddha-Sila becomes a god.

Jains believe that souls are inherent, eternal, and that all have the potential to reach divinity. They hold that everything has a soul, including plants and animals, but that only humans possess the ability to become a god. Once one has become a god, they have achieved salvation from the curse of reincarnation, and now reside in a state of ultimate bliss and highest heaven – detached from the world and one with the cosmos.

The cosmos, according to Jainism, have the same properties as that of the Buddhist belief in that it is eternal and was never created. Jains believe that the cosmos contain infinite souls, which make up every single space of existence within it. There is no space in the cosmos that lacks a soul, and therefore the idea of the cosmos for Jainism is representative of all souls.

Sikhism is a religion that believes in on single God who is the creator of all things. This God is representative of the Abrahamic God, the God of Islam, who shares the same properties and serves as reason to believe the world is true. The Sikhs believed that one should be completely dwelling in God, practicing Simran (remembrance of God by repetition of his name), and that one should not torture their body because it is “the God built palace.”

Regarding the soul, the Sikhs believed it to be immortal and that it suffers the cycle of reincarnation until it is rid of all bad karma. Once all karmic debt is removed, the Sikhs believe that the soul will reunite with God, the creator of the cosmos, and reside in the highest level of existence never to return to the cycle of death and rebirth.

Zen Buddhists, similar to Buddhists, hold a very skeptical and agnostic view of God. Following the teachings of Buddha more strictly than the Buddhists, the Zen Buddhists believe that the idea of God should not be considered, for there is never going to be a right or wrong answer. Taking time to ponder the existence of God does not move one closer to true knowledge. Zen Buddhists are very focused on staying on the path to enlightenment, and do not view the existence (or lack of existence) as a means to get there.

Also similar to the Buddhists, the Zen Buddhists do not believe in a soul. This is primarily due to the fact that Buddha never discussed a soul, and so therefore they do not deem it as a worthy topic to reflect on. If Buddha was able to achieve enlightenment without the idea of a soul, then so should we and thus is the view of the Zen Buddhist.

Contrary to Buddhism, Zen Buddhism does not believe in reincarnation or an afterlife. Zen Buddhists do share the principle concern for enlightenment, however this “version” of enlightenment is more a term to describe how everything is interconnected with the cosmos. With everything fused with the cosmos, there is no essential “death and rebirth” cycle. Although there is in fact death and rebirth, they are not, as commonly viewed, an entering and leaving of the cosmos. Death and rebirth are a part of what makes up the cosmos. Everything is one and one is everything. There is nothing that is found to be apart from the cosmos.

Confucianism is a religion that also did not believe in any creator god, however Confucians did believe that there were many celestial gods that exercised power over the living. Although he did not talk about it much, Confucius had no problem observing signs from heaven and deceased ancestors, and these doings from heaven were more assumed to be real rather than imaginary.

Because Confucianism emphasized social order rather than a way to God or enlightenment, it is viewed to be more of an ethical system rather than a religion. Confucius never spoke of a soul, an afterlife, or reincarnation, but instead, he offered a system insisting on propriety and ancestor worship, a system which he believed would lead to the ultimate human goal – a perfect society. To Confucius, the soul was the sum of one’s relationships, and that to be human was to live orderly in a society performing the appropriate roles. That was the highest aim for humans, thus there was no need to discuss any afterlife. Humanity is connected to the cosmos, and they are one in the same.

The Tao religion teaches that the “Tao” is the eternal Supreme Being. There is no creator god, no afterlife, no beginning and no end. The Tao is the “source of 10,000 things,” intangible, and barely known. The Tao flows everywhere, encompasses all things, and is one thing comprised of many.

Taoists also believe in an eternal soul that is subject to a type of reincarnation. Reincarnation is different for the Taoist in that it does not focus on “bad karma,” but rather describes life and death as “being born of not being.” Because the Tao is everywhere and everything, the Tao is also life and death simultaneously. When you are born you are parts of the Tao and when you die you are parts of the Tao, everything is always one and there is never a time when something is separate from the Tao. Afterlife is the same as life, the same as birth is equivalent to death.

Christianity is a religion teaching that there exists only one God who is the creator of the cosmos and everything in it, Christians believe that God is the eternal, Supreme Being who is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omni benevolent (perfectly good). He is the creator of heaven, earth, and everything in between.

Christians believe that the soul is immortal and does not undergo reincarnation of any kind. Upon death, a soul either earns an eternal life in heaven, reunited with God in His kingdom, or it is cast into a place without the presence of God, usually referred to as hell, for all of eternity. A Christian believes that the only way to obtain salvation from God

and a passage into Heaven is to have faith that Jesus Christ is the savior and the redeemer of all sins. If and when salvation is earned, it is nothing that one has earned on his own, but rather something that has been awarded entirely by the grace (or kindness) of God. All Christians believe that they are innately sinners, and that the only way these sins can be made right is by believing that Jesus Christ sacrificed his life for them (paying the price, squaring the debt, etc.). In short, Christians believe that all people are sinners, that Jesus paid the price of those sins, and that by having faith that Jesus did such a thing makes them righteous in God's eyes and therefore is worthy of an eternal life in heaven united with God.

Islam is very similar to Christianity it teaches of the same single creator of the cosmos God, and that the soul is immortal – either cast into heaven or hell. One difference between Islam and Christianity is that Muslims believe that salvation can be earned by good acts, as opposed to the Christian view that salvation is a gift of God's grace. Another difference between the two religions is that Muslims do not believe that Jesus is the redeemer of all sins. They believe that Jesus existed, that he was a Son of God, but they are skeptical on whether that is equivalent to saying that “we are all God's children.” In fact, Muslims find it entirely inappropriate for one to refer to themselves as children of God.

The second division of philosophy is epistemology, which is the study of knowledge with its regards to its methods, validity, and scope. It is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion. Also related to epistemology sources and extent of knowledge, faith, and enlightenment, and it is these specific areas that we will use to further examine these nine great religions.

In Hinduism, the Jnana Yoga is the method used to acquire intellect and knowledge. It focuses on both things that are never changing versus those that are fleeting, and continually questions what is merely appearance versus what is true reality. Jnana Yoga helps guide a Hindu how to realize the truth in daily existence, and is purely a means of understanding and obtaining awareness for existence. Jnana Yoga helps one gain insight into the essence of things, rather than seeing things (or themselves) as independent beings.

Bhakti Yoga is the most popular Hindu yoga and represents a devotion and love to God. It teaches the ways to practice spiritually, and aims at forming a divine, loving union with God. Bhakti Yoga addresses the “Creative Deception,” and how we rationally know God as one way (for example, transpersonal, omnipresent, without need, formless, etc.), however we often refer to God in a much different way in order to properly devote to him (for example, personal, in a location, in need of our devotion, having a form, etc.). A common analogy used to describe this deception is “I want to taste the sugar, I do not want to be the sugar.”

Raja Yoga is often referred to as the “ultimate yoga,” and is a yoga of deep meditation. It encompasses eight steps that help achieve enlightenment, and are the following: 1) 5 Abstentions, 2) 5 Observances, 3) Overcome Bodily Distractions, 4) Controlling Breath,

5) Turn Inward, 6) Concentration on a Focal Point, 7) Lose Your Subject, and 8) Samhadi.

The first step, or the 5 Abstentions states that one following Raja Yoga should abstain from harm, lying, stealing, sensuality, and greed. The second step, the 5 Observances, state that one should practice self-control, contemplation of the divine, studiousness, self-contentment, and cleanliness. The third step, Overcome Bodily Distractions, says that one should practice Hatha Yoga, 84 asnas, and careful control of the body. The fourth step, Controlling Breath, says that one should be a master of rhythms (prana), counting, and place control. Different ways to practice controlled breathing is outside-in, easy-difficult, and to overcome limitations. The fifth step, Turn Inward, says to control the senses and entirely overcome distractions using a very high degree of focus. Basically, the fifth step teaches that by not allowing your senses to distract you will bring you to focus. The sixth step, Concentration on a Focal Point, is a means of still using a tool to focus your concentration, but you are not quite there yet. The seventh step, Lose Your Subject, is when you have object distinction. You have escaped the illusion and achieved a deep meditation. The eighth and final step is Samhadi, which can be translated to mean "Together with The Lord." By this step, one has moved beyond form and limit and has reached the highest Lord.

Buddhism is a religion that uses reasoning and experience to gain knowledge that will lead them on the road to truth, which is the path of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddhist has faith in the Four Noble Truths because of what the Buddha had experienced and passed onto them. These four truths consist of 1) Dukka (suffering), 2) Tanha (desires), 3) The End of Tanha is the End of Dukka (ultimately freeing yourself from the attachments of the world), and 4) the Noble 8-Fold Path (eight final steps to attaining enlightenment). It is believed by the Buddhist that by faith in these truths, ontological and phenomenological knowledge arises, while sufferings and desires diminish.

The source of enlightenment for the Buddha is the Noble 8-Fold Path, or the fourth path in the Four Noble Truths. The Noble 8-Fold Path consists of eight steps which are 1) right views, 2) right intent, 3) right speech, 4) right conduct, 5) right livelihood, 6) right effort, 7) right mindfulness, and 8) right concentration. By following this path, a Buddhist believes he can achieve enlightenment, which leads to liberation, which then leads to Nirvana, the ultimate end to all sufferings.

Jainism is a religion that believes it can obtain its knowledge through sense perception and valid testimony. By use of these methods, the Jain can achieve provisional and tentative knowledge of all things.

The Jain's source of faith comes from a comprehension of sacred love, course study, religious exercises, nature, instruction, command, study of the sutras, suggestion, reality, and brief exposition. Practicing each of these methods is sufficient for a Jain to build good karma, which assists them in the liberation of bad karma.

In order to be completely liberated from bad karma, the Jain believes he must practice kindness, reparation, and the Five Great Vows, which include 1) ahimsa, 2) truth telling, 3) no theft, 4) no sensuality, and 5) no attachments. Full adherence to these sources of liberation will help the Jain fully rid himself from bad karmic debt, and ultimately break free from the curse of reincarnation.

Sikhism is a religion that gains its knowledge from the Nanak Doctrine, which emphasizes on perception, inference, and verbal testimony. The Sikhs believe that by adhering to these sources of knowledge, one can be led to the path to unity with God.

A Sikh's faith in God comes from God's existence in general and all he has created when he created the cosmos. From this faith the Sikh's are able to overcome obstacles of social objects and worldly things, by following his teachings and the teachings of the Gurus (inspired, enlightened teachers of God).

Ultimately, once a Sikh has obtained his spiritual union with God, he is free from all karmic debt and can proceed to salvation and an eternity united with God in his kingdom.

Zen Buddhism is a religion that believes knowledge can be obtained through deep introspection and meditation alone. The Zen Buddhists believes that by dealing with the irrational, one is able to experience the beyond. Participants in the religion focus on mysticism, believing that reason and the senses are not accurate representations of reality. They are subtle, esoteric, ineffable, and unable to grasp with the mind. By utilizing this method of deep meditation, a Buddhist believes he is able to gain self-knowledge that will help lead him to the path of enlightenment.

The faith that Buddhists have in the path to enlightenment comes from the life of Buddha and the idea that Buddha was able to achieve enlightenment through deep introspection. In addition to the life of Buddha, faith is broadly applied to the Zen Buddhist by virtue of doubt and uncertainty – meaning, “extensions of faith must subsume doubt. This orientation subtly departs from most conceptions of faith that regard faith as self-willed certainty within mystery. In other words, direct experience or intellectual validation being absent, mystery itself is pointed to as a type of invitation to unwavering certainty. One is invited to be certain as an affirmation of their faith. Zen on the other hand generally embraces doubt as a non-dual aspect of reality and illumination. Being laden with uncertainty, reality contains faith and doubt as one thing. The Zen practitioner is encouraged to doubt as an extension of faith in the Buddha-nature of all beings.”¹

To obtain enlightenment, Zen Buddhists use methods of Roshi, Zazen, and Koans. A Roshi is an enlightened teacher. Although Zen Buddhists believe that one cannot be taught the truth, they believe that one must be shown the truth and directed towards it so that you can experience it. Zazen is a word used to describe a “seated meditation.” A Zen Buddhist practicing Zazen will be seated in a lotus position with his eyes half closed, attempting to achieve the deepest and ultimately negative meditative state. Koans are another method used by Zen Buddhists on their path to enlightenment. They are riddles or puzzles that a Roshi will tell a monk in an attempt to get the monk to deeply examine

the elements of reason. Combining all of these efforts, a Zen Buddhist believes that he will eventually reach Satori, the ultimate goal. Satori is when enlightenment comes like a lightning bolt, leaving you with the ability to do worldly tasks with your mind and remain in a meditative state in everything that you do.

Confucianism is a religion that believes knowledge is attainable through past ways and ancient rituals. Confucian believed that if everyone in a society was taught right propriety from childhood, and if every aspect of society (such as plays, musicals, art, etc.) followed and demonstrated these rules of propriety, then children would learn from their parents, and their children from their parents, etc. Through ancient rituals, every member of society would attain Chi, the proper ways of doing things all of the time.

Confucianism's source of faith comes from the ideal life of a Chun Tzu. A Chun tzu is one who is a superior person, fully mature, a gentleman with grace, manners, and a deep understanding of propriety. He is a man that is filled with sincerity, honesty, has no violence, no arrogance, no coarseness or impropriety. Confucius believed that the ultimate goal of humans was to live in a perfect society, and he believed that society would have to consist of only chun tzu's.

The idea of an ideal chun tzu is incorporated in the Confucian aspect of Jen, which is the root of all Confucian beliefs. A person who has reached the state of Jen would be the ultimate contributor to a perfect society, and Confucius says would possess inner moral qualities such as ideal relationships, virtue, goodness, benevolence, righteousness, etc. Jen is the root of Confucianism and the ultimate means of which is necessary to form a perfect ideal society.

A Taoists source of knowledge comes directly from the Tao itself. Because the Tao is the cosmos, and everything in the cosmos is also the cosmos, then by learning from the cosmos one is on the path to realizing that they are one with the Tao. In the journey to realize that one is already part of the Tao, it is necessary to look at nature and the way things work in order to gain an understanding on how to not disturb the natural course of the Tao (ultimately becoming one with the Tao).

Enlightenment for the Taoist comes from understanding one's self, deep enough to know that they are part of the Tao. As soon as someone has realized they are part of the Tao, they can finally become one with the Tao again and achieve complete enlightenment (for just to realize one is already part of the Tao is not suffice for enlightenment, it is merely a step closer to it).

Christianity is a religion that gains its knowledge through the Bible, by which they believe was written by messengers of God. For Christians, the bible contains the truth, and so they use that book as their guide to make sense of the world. Christians are also encouraged to study the bible deeply and gain a deep understanding of it, so that they have the ability to spread the word of the gospel to others.

Faith for Christians is inspired by the life of Jesus and the claims of all he has done for the world. Jesus is said to have been sent from God to “take away the sins of the world” – and so the life of Jesus is proof of God’s fulfillment of the covenant, and ultimately gives Christians faith to not only believe in the bible and Jesus, but to live according to the standards God has set for them.

Ultimate enlightenment for the Christian is to receive salvation from God and join with him in Heaven for eternity. This salvation can only be reached by means of grace from God, and is not something that the Christian can earn on his own. One must have faith in Jesus Christ that he is the Lord and savior, and it is through that faith in Jesus that God will grant salvation and a life of eternity in Heaven.

For the Islam religion, knowledge is acquired much like it is for the Christian, through the word of God recorded in the Bible. The Bible is the truth, and a way of making sense of the world. Faith for the person of the Islamic religion is by the life of Jesus and it is through the life of Jesus that one acquires gratitude and complete submission to God.

For the Muslim, salvation from God is achieved through good acts. Muslims believe that by having proper moral conduct, as taught in the bible, God will deem them righteous and accept them into Heaven for eternity. This belief differs from the Christian who believes that salvation is obtained solely by means of grace.

The third branch of philosophy is ethics, which is the study of moral principles that govern person’s behavior. Characteristics of religion such as their primary tenets, principles, and rules are the more specific ethical areas and what we will examine to evaluate the nine great religions.

The primary beliefs of the religion Hinduism is that the world is based off of karma and Samsara (the wheel of rebirth). By believing that enlightenment will be obtained after multiple lives is inspiration for a Hindu to strive for a just and moral life, in hopes of reaching the liberated state sooner than later.

The core principles of Hinduism focus on the belief that all actions have repercussions. This is very influential for the Hindu, encouraging them to do well by following the general rules and regulations, which are: good acts done disinterestedly, selflessly, and emotionally detached.

The primary tenet of the Buddhist religion is that all suffering is caused by desire. By ridding one’s self of desires, he can begin on the path to enlightenment. The act of ultimately freeing one’s self from the attachments of the world is the core principle of the Buddhist religion, and can be done so by following the path of the Four Noble Truths. The rules to follow that are included in the Four Noble Truths include ridding one’s self from suffering, from desires, from suffering and desires, and then eventually following the 8-Fold Path which includes rules such as right views, right intent, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and finally, right concentration.

The principle aim of Buddhism is to end suffering, end desires, end rebirth, and eventually reach the destination of enlightenment.

Similar to Hinduism, the primary tenet for Jainism is the belief that rebirth is the accumulation of bad karma. The more bad karma one accumulates, the more lives the will live, etc. The core principle of Jainism is that one can be released from the cycle of rebirth by ridding themselves of bad karma. In order to fully rid one's self from karmic debt, one must make good karma by following the Five Great Vows and also follow the Vows for the Layman. These vows include: ahimsa, truth telling, no theft, no sensuality, no attachments, never knowingly harm sentient life, don't lie, don't steal, don't be unchaste, check greed, avoid temptation, limit the number of things in daily use, be on guard against evil, meditate, observe special self-denial, spend days as a monk, and give alms. Adhering to each of these rules is how the Jain believes he can obtain enlightenment.

The primary tenet of Sikhism is the belief that egoism creates bad karma. By creating bad karma, one is destined to stay in the cycle of rebirth until all of the bad karma is gone. By living more lives, prolonging their final destination of an eternal life with God. The core principle of the Jain religion is that everyone is equal. Jains rejected the caste system and believed that everyone was equal in the eyes of God. The dominant rule in Jainism requires its followers to be completely dwelling in God. This is mainly referring to "repeating God's name is as good as 68 pilgrimages," which emphasizes the idea that repeating God's name and constantly reminding yourself of God will help one to be completely dwelling in God.

Zen Buddhism's primary tenet was that reason and senses are not accurate means of finding the truth in reality. Zen Buddhists believed that they should follow the strict ways of the Buddha, using only methods that he used and rejecting any form of written instruction on how to obtain enlightenment. The Buddhist religion has rules such as respecting property, honesty and truth, proper care of body and mind, loving relationships, and no lust. Adhering to these guidelines, similar to the adherence of the rules of the Buddha and the Hindu, will result in less rebirths and an end to the cycle forever.

Confucianism's primary tenet is that it holds the view that practice is more important than belief. In other words, it is more important for the Confucian to act according to certain principles than to believe that those principles are the truth. This is consistent with Confucian's aim at the perfect society and that it could be obtained if everyone conformed to the principles of Jen. The principles of Jen pertain to inner moral qualities and include ideal relationships, virtue, goodness, benevolence, righteousness, love, and humanity. Following these principles will lead a Confucian to the ultimate state of Jen, however it by following the rules of Li, or propriety, that will lead a society to perfection. The main aspects of Li include Shu (reciprocity), rectification of names, Doctrine of the mean, Five Constant Relationships, and Hsiao (filial piety). These five key aspects of Li help shape a society to be more orderly, and ultimately more perfect.

The primary tenet of Taoism is the Tao itself, and the belief that everything is one with the Tao. Taoists believe that in order to become one with the Tao that one must first acknowledge that he is already part of the Tao to begin with. The foundation of the Tao religion is the Tao Te Ching itself, written by Lao Tzu. The Tao Te Ching is a small volume of metaphors that Lao Tzu documented before leaving town. The metaphors of the Tao Te Ching can be translated into insightful guides to life as well as an understanding for the cosmos as a whole.

Christianity's primary tenet is the belief that Jesus is the messiah and the redeemer of all sin. This belief is cultivated by use of the bible, and by reading and understanding all of the promises that God has fulfilled. There are 10 rules that God gave, called the Ten Commandments, which all Christians are expected to adhere to. They are: 1) You shall have no other gods before Me, 2) You shall not make for yourself a carved image--any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth, 3) You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, 4) Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, 5) Honor your father and your mother, 6) You shall not murder, 7) You shall not commit adultery, 8) You shall not steal, 9) You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor, and 10) You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's.

The primary tenet of the Islamic religion is very similar to that of the Christian religion. Muslims believe that Allah is the only God, and derive their ethical standards from the Koran. Expanding on the ten commandments of the Christian, Muslims are to "walk the straight path" by adhering to the Five Pillars the God revealed to Muhammad. These pillars are: 1) Shahadah (the profession of faith), 2) Qiblah (prayer), 3) Zakat (alms), 4) Ramadan (month of fasting), and 5) Pilgrimage. And while each of these pillars clearly defines what it entails, there are additional general prohibitions that naturally come with the pillars, such as: do not gamble, do not steal, do not lie, do not eat pork, do not drink intoxicants, do not have extra marital sex, etc. Although there seems to be several more rules for the Muslim than there is for the Christian, it may actually be due to the fact that the rules are more articulated, whereas for the Christian the same rules apply but are more acquired by inference rather than an actual list.

The fourth and final philosophical aspect to cover in the evaluation of the nine great religions is the social aspect of each religion, including congregation, ritual, sacrifice, and social class. By covering each of these areas in each religion we will be able to easily see the similarities and dissimilarities between them.

In Hinduism, followers congregate in a temple where they recite scriptures and sing songs of worship. They heavily emphasize on ritual, and it is considered to be the most important aspect of the Hindu belief. The daily ritualistic practice of puja is very common and is comprised of three parts, 1) darshana, 2) bhog, and 3) prasada. While puja is performed in a sacred corner in the home, its intent is to keep Hindus aware of their family gods and mindful of their duties as individuals. The first step of puja is darshana, which is seeing the family deity. The second part is bhog, which is when the worshiper

offers flowers, fruits, and cooked foods. The third and final step of puja is prasada and is the retrieval of the blessed food and consuming it. There are also very special rituals of sacrifice that only Brahmin can perform, because they are so complex and elaborate. These rituals performed by the Brahmin are called the shrauta rituals. ²

The social class of the Hindu religion is best explained by the onion metaphor. If you can imagine an onion cut in half, and that you are staring down at its inside rings, the rings would be representative of every different part of you, while the onion itself represents “you.” Now imagine the outermost ring to be representative of your profession, the next inner ring would be your possessions, the next ring would represent your social status, next your family, next your personality, and ultimately, once the center of the onion is reached, that is where your soul or your “true” self exists. It is your soul, your atman, your Brahman. All of the other things are not actually “you,” they are just externalities that surround your true self and who you really are.

Followers of Buddhism typically meet in a Buddhist Temple where they learn Buddhism and participate in chants and meditation. While some Buddhists may meet there often, there is no set time or day where a Buddhist is expected to go. The Temple operates on a “go as often as you like” schedule and Buddhists do just that.

Typical Buddhist rituals include meditation, mantras, mudras, prayer wheels, monasticism, pilgrimages, and veneration. These rituals are very common and are generally practiced by every Buddhist following the path to enlightenment. While there are no animal sacrifices made in Buddhism, there are plenty of human sacrifices that are made such as desires. Although it is the Buddhist belief that desires contribute to suffering, until a Buddhist reaches the third noble truth, they are still in a stage where they feel they are sacrificing something for a greater good. Buddhists also believed that everyone was equal and rejected the caste system entirely.

Members of Jainism generally meet in a Jain Temple, however it is not a Jain belief to hold that worship leads to liberation. Congregating together is more a means to spiritual and karmic development, meditation, offerings, and prayer. Typical Jain rituals include monasticism, worship, and meditation, and do not contain any sacrifice. Similar to the Buddhists, Jainism was also not a supporter of the caste system and rejected it completely.

Sikhs, or believers in Sikhism congregate in Temples where they read and sing scriptures and listen to sermons. Attending Temple is a means of acquiring spiritual knowledge and wisdom and is not a requirement of the Sikhs at all. Also similar to the Buddhists, the Sikhs have no special worship days and are free to attend however many or few services they desire. Sikhs condemn empty ritual and do not believe in a social class of any kind. They hold that everyone is equal and also offer no sacrifices with the exception of personal sacrifice for supreme principals.

Zen Buddhists generally congregate at the Buddhist Temple similar to the Buddhists and the Sikhs. There is no set meeting time, however monks typically meet twice a month to

gather and chant together for the welfare of the Japanese people. Zen Buddhists offer no sacrifices besides personal ones, but only with the purpose of obtaining a higher state of pleasure. Zen Buddhists do have a small social class, consisting of Zen Masters and students or lay people. The Zen Master is obviously superior to the student, but only by the means of his enlightened state.

Confucianism does not have any type of congregation for worship, as it is more a system of ethics rather than a religion. However, although not a religion, there are several ancestor worships that take place as they are seen by Confucius to “bind people together and give social order.” Confucianism also has a very elaborate and methodical social structure, listed in the Li division of the Confucian writings. Li is comprised of five main parts, however it is parts four and five that most clearly illustrate the social expectations of each member of society. From men, to women, children, and government officers, the Confucian doctrine has a very organized method of how everything should be run in society.

Taoism is another religion that does not have a congregation or place of worship, nor does it possess any rules of sacrifice, ritual, or social class. The Taoists are perhaps the most simplistic of all the religions discussed, in that they simply believe that the Tao consists of all things, everyone is part of the Tao, and that the goal of every human is to acknowledge that they are part of the Tao.

Christianity is a religion that gathers at a congregation for prayer and worship, similar to the Sikhs. Typically Christians will meet once a week, while also participating in common rituals such as communion, baptism, prayer, marriage, bible studies, etc. Christians also follow Jesus in the view that there are no social classes, and that everyone is equal in the eyes of God.

Islam is a religion very similar to Christianity in its ways of worship. Perhaps the most obvious difference is the ritual of praying five times per day, seven days per week, and totaling thirty-five prayers each week. While Christians are not limited to praying less than this amount, it is actually in the Islamic tradition to pray this many times.

As clearly illustrated by each of the religions discussed, although every religion may contain metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and social properties, the content of which varies tremendously. From the way that Christians believe in an absolute monotheistic God to the way that Hindus believe in multiple Gods is a clear demonstration of these differences. However at the same time, there are also many similarities between the different religions as well, for example the way that Zen Buddhism and Confucianism are both relativistic religions or how Jainism and Sikhism are examples of pluralistic systems.

One frequently hears these days that “All religions are basically the same.” But this is like saying a new BMW is the equivalent to an old VW Bug. One could easily compare the similarities and argue that, both have windows, both have tires, both have wipers, etc., but it is when we look at the differences that we can really begin to see why one is

superior or inferior to the other. The same basic principles need to be applied when discussing the natures of religion.

To say that all religions are the same is an example of someone that is comparing only the similarities. And it is very probable that if you were to ask that same person to compare a BMW to a VW Bug, they would immediately start pointing out the differences. For someone to honestly believe that such a statement is valid, they are merely demonstrating their ignorance on the subject, and will hopefully some day be enlightened by the truth. That is, that every religion in the world is different, even if only by a small margin.

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