

# Christianity, Cults & Religions

## *Hinduism, Buddhism and the New Age*

### 1. Hinduism

- **Beginning:** Initiated c.1500 BC in North India; no one founder; no unifying philosophy/tradition; Adi Shankara (AD 788-820) is considered the greatest Hindu philosopher, who refined pantheism into the *Advaita Vedanta* (or Monism) philosophy: God is totally impersonal, without attributes.
- **Writings:** Many, including:
  - Vedas ("knowledge") (1500-1000 BC): the earliest Hindu documents
  - Upanishads (800-500 BC): over 100 Hindu philosophical treatises
  - Bhagavad-Gita: an epic poem whose central figure is the deity Krishna (8<sup>th</sup> avatar of Vishnu)
- **Major Types:**
  - Vaishnavism: worship of Vishnu, emphasizes personal manifestations of Brahman (Krishna)
  - Shaivism: tradition with multiple expressions, most significantly Shaiva Siddhanta
  - Shaktism: devotion to Shakti ("power") manifested by the Devi (the "divine mother")
- **God:** God (Brahman) is "The Absolute" universal spirit; everyone is part like drops in the sea, but most people are not aware of this; people worship manifestations of Brahman (gods/goddesses)
- **Jesus:** Jesus Christ is a teacher, guru or avatar (an incarnation of Vishnu); he is a son of God as are others; his death does not atone for sins and he did not rise from the dead
- **Holy Spirit:** The Holy Spirit is not part of this belief
- **Salvation:** Release from the cycles of reincarnation, achieved through yoga and meditation, which can take many lifetimes; final salvation means absorption or union with Brahman
- **Death:** Results in reincarnation into a better status if a person has behaved well (good karma); if he has been bad, he can be reborn and pay for past sins (bad karma) by suffering
- **Other Information:**
  - Many Hindus worship stone and wooden idols in temples or homes
  - Disciples meditate on a word, phrase, picture; may wear orange robes, have shaved heads
  - Many use a mark, called a tilak, on the forehead to represent their spiritual "third eye"
  - Yoga involves meditation, chanting and breathing exercises
  - Some gurus demand complete obedience to them
  - Splinter groups: Buddhism, Hare Krishna, Transcendental Meditation (TM), New Age
  - It has been estimated that there are as many as 33 million gods in Hinduism

## 2. Buddhism

- **Beginning:** Gautama Siddhartha (563-483 BC): Buddha the “Enlightened or Awakened One”; Siddhartha was born into a ruling clan, and was protected from all knowledge of human suffering. Later, he encountered an old man, a sick man and a decaying corpse. The scene shocked him into taking a pilgrimage of inquiry and meditation to find a solution to life’s suffering. However, he became frustrated with the Hindu teachers he found. One day while sitting under a (now “the”) Bodhi tree in northeastern India, he suddenly experienced “enlightenment” or “awakening”, realizing that souls have the illusion of being reincarnated and floating through eternity, bound in ignorance and suffering senselessly in one body after another.
- **Writings:** Triitaka (“three baskets”) (or Pali Canon): The oldest and most authoritative scriptures, presenting Buddha’s life and sayings, saved as oral tradition for 500 years before being written:
  - Vinaya Pitaka (“basket of discipline”): a code of ethics for monks and nuns
  - Sutra Pitaka (“basket of threads”): accounts of Buddha’s teachings
  - Abhidharma Pitaka (“basket of scholasticism”): philosophical works
- **Major Types:**
  - Theravada: emphasizes concentration and insight meditation; practiced mainly by monks
  - Mahayana: all may attain the essential Buddha-nature with the help of Bodhisattvas
  - Vajrayana: Tibetan Buddhism combining many forms/practices of Buddhism (Dalai Lama)
- **God:** Buddha himself did not believe in the existence of God. Others consider Buddha as a god.
- **Jesus:** Jesus Christ is not part of the historic Buddhist worldview. Buddhists in the West today generally view Jesus as an enlightened teacher, while those in Asia believe, while he is not God, Jesus is an avatar or a Bodhisattva (a spiritually advanced person who aspires to buddhahood, but who postpones his own enlightenment to alleviate the suffering of others by his own merits).
- **Holy Spirit:** The Holy Spirit is not part of this belief; however, Buddhists believe in spirits, and some practice deity yoga and invite spirit possession.
- **Salvation:** The goal of life is nirvana (“extinction”): to eliminate all desires or cravings, in order to escape suffering. The Eightfold Path is a system to free Buddhists and achieve nonexistence.
- **Death:** Reincarnation. People do not have their own individual souls or spirits, but after death, one’s desires and feelings may be reincarnated into another person.
- **Other Information:**
  - The Eightfold Path recommends right knowledge, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation.
  - Some Buddhist groups talk about an “eternal Buddha” (life force).

### 3. New Age

- **Beginning:** Some 19<sup>th</sup>-century transcendentalists (Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman) promoted many teachings from ancient Hindu and Buddhist writings; made popular by Shirley MacLaine in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century; based on Eastern mysticism, Hinduism, paganism, etc
- **Writings:** No holy book, but uses information from Bible passages; I Ching (Classic of Changes); Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist writings; Native American beliefs; writings on astrology, mysticism, magic.
- **God:** God consists of everything and everyone. God is an impersonal force or principle. People have unlimited inner power and need to discover it.
- **Jesus:** Jesus is not a savior, but a spiritual model and guru, and is now an “ascended master”. He was a New Ager who tapped into divine power in the same way anyone can. Many believe he went east to India or Tibet and learned mystical truths. He did not rise physically, but “rose” into a higher spiritual realm.
- **Holy Spirit:** Sometimes a psychic force used by some divine men to contact unearthly beings
- **Salvation:** Must offset bad karma with good karma; can tap into supernatural power through meditation, self-awareness and “spirit guides”; new self-awareness is called being “reborn”
- **Death:** Human reincarnations occur until a person reaches oneness with God; no eternal life as a resurrected person; also, no literal heaven or hell
- **Other Information:**
  - Can include yoga, meditation, visualization, astrology, channeling, hypnosis, trances and tarot card readings; the use of crystals to get in harmony with God (energy) for psychic healing, contact with spirits and for developing higher consciousness or other psychic powers
  - Strive for world unity and peace
  - Emphasis on holistic health
  - In 1900, an estimated 1% of Americans believed in reincarnation. Today, it is about 25%.

### 4. General Information

- **Karma (“act”):** The spiritual principle of cause and effect, in which some kind of reward or punishment follows one’s every act, whether good or bad. Thus, a person’s past actions govern his present life, and future lives (reincarnations) are determined by past and present actions.
- **Transcendental Meditation (TM):** Began by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917-2008) in India in 1957. TM emphasizes the 7 levels of consciousness as the path to enlightenment: waking consciousness, deep sleep, dreaming, transcendental consciousness, cosmic consciousness, god/unity consciousness. Gained popularity in the 1960’s with the Beatles, Beach Boys, others.

# Christianity & Eastern Religions



## THE GROWTH OF EASTERN RELIGIONS AND WHAT IT MEANS TO CHRISTIANS

A century ago the average westerner knew little to nothing about East Asian religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. But with rapid changes in travel and technology, eastern worldviews and practices have gained enormous influence in western culture. For example, in 1900 an estimated 1% of Americans believed in reincarnation, compared with roughly 25% of the U.S. population today. With missionary zeal, Hindu gurus and Buddhist monks—such as the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Transcendental Meditation) and the Dalai Lama (Tibetan Buddhism)—have traveled throughout the West to promote their religions. Simultaneously, eastern philosophies have gained many followers, influenced by yoga, feng shui, martial arts, macrobiotic diets, acupuncture, and ayurvedic therapies.

## BELIEFS OF EASTERN RELIGIONS

There are important differences in the major eastern religions, and not all scholars agree on points of history and classification. Still, many foundational beliefs of eastern belief systems stand in stark contrast to the Christian worldview. To see how Christianity and eastern religions differ, it's helpful to understand basic concepts common to most eastern religions and New Age thought:

**Pantheism** is a bedrock of eastern religious philosophy. The meaning of the word comes from the Greek *pan* ("all") and *theos* ("God"). In pantheism, God is not separate from creation. "God" in pantheism is not a personal, loving, creator as in Christianity, but a vague, impersonal force that exists in all things. Although some eastern religions incorporate devotion to gods or spirit beings, they generally reject belief in an all-powerful, loving, personal God with whom anyone can have a personal relationship.

**Reincarnation** is a foundational belief in eastern religions, in which souls go through thousands of births, lives, and deaths. Karma—the spiritual principle of cause and effect—is the negative agent that causes people to reincarnate. In early Hindu scriptures, reincarnation is described as smoke from a cremated soul rising into the clouds, where it falls back to the earth as rain that nourishes plants and animals in the food chain, eventually becoming human again. This is the opposite of the Christian belief that God creates us as individuals with one physical life on earth—in which we can accept or reject his loving gift of salvation—followed by a single resurrection.

**Yoga and meditation** are two of the main ways of attaining "salvation" in eastern religions. Salvation means escaping the countless painful cycles of reincarnation. Yoga and meditation are physical and mental practices developed as ways of reducing one's karma—the attachment to the physical world and our individual selves. In Christianity, salvation is the free gift from God through his love and grace to anyone who will accept it; in eastern religions, salvation is something people constantly work to achieve by their own efforts.

## TALKING WITH EX-CULTISTS

**DO let the ex-cultist know he or she is not alone.** Help the person find a Christian support group of ex-members (many are on the Internet at [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)), and give the person ex-member testimonies to read. (For example, see the testimonies at [www.4mormon.org](http://www.4mormon.org) and [www.4jehovah.org](http://www.4jehovah.org).)

**DO NOT pressure the ex-cultist into church attendance or Christian activities too soon.**

Remember that in the cult, meeting attendance was likely mandatory; so a simple, "I missed you at church last night; where were you?" question from a well-meaning Christian can scare off an ex-cultist.

**DO demonstrate the love of Christ by unconditionally accepting the ex-cultist regardless of his or her issues with Christianity.** Remember that in the cult, it was not acceptable to act or believe differently, so be sensitive to the ex-cultist's insecurity about the commitment level of your friendship.

**DO create a "safe" environment for the ex-cultist to ask his or her questions.**

Never belittle the person's ideas or questions or put them down by saying, "I would never believe ..." or "I would never do ..."

**DO help the ex-cultist feel accepted and normal.** Remember that ex-cultists already feel inferior because of their prior involvement in a cult, and most would not have joined the cult if they had known all the facts.

**DO NOT tell the ex-cultist WHAT to think, but HOW to think.** Remember that in the cult, members were not allowed to think for themselves; so the ex-cultist will need to learn how to research and find answers to the questions they have about God, the Bible, and Christianity.

**DO point the ex-cultist to a relationship with Jesus.** Ex-cultists are hungry for something to believe in and belong to. As a result, people often leave one cult only to join another. Instead of pointing them to your church or another religious association, you must point them to Jesus. Emphasize that he is the only one who can fulfill the deepest longings of the human heart.