

Introduction

While it is debated as to whether the United States was founded as a Christian nation, there is no question but that the vast preponderance of settlers for the first century of our national existence (as well as the earlier colonial period) were from the Judeo-Christian tradition (and almost exclusively from the Christian portion of that tradition). So, while America has long been characterized as a melting pot, for most of its history there has been a substantial degree of religious homogeneity despite a wide spectrum of various ethnic elements.² As a result, while Americans were aware that there were other religions, for the most part this would have really only affected people who traveled

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²David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 21-52.

abroad. Unless an individual lived in specific areas of certain cities, it was unlikely that he or she would ever encounter a Muslim mosque, or a Buddhist temple, or a Hindu shrine without leaving the country.

The past half century or so has been a very different story. Immigration has brought in increasing numbers of adherents to other world religions, and as a result we now find enclaves of different religions not only in the largest cities, but also in many medium sized towns. Places of worship have followed, and it is not unusual to find mosques, temples, and shrines even in such “middle America” cities such as Indianapolis. As a result, it is increasingly likely that any American knows, works with, or even lives near individuals from a variety of different religious backgrounds.

Coupled with this growth, since the 1960's we have been going through a cultural transition sometimes called “Post-modernism.” A key component of this is

characterized by what is called “multi-culturalism” with a basic tenet of tolerance for other beliefs. Unfortunately, the concept of tolerance has taken on political overtones which transcend accepting the individual as he or she is. Rather, the pressure is to grant those beliefs status as truth.

This is evident in how world religions are taught. For example, Segal and Oxtoby note: “Many who take a favourable (sic) view [of religion] regard all or most of the world’s religious traditions as more or less equal in value. Some . . . would go so far as to say that all the world’s religious traditions teach essentially the same things.”³ If that were the case, the value of one religion over another would seem to be just a matter of personal preference. But, if that were so, then one might ask, why is there so much religious conflict? (Of course one could also ask a similar question about many other areas of life, even in terms of

³ Willard G. Oxtoby and Alan F. Segal, editors, *A Concise Introduction to World Religions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

allegiance to sports teams—but that is another issue.)

Corduan argues that while there are common threads, there is a crucial distinction between Christianity and the rest of the world religions in terms of the “utter preeminence of Jesus Christ.”⁴ Given the claims that Jesus made, this is an essential starting point. Our problem today is how do we evaluate those claims? In other words, how do we (or even do we) evaluate the various religions and chose one, or if we have one how do we defend it?

In 1990, as a result of my status as a Naval Reserve officer, I was working with the Commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet in Japan on a special project. During my off-duty hours I began studying Buddhism and Shinto. After Iraq invaded Kuwait, we steamed to Bahrain, where my job changed in preparation for what became the First Gulf War. Now in my off-duty hours, I began studying Islam. The

⁴ Winfried Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 11.

result of those studies ended up as a history of religion published later, and subsequently to my teaching world religions courses at two different institutions. One of the most significant points I discovered during that several year research process was that of all of the world religions I studied, only two even *claimed* to be based on historical events. I have come to the conclusion that this significant fact provides an entree into the issue of religious truth. However, I have also discovered there is a lot of confusion regarding the matter. For example, when I present this material to my students, they almost invariably suggest that the two historical religions are Christianity and Islam. However, as we examine the evidence (as will be done below), they agree with me that the correct response should be Christianity and Judaism. In contrast, every other world religion is based on unsupported assertions of its founder. While this raises some very interesting implications regarding how we might approach the issue of religious

truth, it is first important that we evaluate the validity of this claim. To do this, we will look briefly at major world religions, focusing on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam to evaluate their foundations. We will then look at Judaism and Christianity and contrast their foundations. After this we will evaluate the implications.

Hinduism and Its Founders

While some scholars maintain that Hinduism is “the oldest of the world’s living religions,”⁵ this is based on two assumptions that are questionable at best. The first assumption is that since Hinduism developed out of the religion of the Aryan tribes which invaded the Indus Valley region in the early second millennium BC, Hinduism itself can be traced back to that time.⁶ However, that ignores the

⁵ D. S. Sarma, “The Nature and History of Hinduism,” in Kenneth W. Morgan, *The Religion of the Hindus*, (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1953), 3.

⁶ Louis Renou, *Hinduism*, (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 16.

tremendous changes that took place during the millennium after that invasion. The reality is that the major beliefs of Hinduism really did not emerge until about the sixth century BC.⁷ The second assumption is that the modern critical theory which dates the origin of Judaism and the writing of the Pentateuch to the sixth century BC is valid.⁸ However, that dismisses the Exodus and all that was involved with that event, which we will address below.

Classical Hinduism developed over the centuries through a process that is largely unrecorded. Some of the developments seem to have been in response to various social pressures that derived out of the Aryan conquest. Other developments seem to reflect attempts to reform the system. Many factors from both the Aryan invaders and the conquered Dravidians combined to produce what became

⁷ Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 57.

⁸ Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 267-70.

Hinduism,⁹ but perhaps the most significant were three main collections of literature that were written largely anonymously.

The oldest collection is that of the Vedas dating to the second millennium BC. The Vedas consist of four sections: The *Rig Veda*, the *Sama Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, and the *Atharva Veda*. The oldest section is the *Rig Veda* a collection of 1028 poems which are hymns addressed to the principal gods of the Aryan pantheon.¹⁰ The *Sama Veda* is a selection of excerpts from the *Rig Veda*, apparently designed to assist in the performance of sacrificial rituals. The *Yajur Veda* contains the sacrificial rituals or formulas. This Veda lacks the rhythmic nature of the first two Vedas.

⁹ Michael A. Harbin, *To Serve Other Gods*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 99-101.

¹⁰ Gaurinath Sastri observes that the *Rig Veda* mentions a total of 33 gods, with most of the hymns focusing on Agni, Indra, and Soma. He seems to indicate that other gods are implied, but then argues that all are manifestations of the three key gods who rule the three realms, earth, air, and sky (*A History of Vedic Literature*, [Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1982], 36-55).

About half of the material is taken from the *Rig Veda*. The *Atharva Veda* is a collection of poetry from the priestly class. It consists of prayers or hymns, some of which have a magical character. The focus of this Vedic religion was on sacrifice.¹¹

The second body of literature significant for Hinduism is the *Brahmanas*. This collection of writings from the priestly class (brahmins) delineated the Vedic ritual, especially the sacrifices. They also changed the value of the ritual from a means of expressing a request to a god (which may or may not be honored) to a process where the efficacy of the ritual depended on the skill of the priest who performed it, thus enhancing the position of the priestly class.¹² While their date is unclear, the fact that Buddhist texts show familiarity with them would suggest a date prior

¹¹ Renou, *Hinduism*, 21-25.

¹² It seems likely that this situation is what led to several reformation movements which included Buddhism, Jainism, and actually Hinduism itself as a reaction to the other two.

to the sixth century BC.¹³

The final and probably most important body of literature was *The Upanishads* (in essence, meaning secret teachings).¹⁴ They explain the Vedas and delineate the teachings which became classical Hinduism. It is their composition, which probably began about 600 BC, that is generally viewed as the formation of Hinduism.¹⁵ The number written is unknown but currently 108 survive. Of these, 10-13 are accepted by all Hindus as revealed writings. The *Upanishads* were completed by about 300-200 BC.¹⁶

It is in the *Upanishads* that we first encounter key

¹³ Sastri, *A History of Vedic Literature*, 105-6. He notes that there is no indication that the Brahmanas have any familiarity with Gautama the Buddha.

¹⁴ Swami Nikhilananda notes that according to certain teachers, it means sitting at the foot of a teacher and listening to his words, which in essence means secret teaching (*The Upanishads*. [New York: Harper and Row, 1964], 383).

¹⁵ Renou states that the Upanishads “show a discrete beginning for Hinduism” (*Hinduism*, 27).

¹⁶ John B. Noss, *Man's Religions*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956), 128.

aspects of the religion we know as Hinduism. Probably the key innovation is the concept of karma and reincarnation. According to this concept (which developed in parallel with the caste system), human beings are born over and over. The status of the new life is dependent upon the accumulated moral quality of the previous lives (karma).¹⁷

Modern Hinduism has added a number of other literary works including the *Sutras* which provided guidance on how to perform various rituals, and later several epics including the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad-gita* (which focuses on Krishna). The *Sutras* were written between the Upanishads and the epics which were written in the first and second centuries AD. These epics have been a major influence in popular Hinduism.

Tracing this very complex development suggests that Hinduism is a combination of traditions and

¹⁷ Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 86-90 and Noss, *Man's Religions*, 126-140.

innovations, which in turn became traditions. The various written authorities for Hinduism are the teachings of the priestly class rather than those of a specific teacher. What is clear is that there is no historical event which is the foundation of the religion. Rather, its antecedents were worship of Varuna who is characterized as the creator and guardian of cosmic law.¹⁸ Some have suggested that this points back to an original monotheism which later developed into an increasing polytheism.¹⁹ In any regard, over the centuries, it has added new written teachings which have greatly changed its character, and added so many new gods that today it is estimated that it includes hundreds of millions.²⁰ Hinduism as we know it can be dated to not much earlier than the fifth century BC, and it is on the basis of those essentially anonymous writings that

¹⁸ Harbin, *To Serve Other Gods*, 99-100.

¹⁹ Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths*, 43; Harbin, *To Serve Other Gods*, 112, fn 5.

²⁰ Harbin, *To Serve Other Gods*, 110.

Hinduism builds its truth claims.

Buddhism and Its Founder

Buddhism was basically an attempt to reform the brahminic religion which later became Hinduism. Its founder was Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as “the Buddha” after his “enlightenment.” The little that is known about his early life is based upon oral tradition which was not written down until at least 250 years after his death and which focused on his teachings rather than events in his life.

Rockhill observes “two periods of the life of Gautama are narrated by all Buddhist authors in about the same terms (probably because they all drew from the same source for their information), the history of his life down to his visit to Kapilavastu in the early part of his ministry, and that of the last year of his life.”²¹

²¹ W. Woodville Rockhill, *The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of His Order*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner, and Co., 1884. Reprint edition, Petaling Jaya: Mandala Trading, 1987), vii.

The gist of these accounts is that he was born into the ruling family of his region and was the heir of the local raja (or prince). Local seers told his father, Suddhodhana, that Gautama would end up in one of two careers: a world class emperor ruling over vast realms, or an enlightened religious leader. Suddhodhana resolved that it should be the former and raised his son accordingly. The traditions maintain that Gautama was raised in a hedonistic lifestyle, with special efforts expended to make sure that he never saw a diseased person, an aged person, a dead person, or a wandering monk. At age sixteen, he was married to a beautiful wife, Yasodhara, through whom he later had a son. While the raja's efforts were successful for several years, at the age of twenty-nine Gautama was allowed to travel through the realm that he anticipated ruling. Despite the efforts of his father, during this trip he saw for the first time disease, old age, death, and wandering monks. Subsequently, after thirteen years of hedonism, he

abandoned his wife, his son, and his future throne and set out to be an ascetic.

For the next six years Gautama wandered as a monk through the Ganges valley seeking answers to the issues of life. He sought out religious teachers as well as practiced meditation and a wide variety of ascetic practices to an extreme.²² At the end of that period, he realized his efforts provided no solution so Gautama abandoned his extreme fast, gathered his strength and retreated to the roots of the Bodhi tree.²³ For a week, he sat there in meditation. The tradition is that during the full moon of either April or May of his 35th year (528 BC), Gautama was “enlightened,” and

²² As Khantipalo puts it, “He lived in fearful wilds among the corpse-fields or in dirty places; he refused to wash and wore no clothes; he lived baked by the summer sun in the day and frozen cold in thickets during winter nights; and he lived on minute amounts of food, systematically starving himself until his fine, once regal, body was reduced to mere skin and bone” (Bhikkhu Khantipalo, *Buddhism Explained: An Introduction to the Teachings of the Lord Buddha*, [Bangkok: Mahamkut Rajavidyalaya Press, 1989], 11).

²³ The term Bodhi tree means “tree of enlightenment.” Traditionally, the type of tree has been viewed as a variety of fig called pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) which is similar to a banyan tree.

became “a” or “the” Buddha.²⁴

At this point it is key to observe that Gautama had been born and raised in a religion that was in the process of becoming what we call Hinduism.²⁵ As such, he accepted without question many of the foundational beliefs of that religion. These include a very basic premise that an individual dies and is reborn with his rebirth “body” determined by his behavior in the previous life; the idea that the physical world is illusion or *maya*; and that true reality is what is deemed *Brahman* or the universal soul, as opposed to the perceived reality, *Atman*, the individual soul. According to this belief, the individual soul goes through a process of rebirth or transmigration until the point of enlightenment, or re-unification with the universal

²⁴ Buddha is a title meaning “enlightened one.” One of the items of controversy between the various schools of Buddhism is who might become a buddha. At the time of his assumption of this title, the concept was well known, and more than one skeptic asked if Gautama had become *a buddha* (italics mine). (David Bentley-Taylor and Clark B. Offner, “Buddhism,” in Norman Anderson, *The World's Religions*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 179-189).

²⁵ Harbin, *To Serve Other Gods*, 124-125.

soul (a state called nirvana). Since he accepted the rebirth process without question, his quandary was how then to stop this process of rebirth. He emerged from his meditations with what are called the Four Truths. The first is that the world is a place of suffering. His second truth is that the origin of suffering is craving or desire (which is then the cause of the rebirth process or reincarnation). Therefore, he concluded (the third truth) the way to eliminate suffering is to eliminate craving or desire. To this end, Gautama developed an eightfold path of self-discipline (the fourth truth).²⁶ After his enlightenment, Gautama

²⁶ H. W. Schumann, *The Historical Buddha*, (London: Arkana, 1989), 61-67. Succinctly, the steps in this path are:

1. Right understanding—the individual should accept Buddha's philosophy and reject other, countering philosophies.
2. Right desires—the individual should reject such desires as lusts, and resolve to desire only the highest goals.
3. Right speech—the individual should be truthful and gentle in his speech.
4. Right conduct—the individual's actions should reflect his goals. This includes abstention from killing any living being, from stealing, and from unlawful sexual intercourse.
5. Right mode of livelihood—the individual should avoid any work which produces luxury or harms any living thing. He should strive to use his talents and be useful to his fellow man.

began to teach his conclusions or *dhamma* to mankind.

Gautama's enlightenment draws directly from his experiences of extreme hedonism and extreme asceticism. His conclusion is called the "middle way" because it is the way between those two extremes. This is the essence of Buddhism, and is a logical conclusion that any teacher could have reached. The validity of Buddhism lies primarily in the first three truths. Most people would agree that the world is a place of suffering. But the second and third truths raise significant questions. Is the origin of suffering desire? From a Christian perspective, there is a degree of truth to this since desire led to the Fall of Adam

6. Right effort—the individual should strive to avoid evil, to overcome evil, to inculcate good habits within himself, and to maintain those good habits already present. The ultimate goal is universal love.

7. Right awareness—the individual should be aware of the transitory nature of the body, of the feelings of others, the mind, and focus on completely mastering his own mind.

8. Right concentration—the individual should learn to concentrate on a single object, thus demonstrating the mastery of the mind.

and Eve. But, while desire could be another way of describing the self-centeredness of fallen human beings, the concept of sin goes much further incorporating moral issues, depravity, and actual guilt.²⁷ Further, the idea that this leads to reincarnation is an assumption that Gautama brought forth from his proto-Hindu background. Is the solution then to eliminate desire? While logical, one must question whether it is possible since at least some desire derives from physical needs.²⁸ But all that we have is the assertion from Gautama that it is possible and that his eightfold path is the means by which it can be done.

Islam and Its Founder

It is commonly known that Islam dates its founding and its

²⁷ Ted M. Dorman, *Faith For All Seasons*, second edition (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 123-133.

²⁸ In this regard it is interesting that even the various schools of Buddhism differ with regard to this possibility in terms of whether any individual other than Gautama can achieve buddhahood (Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism: An Introduction and Guide*, third edition. [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962], 45-58).

calendar from when Mohammed fled the Arabs in Mecca to go to Medina in AD 622. This event, which is called the Hijra (more properly, the Hijra, which means “emigration”), is probably the reason that many people assume that Islam has an historical foundation.²⁹ What is less commonly known is that this journey to Medina was made partially because there were some in Medina who welcomed him as the promised Messiah the Jewish rabbis proclaimed.³⁰ When the Jews in Medina decided that

²⁹ At the time of Mohammed’s flight, the destination city was called Yathrib. It was renamed by Mohammed as Medina (or Madinah) which means “the city” and is a shortened version of the city of the prophet. The Muslim calendar is a lunar calendar of 354 days dated after the official start of this emigration, July 16, AD 622.

³⁰ Robert Payne, *The History of Islam*, (New York: Dorset Press, 1990), 23-26. As Pickthall puts it in his explanation of Surah 2, “So plainly did [the Jewish rabbis in Medina] describe the coming Prophet that pilgrims from [Medina] recognized the Prophet, when he addressed them in Mecca, as the same whom the Jewish doctors had described to them” (Muhammad M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an: Text and Explanatory Translation*, [Mecca: Muslim World League, 1977], 3—all Qur’an citations are from this translation). A second factor leading to the Hijra is that the Arabs in Mecca were threatening Mohammed because his new teachings threatened their lucrative business as a pagan center of worship, especially the Kaaba (Payne, *The History of Islam*, 23).

Mohammed was not the Messiah and consequently questioned his position as a prophet, Mohammed had a revelation which made Mecca the center of Muslim worship. Further, Jews became viewed as enemies.³¹ As we will see, the actual foundation of Islam is the Qur'an, a collection of revelations (*Surahs*) that Mohammed proclaimed to his followers.

According to Mohammed's testimony, these revelations began in the year AD 610, twelve years before start of the Muslim calendar. In that year, as was his custom, Mohammed retreated to a cave for meditation during the month of Ramadan.³² As he sat there in

³¹ Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not A Muslim*, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995), 91-99. Safi carefully points out that the Jewish population at Medina was of a mixed bag which primarily involved political loyalty—some accepted Mohammed while others did not. He suggests that the tensions between the Muslims and the Jews developed much later (Omid Safi, *Memories of Mohammed: Why the Prophet Matters*, [NY: Harper Collins, 2009], 139-40).

³² Having Ramadan as a month of fasting long preceded Mohammed among the Arabs, along with a number of various other customs which are integral to modern Islam including a pilgrimage to Mecca and praying towards the Kaaba in Mecca (Harbin, *To Serve Other Gods*, 179 fn 6).

isolation, he reported seeing a vision of the angel Gabriel, in which the “illiterate” Mohammed was told to read a scroll.³³ After several protests, Mohammed read the scroll. Upon awakening, he remembered the words, although tradition reports that he was so distraught that he considered suicide.³⁴ At this point, he heard a voice telling him that the angel was Gabriel and Mohammed was Allah’s messenger. Mohammed returned home where he told his wife, Khadija, what he had seen. She quietly listened to his report and reassured him. Later they visited her cousin, Waraqa, who claimed that Mohammed had seen the same angel who had come to Moses. The key thing to note here is that the only way we know that Mohammed

³³ Muslim biographers report that this vision occurred in a dream (Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, [Delhi: Crescent Publishing, 1978], 75). While it has traditionally been held that Mohammed was illiterate, this is less defended today. Shorosh gives several reasons to suggest that Mohammed was not illiterate (Anis A. Shorosh, *Islam Revealed: A Christian Arab’s View of Islam*, [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988], 52-54). It is perhaps for this reason that Safi translates the Arabic as “recite,” rather than “read” (*Memories of Mohammed*, 103-4).

³⁴ These words are recorded in Surah 96 of the Qur’an.

saw the vision which established his role as prophet was that Mohammed told us so.

Over the next twenty-two years, Mohammed gave a number of other revelations to his followers, although only four of them specifically claim to have come from Gabriel. Few of these revelations were written down at the time they were given, and it is debated as to how many were actually in written form during the lifetime of Mohammed.³⁵ The revelations were given in a “bit-by-bit” manner, and then collected into Surahs or chapters. Islamic teaching indicates that after Mohammed received a revelation, he would indicate to his followers where it should fit in the body of teaching which had been collected to that point.³⁶ However,

³⁵ Pickthall maintains that all were transcribed at that point (*The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, xvi). On the other hand Ibn Warraq states that this is not clear (“Introduction” in *The Origins of the Koran*, edited by Ibn Warraq, [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998], 10). Payne goes so far to state that not only was no final edition prepared, “many of the suras were not yet written down” (*The History of Islam*, 91).

³⁶ Victor Danner, *The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction*, (Amity NY: Amity House, 1988), 62.

it is generally agreed that at the point of his death in AD 632, there was no actual collection of all of the 114 Surahs of the Qur'an we have today.³⁷

So, the Qur'an is a collection of revelations that Mohammed gave to his followers. These revelations consist of various teachings given by Mohammed. Some of these revelations are very general and many provide good moral teaching. But some of them are also very specific in nature, and seem rather convenient in terms of when they were given and their subject matter. These latter, especially, raise questions. For example, part of Surah 2 was given at Medina when the Jews there began to question Mohammed's call. As a result, the revelation directs that

³⁷ As Pickthall puts it, "the written surahs were dispersed among the people" (*The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, xvi). Ibn Warraq expands on this noting that since there was no single collection, various followers formed their own collections which produced what he calls a "chaotic situation." While 'Uthman (the third caliph, 644-656) tried to standardize the text, it was an unpointed consonantal text. Although he ordered all other traditions destroyed, variations persisted for at least four centuries (*The Origins of the Koran*, 14-15).

the followers of Mohammed pray towards the Kaabah (at the time, a pagan shrine in Mecca), as opposed to Jerusalem.³⁸ Likewise Surah 33 contains a section which directed Mohammed's adopted son to divorce his wife, Zeynab, and for Mohammed to marry her.³⁹ Muslim apologists do not deny the directive but try to explain it away. Pickthall asserts that this was done for political reasons.⁴⁰ Haykl also defends Mohammed and attacks non-Islamic writers who bring up the matter, even though he admits that the account is not a fabrication but is based on Muslim sources, including *hadith*.⁴¹ (The *hadith* is the traditional collection of sayings of Mohammed and his companions which relate amplifying information to the

³⁸ Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, 3 and footnote 1 on page 22 (see Surah 2:142-145).

³⁹ Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, 439-440 (see Surah 33:2-7).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Haykal also attempts to deny that tradition that Mohammed was sexually attracted to the woman, but then dismisses the matter by asserting that "rules which are law to the people at large do not apply to the great" (*The Life of Muhammad*, 287).

material that is in the Qur'an.⁴²⁾ However, other scholars maintain that Muslim sources “give the entire story a sexual interpretation” suggesting that Mohammed was sexually attracted to Zeynab. As Aisha, one of Mohammed's wives, is reported to have said, “Truly your God seems to have been very quick in fulfilling your prayers.”⁴³

In addition, the Qur'an claims to be a revelation of God like the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Surah 3:3 states “He hath revealed unto thee (Mohammad) the Scripture

⁴² These sayings and actions are items which were remembered by his friends and followers, which were passed on after Mohammed's death. Safi expresses it well when he notes “[t]here are multiple hadith collections of various degrees of reliability; together they form one of the major sources for understanding the life of Mohammed” (*Memories of Mohammed*, 18). Two key collections have been made by Muhammad Ism'īl al-Bukhari and Muslim b. al-Hajjah al-Nisaburi, both dating from the 800's, and both collections containing about 3000 hadith. In the Sunni tradition, both achieved a ‘canonical status’ although today Muslim scholars consider many individual hadith spurious (Williams, John Alden, *Islam*, [New York: George Braziller, 1962], 57-59). It is a point of interest that the premise that a martyr for Islam will receive 70 or 72 virgins in paradise comes from the hadith.

⁴³ Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not A Muslim*, 100.

with truth, confirming that which was (revealed) before it, even as He revealed the Torah and the Gospel.” However, this revelation goes beyond or seems to change what God had given to earlier prophets ranging from Adam to Jesus,⁴⁴ and thus at key places Christians find that it differs from the Bible. Shorrosh cites a number of examples which he maintains provide an incomplete list.⁴⁵ A key example in the Old Testament is associated with Abraham where there are a number of differences. For example, after Sarah demanded Hagar’s expulsion, the Qur’an has Abraham taking Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca where they built the Kaaba (Surah 2:125-127). While the book of Moses records that Abraham was told by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, the Qur’an is not as clear, and most Muslims argue that the

⁴⁴ The Qur’an mentions at least twenty earlier prophets by name, and Jesus is included as one of them (Ayub Hassan, *Islamic Belief*, [Dehli: Hindustan Publications, 1984], 76).

⁴⁵ Shorrosh, *Islam Revealed*, 201-221.

son was Ishmael since he was the older.⁴⁶ Not coincidentally, Ishmael is viewed as the ancestor of the Arabs.⁴⁷ In the New Testament, one of the most significant differences is the denial of the crucifixion. Surahs 4:157-58 assert “And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, Allah’s messenger—They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. But Allah took him up unto Himself.” There are a variety of explanations for this, but the dominant Muslim teaching seems to understand this

⁴⁶ See Surah 37:102-113. The Qur’an here states “when (his son) was old enough to walk with him, (Abraham) said: O my dear son, I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice thee” (102). After God intervenes and gives a substitute, Surah 112 goes on to say “And We gave him tidings of the birth of Isaac, a Prophet of the righteous.” As Safi puts it, most Muslims believe that since Ishmael was the older, he was the “only son” (Safi, *Memories of Mohammed*, 21). This, of course, ignores part of the Genesis account which states, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, . . .” (Gen 22:2, NASB) specifying that the “only son” is Isaac.

⁴⁷ S.D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*, third edition, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 19-32

verse to indicate that when Judas led the party to arrest Jesus, Jesus was taken up by God and Judas was transformed to look like Jesus and was crucified in his place.⁴⁸

Muslims claim that as the messenger, Mohammed had no control on the revelations which he gave.⁴⁹ They accept the Qur'an not only as the word of God but as the final word that God gave to mankind.⁵⁰ As such, they assert that it supplants the Bible as revelation, which they claim

⁴⁸ Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Context: Past, Present and Future*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 78-79. Shorrosh cites several different variations (*Islam Revealed*, 109-10).

⁴⁹ Danner, *The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction*, 62.

⁵⁰ While Muslims accept the Hebrew and Christian Bibles as holy books, they view them as corrupted. As Masri expresses it, when the Book of Moses became corrupted, God sent the Psalms of David, when it was corrupted, God sent the New Testament, and when the New Testament was corrupted, God sent the Qur'an, which is incorruptible "for it is the word of God" (Fouad Masri, *Is the Injeel Corrupted?*, [Indianapolis, IN: The Crescent Project, 2006], 9-10). This raises some very significant questions. If the first three books were God's word, then how did they become corrupted? If they could become corrupted, then how do we know that the Qur'an is incorruptible? If the Bible is corrupted, then who corrupted it and when? Unfortunately, these questions lie outside the scope of this study.

has been corrupted in its transmission. In contrast, their claim is that the Qur'an which they now have is exactly what God gave to Mohammed without any changes.⁵¹ What is clear, whatever the source of Mohammed's revelations, the only validation that is available for them is Mohammed's word.

The Historical Foundation of Judaism

Judaism as we know it dates from early to middle part of the first millennium AD.⁵² Following the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, the early Rabbis began writing down the oral traditions that they had developed to clarify how to follow the Mosaic Law or Torah.⁵³ This commentary, written in Hebrew, is called the *Mishnah*. Sometime after the second

⁵¹ Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths*, 61.

⁵² Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths*, 59-61.

⁵³ The Hebrew term is Torah which can be translated law, but more properly denotes teaching. As Bamberger puts it, "the customary rendering of 'law' is not wrong, but it is not adequate. Torah means: the direction given by God to man for the guidance of his life" (Bernard J. Bamberger, *The Story of Judaism*, third edition, [New York: Schocken Books, 1970], 26).

century AD, the Jews supplemented the commentary with a second commentary (essentially a commentary on the commentary) called the *Gemarah*, which is written in Aramaic. In essence this accepted the loss of the temple and provided guidelines on how to live a lifestyle that adhered to the Law, regardless.⁵⁴ Combined, these form the Talmud which is the guideline for modern Judaism. But both of these commentaries really address and interpret the Mosaic Law which far transcends the temple and its associated sacrificial system.⁵⁵ While modern Judaism allows the Jews to worship without a temple, the heart of that worship still depends on the Mosaic Law, and as such, we need to look there for the foundation of Judaism.

⁵⁴ Harbin, *To Serve Other Gods*, 57.

⁵⁵ This is somewhat analogous to modern American jurisprudence which focuses on the myriads of court cases and legislative actions but occasionally has to go back to the ground rules which are set forth in the Constitution. There are a number of situations where a thoughtful legal analyst is given pause at the convoluted thinking that arrives at some conclusions. We see similarities in the New Testament on a number of occasions where Jesus confronts the legal scholars of his day on issues such as their interpretation of the Sabbath.

The Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) claims that the Mosaic Law was given to the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai after the nation had departed from Egypt during the Passover-Exodus event. According to Exodus 19, the first revelation God gave to the nation through Moses took place almost immediately after they arrived at Sinai, three months after the nation had left Egypt following the Passover. After the nation arrived, Moses went up the mountain where he received information that he was to relay to the people consisting of two key points. First, Moses was to remind the people that they had been eyewitnesses to what God had done to the Egyptians. Second, the people were to hear God speak to the entire nation so that they would believe Moses.

Exodus 19:18 relates how the people prepared for three days and then on the appointed day they saw lightning and heard thunder in the cloud. As they stood in wonder and fear, Moses climbed the mountain where God told

Moses to go back down and make sure that the people understood that they were to stay back. Although Moses objected that he was sure that the people did understand, he obeyed and went back down to warn the people.

According to Exodus, it was at this point that God delivered what we call the Ten Commandments to the nation.⁵⁶ The transition from chapter 19 to chapter 20 implies that Moses was still down with the people when God spoke those words. Further, we do not read that Moses went back up the mountain until after the Ten Commandments had been given (20:21). Likewise, at the end of the Ten Commandments the people complain to Moses that God's speaking to them was frightening and in 20:18 we are told that when the people heard the thunder and the trumpet sound, and they saw the lightning as well

⁵⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Second Book of Moses, Exodus*, in *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 2., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976 reprint ed), 105.

as the smoke on the mountain, they stood afar off.

Basically, they backed away out of fear.⁵⁷ Their plea to Moses was, “don’t let God speak to us, or we will die.”

As a result, Moses became a spokesman for God.

He returned up the mountain where he was given directions for the nation. The first point of this revelation in Ex 20:22 is that Moses was to remind the people that they had seen that God had spoken to them (in the Hebrew, the “you” is plural). The point seems to be that the people knew from what they had seen and heard that Moses was indeed reporting what God said.

Moses then brought down the first of a series of guidelines on how the people of the nation were to relate not only to God, but to one another (chapters 20:23-23:33). He recounted those guidelines to the people and they agreed that they would do that (24:3). With this agreement,

⁵⁷ Cassuto phrases it, “they retreated in panic” (Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, translated by Israel Abrahams, [Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1987], 253).

the text states that Moses then wrote down what God had already told him (24:4) in what was called the “book of the covenant” (24:7).

The exact content of “the book of the covenant” is not clear. Exodus 24:4 says it included “all the words of the Lord.” It may have been the material in Genesis and Exodus 1-23. Or, it may have been just the minimum of what God had said to the Israelites at that location and time, which would be the material we now see in Exodus 20-23.⁵⁸ In either case, what Moses wrote down at this point would have been the first edition of Torah. But, God had a lot more to reveal to the nation as they spent a year at the foot of Sinai. According to the text, this core was soon expanded as God continued to work with the nation first at

⁵⁸ Modern scholars tend to opt for the smaller section, although there is still disagreement on the scope. For example, Eissfeldt argues for 20:22-23:33 based on context (Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, translated by P. R. Ackroyd [New York: Harper and Row, 1965], 212-213), while Childs places the start at 21:1 (Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974], 453-454).

Sinai, and then through the journeys leading up to the conquest. The text then maintains that over the years, new sections were added by the nation up until the last prophet in the post-exilic period, Malachi.

While this expansion process is interesting, it lies outside the scope of the study. Here, we should just note that the text asserts that the nation of Israel had been eye-witnesses to God's working in history in the Exodus event. Moreover, this Exodus event was to become a critical foundation to God's future dealings with the nation. The outline of the Law which we call the Ten Commandments is recorded twice (Ex 20 and Deut 5). On both occasions it is preceded by a very interesting statement: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:2-3 and Deut 5:6-7). There is an implied cause and effect relationship set forth here that Israel was

expected to obey because of what God had done.⁵⁹ More than this, the phrase, “brought you out of the land of Egypt” or an equivalent shows up at least 138 times in the Old Testament. In other words, this event was the authority basis given to the nation of Israel and thus is in essence the foundation of Judaism.

Despite the development of the Talmud as the outline of modern Judaism, Jews today still look to this event as the foundation of their religion as shown by the continued celebration of the Passover. Whenever the Passover is celebrated, a key component is begun by the youngest child who begins with the question, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The oldest family member then begins the response, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord redeemed us with a mighty

⁵⁹ Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, translated by J.S. Bowden, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962),161-62.

hand.”⁶⁰ So Judaism claims that it is based on this historical event, and as an historical event the Passover-Exodus is subject to the same issues of validation as other ancient historical events.⁶¹

The Historical Foundation of Christianity

The founder of Christianity is Jesus who presented himself as bringing in the kingdom promised in the Old Testament. What Christians call the New Testament presents him as the Messiah for whom the Jews were looking. As such, Christianity claims that it is not only a continuation, but a fulfillment of the Judaism of the Old Testament so the historical foundation of Judaism (the Passover-Exodus

⁶⁰ Harold A. Sevens, ed., *Passover Haggadah for Biblical Jews and Christians*, (Orangeburg, NY: Chosen People Ministries, nd), 16.

⁶¹ While many modern scholars dismiss the historical claims of the Old Testament in general and the Pentateuch especially, modern critical thinking underlying the Documentary Hypothesis does not address the issue as an historical matter, but rather ignores the claims of the text having presupposed that a hypothetical reconstruction is preferable. Cf. Gary Edward Schnittjer, *The Torah Story*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 15.

event) is a critical component of that claim. But, more importantly, Christianity claims that it is based on a second historical event, namely the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus to demonstrate that he was the Messiah—and more. This is evident within the pages of the New Testament itself in several places. One of the clearest is where Paul develops an extensive argument asserting the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15:1-19. He concludes that if the resurrection did not occur, then those who believe in Jesus have a faith that is worthless, and there is no hope. As Edwin Yamauchi points out, there is significant corroborative evidence to this fact.⁶²

Today it is generally agreed that Jesus actually lived and walked the soil of Galilee and Judea during the first part of the first century AD. It is also generally conceded that Jesus was crucified, even by many who argue that

⁶² As interviewed by Lee Strobel (*The Case for Christ*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 73-91).

there was no resurrection.⁶³ However, to deny the resurrection, one has to explain away a number of items, not the least of which is the empty tomb. Since this is the understood foundation of Christianity, it is not surprising that the reality of that event has been subject to a multitude of attacks, and there are many excellent works which explore the resurrection as an historical event.⁶⁴ For our purposes, the salient point is that from the beginning Christianity has claimed to be based on an historical event. Whether one wants to accept the historicity of that event or

⁶³ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 123-158.

⁶⁴ A number of works could be cited here ranging from very scholarly to more popular. The following is just a partial list. J.N.D. Anderson, *The Evidence for the Resurrection* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1966). Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli, editors, *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000). William Lane Craig, *Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection* (Ann Arbor MI: Servant, 1988). William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody, 1981). Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort The Gospels*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006. Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernadino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1981). Frank Morison, *Who Moved The Stone?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

not is another matter.

Conclusions

In this brief survey, we have looked at the foundations which are claimed by five different religions. In the case of the first three, the religions themselves maintain that they are based simply on declarations of their founders, which upon examination are unsupported. As I have studied various other religions, I have found that with the exception of the two noted above, Judaism and Christianity, every religion I have examined also fits that pattern. For example, Mormonism is based on the unsupported claim of Joseph Smith that he had revelation from the angel Moroni. Mormon historians Arrington and Bitton note that “in the strictest sense, historical research can never either confirm or disprove alleged supernatural appearances.”⁶⁵ This is a

⁶⁵ Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 7.

valid observation, but the point is that the only evidence that the angel Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith is Joseph Smith's word, and when one is listening to an unsupported witness the character of the witness is extremely important—and that can be demonstrated through historical research.⁶⁶

In addition, we must remember that Joseph Smith also claimed that the book of Mormon was a translation of gold plates which no-one physically saw,⁶⁷ and relates what is supposed to be an historical account of two great civilizations for which there is absolutely no evidence.⁶⁸

So what does this mean? While Arrington and Bitton are correct that “historical research can never either

⁶⁶ According to Charles and Steven Crane, this is why the Latter Day Saint Church is distancing itself from its founder. They cite a number of issues which raise questions regarding Joseph Smith's character and integrity (Charles Crane and Steven Crane, *Ashamed of Joseph*, (Joplin MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1993), note especially 45-76.

⁶⁷ While the Book of Mormon contains affidavits of witnesses that they saw the gold plates, a more careful examination suggests that at best they “saw them with the eye of faith” (Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975], 78).

⁶⁸ Crane and Crane, *Ashamed of Joseph*, 113-120.

confirm or disprove alleged supernatural appearances,” it can evaluate historical events and give a context which can be used to corroborate the claims. This necessarily includes events which claim non-physical (i.e., spiritual) causes, such as a resurrection.⁶⁹ This is why history is not only important, but it is critical—not just for Christianity, but for every religion. If, as Paul claims, Christianity can bear up to rigorous historical scrutiny, then to become a Christian is not a mere leap of faith. But conversely to follow the teaching of someone just because he (or she) said so, would be not only a blind leap of faith, but an extremely disastrous one.

⁶⁹ Here is an area where our secular culture is setting the terms of the debate, specifically by limiting history to physical causes for physical events. That is, any event which involves spiritual forces is ruled non-historical by definition. This was brought home to me several years ago, when after presenting a paper at a national conference, I submitted an article drawn from that paper to a conservative Christian historical journal proposing using historical methodology as a means by which a miracle might be validated. I was surprised at the reason the article was rejected—it was because this evangelical Christian organization would only accept articles that addressed history in terms of naturalistic assumptions.