

Christianity, the Cults and Other Religions

David Matthew

What follows makes no claim to be a comprehensive treatment of this vast subject. It is no more than a brief summary of (1) the main branches of Christianity, (2) the most popular cults and (3) the major world religions. If you want to dig deeper, you will find at the end a list of books that you can refer to for further details.

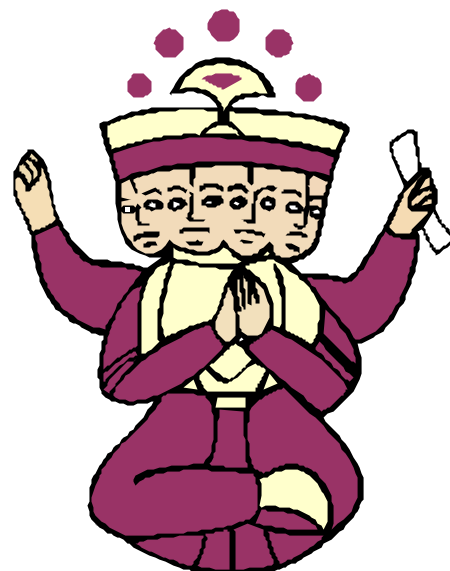
Two cautionary points

First, it is vital to distinguish clearly between *systems* and *people*. For example, I have little time for the Roman Catholic Church as an organisation and doctrinal system.. I see it as alien to the kind of Christianity taught in the Bible. But I count several Roman Catholics as my personal friends and have no doubts at all about the genuineness of their faith in Christ and the reality of their experience of the Holy Spirit's presence and power.

Some will say, 'But if you reject my church you reject me.' Not at all. You must insist at all costs on distinguishing systems from people. In the end it is *people* who stand accountable to God, not systems. And it is with people, not with systems, that as humans we relate. We can—and must—warmly accept the one without condoning the other.

Second, Christianity makes exclusive claims. Referring to Jesus, Peter affirms: 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). On that basis there is no salvation through, say, Buddha, Mohammed or the Hindu gods.

But that does not mean that those other religions contain no truth at all. Their teachings contain some wise and valid insights into life and the human condition, and acknowledging these could well be a starting point for witnessing to their adherents.



The Hindu god Vishnu

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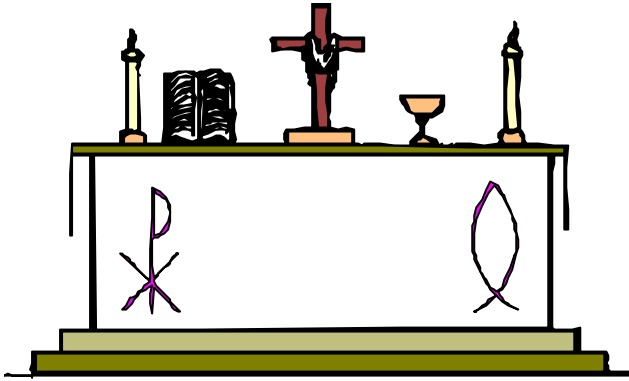
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1. Groups within the Christian tradition

The New Testament church had nothing like today's 'denominations'. There was just 'the church', as distinct from 'the world' of non-Christian society. The church, however, soon took on a style far removed from its early simplicity. In particular, it developed along two separate lines which came in time to be known as the *Roman Catholic Church* and the *Eastern Orthodox Church*.

The Roman Catholic Church

In the early centuries of the Christian era, Christianity quickly became unbalanced. This was in part through neglect of the Scriptures. Also, the conversion of the Emperor Constantine early in the 4th century made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire instead of a persecuted minority-faith. As a result, many embraced the religion in a loose way without having a personal experience of faith in Christ.



The church soon modelled itself on the civil setup of the Empire, with Rome as its base and the leader of the church there assuming leadership of the church worldwide. As time passed, elements of pagan religion came on board. Altars were set up in church buildings, with a mediating priesthood to offer sacrifices on them. This was an aberration from the simple Lord's Supper presented in the New Testament. The bread and wine were seen as magically transformed into Christ's very body and blood when the priest spoke the words, 'This is my body...blood.' The priest would then offer this 'sacrifice' on the altar.

Having in practice forsaken the Bible as the sole authority in matters of doctrine and practice, the church put tradition on an equal footing alongside it. On this basis, virtually any belief could be justified, given time, and the church promulgated such unbiblical doctrines as infant baptism, Mary's perpetual virginity, prayer to the saints, purgatory, indulgences and the infallibility of the Pope when speaking in his official capacity on matters of doctrine and practice.

This system persisted during the Mediaeval period (the 'Middle Ages') in Europe. Church and state were effectively one, with every person considered to be a Christian, and with religious failures punished in the civil courts. It was known as *Christendom*. The church was 'Roman' because its headquarters were in Rome, and 'Catholic' (meaning 'universal') because it embraced the whole of society.

Not until the 16th century was there a major reaction. This was the *Reformation*, led by Martin Luther and

John Calvin. Many major RC doctrines were set aside as unscriptural and attempts were made to bring church life and doctrine more into line with the Bible's teaching. Christians who embraced this return to a more biblical faith became known as *Protestants*.

Since then, further subdivisions have appeared within Protestantism. The Roman Catholic Church, however, has continued largely unchanged in its doctrine and practice. To this day it regards non-Catholics as an inferior type of Christian. At one time it labelled them 'heretics', though now it prefers the term 'separated brethren'.

The Eastern Orthodox Church

At the time when Roman Catholicism was establishing itself as the 'universal' church in Western Europe, Christians living further east adopted some differences of emphasis. They saw *Constantinople* (Istanbul), rather than Rome, as the church's base and the leader of the church there—the *Patriarch*—as their head. In due course this split became official, leaving the Roman Catholic Church in the west of Europe and the Eastern Orthodox Church in the east.

The Eastern church followed the same route as the RC Church in adopting a high degree of ritual and many unbiblical doctrines. It took a similar line, too, in its joining with the state. This joining later became the buttress for 'national' churches like the Greek Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church.



An icon in the Eastern Orthodox tradition:
'The Trinity' by Andrei Rublev

In more recent times, churches of other types have gained a foothold in those countries, but there has never been any major challenge to Eastern Orthodox Christianity matching the scale of the Reformation in the west.

Other 'state churches'

At the Reformation, while there was a welcome return to more scriptural church standards, no one thought to abolish the link between church and state. In western Europe, for instance, Germany severed its link with Catholicism and simply joined itself instead with the *Lutheran Church* that emerged from Martin Luther's teachings and leadership. The Lutheran Church also became the state church in Scandinavia.



Martin Luther

In England, King Henry VIII fell out with the Pope and took the English church away from Rome. He established the *Church of England*, with himself as its head. With the monarch as leader of both church and state, the 'state church' system simply continued under a different name.

Today, the links between church and state in most countries are weaker. But the basic link remains. It is seen in England, for example, in the role of the Prime Minister in helping select the Archbishop of Canterbury, in coronations taking place in an Anglican church service, and in the participation of the Anglican clergy in military events like the annual Service of Remembrance. In this respect we say that the Church of England is the 'established' church.

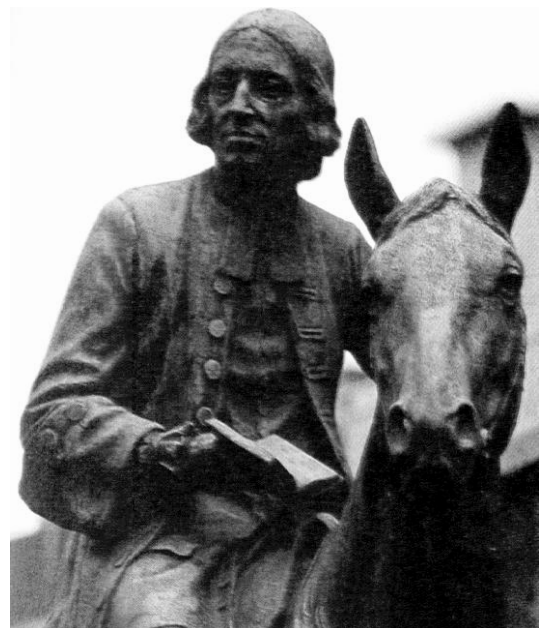
In most countries today, however—the United States of America, for example—there is no 'state church' and civil and religious aspects of life are kept separate.

Free churches

Since the Reformation there has been growing freedom for Christians of many different persuasions to practice their faith unopposed. Many denominations and loose groupings have emerged outside the state churches, and these are called the 'free churches'—free, that is, from state links and state control.

Examples of 'free church' denominations would be the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, the Salvation Army and the Elim Pentecostal Church. They all have different emphases, but all claim to adhere to the basics of Christianity as revealed in the New Testament.

Other groups are less structured, preferring to exist without the constraints of a denominational setup. These would include the so-called 'new churches' that have sprung up in large numbers since the early 1970s. Some of them are in informal networks like New Frontiers International, while others remain independent, with only a small number of local connections. The advantage of this position is freedom to order themselves on the biblical model without outside interference while enjoying the advantage of the checks and balances provided by their voluntary connections.



John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church

All the above, from the RC Church to the 'new churches', see themselves as within the parameters of genuine Christianity. But they represent a wide range of doctrinal views and church practice, and there is no guarantee that 'membership' of any one of them ensures a personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—which is how the New Testament presents real Christianity.

2. 'Christian' cults

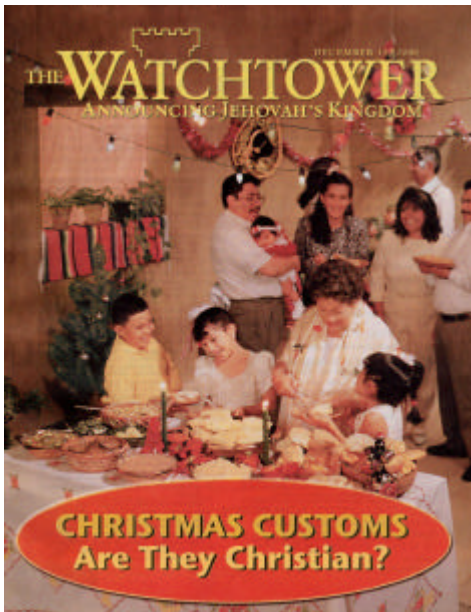
By 'the Christian cults' we mean those groups which, though they claim to be Christian, differ from basic Christianity to the degree that they are regarded as being in major error and thus heretical. Most of these cults originated in America.

Members of these groups fall into two general categories. Some have swallowed the party line completely and have no interest in listening to other people's views. Others, by contrast, are fundamentally seeking God and through circumstances have been drawn into the cult, but their overriding desire is to know and please the Lord. These are usually much more open to debate and the weighing of other viewpoints.

We also need to remember that God is a God of grace and responds to the slightest move on a person's part towards him. For that reason, while we may completely reject a cult's doctrine as a system, we must stay open to the fact that some members may be genuinely saved—in spite of the system rather than because of it.

Jehovah's Witnesses

This cult was founded by an American, *Charles Taze Russell* (1870-1916). The name 'Jehovah's Witnesses' (based on Isaiah 43:10) was not adopted until 1931, the group having previously been called by several other names: Russellites, Millennial Dawn, the International Bible Students' Association, and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.



Typical Jehovah's Witness literature

Jehovah's Witnesses have their own English translation of the Bible: the *New World Translation*. Christian scholars universally recognise it to be unreliable, in places dishonest, and adapted in line with the group's doctrines.

Their doctrine of Christ is seriously deficient. They deny his deity, believing him to be a created being, the archangel Michael. His death atoned only for Adam's sins, not for anyone else's; it merely provides a basis upon which individuals must work

for their own salvation. They do not believe that Jesus rose in bodily form from the dead. As for his return, they hold that he was crowned as king in October 1914 and 'returned' secretly and invisibly. At the same time, Satan and his hosts were thrown out of heaven and came to earth. As for the Holy Spirit, Jehovah's Witnesses view him as no more than a vague force.

With no real Saviour, they inevitably end up in legalism. Salvation has to be earned by door-knocking, the selling of Watchtower literature and attending meetings and conferences. There is an 'anointed class' of believers, numbering 144,000, who, if they work hard enough at it, are born again and will go to heaven, but the last of these places was taken in 1931. Other believers are in the general class, called the 'other sheep', and they will have to be content with life on the new earth.

Jehovah's Witnesses take a legalistic view of Genesis 9:4, on the basis of which they teach it is a sin to accept a blood transfusion. As a result, many have died who with a transfusion might have been saved.

Christadelphians

The name comes from two Greek words meaning 'Christian brothers'. Like Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians are Arians, that is, they believe Christ to be a created being.

The movement was started by an English medical doctor, *John Thomas* (born 1805), who spent much of his life in America. He became fascinated by the book of Revelation and other prophetic books of the Bible. Soon he claimed to have the authentic interpretation of those books, and taught that salvation depended on embracing his views. The movement developed chiefly in Britain but never became very large.

Like Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians reject the doctrine of the Trinity, holding both the Son and the Spirit to be created by the Father. Jesus' birth was not miraculous, nor was his life perfect, and there is no atoning value or purpose in his death. The Holy Spirit is just a vague power. The devil does not exist.

They deny salvation by grace. The Christian life begins, they hold, with baptism by Christadelphians, after which life is a period of probation. Depending on the individual's performance, salvation may or may not be achieved. In other words, salvation is entirely by works.

Numbers appear to have been shrinking in recent years and this cult remains small compared with the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

Mormons

Properly called the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, this cult traces its roots to an American named *Joseph Smith* (1805-1844).



Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism

He was a psychic (Mormons would say ‘prophet’) and claimed many ‘revelations’ that led to the creation of the Mormon Church. The main one was of an angel called Moroni, who told him that details of early American history and a fuller revelation of the gospel were written in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics on gold plates hidden under Cumorah hill. Four years later he was provided with the ‘Urim and Thummim’, which were ‘stones’ enabling him to decipher the hieroglyphics and translate the plates. This is the cult’s main textbook, the *Book of Mormon*, which in theory they give equal status with the Bible but in practice exalt above it.

Early Mormons were polygamists (Smith had 17 wives) and had difficulty finding acceptance in society. Smith’s successor, *Brigham Young* (at least 26 wives), eventually led them on a trek to Utah, where they settled and founded *Salt Lake City*—still the cult’s headquarters.

Their doctrine differs from Bible truth in many points. They believe that God was once a mortal like the rest of us but advanced to become a god. Christ was the devil’s brother, a polygamist who married both Mary and Martha at the wedding at Cana. His death has no saving power. He did, however, rise from the dead and he visited America in AD 34—a

flat contradiction of Acts 1:8-11. But the Holy Spirit is merely an impersonal force.

Salvation is by being baptised by Mormons, living a good life and keeping the church’s rules. Members can also undergo proxy baptism on behalf of non-baptised people of bygone ages. Young men are expected to do a period of missionary service by calling at people’s homes and trying to convert them.

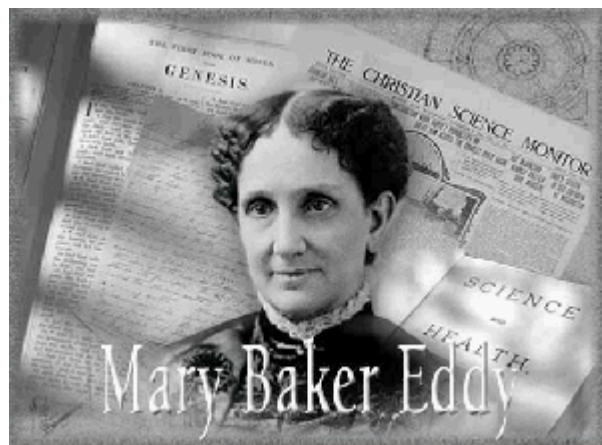
Mormons attract many to their numbers by their emphasis on family life and wholesome values—and their American funding. They are also very diligent in looking after their members, providing support for the needy in both cash and kind so that they have no need to look to the state for benefits.

Christian Science

This cult, which is neither Christian nor scientific, was founded by *Mary Baker Eddy* (born in New Hampshire, USA, in 1821). Its proper name is *The Church of Christ, Scientist*.

Mrs Baker Eddy, three times married, had a very unhappy life and suffered with poor health. She claimed to have been healed dramatically on two occasions, leading to the formulation of her theories, the main one being that sickness and death are illusions, existing only in the mind. In 1875 she set out her views in *Science and Health, with Key to the Scriptures*. She claimed to be God’s appointed messenger to this age.

Though the movement grew in popularity, making its founder very wealthy, it is now in decline, and its American newspaper, the *Christian Science Monitor*,



is losing money. One can still, however, find a Christian Science Reading Room here and there.

The movement disapproves of medical treatment, advocating instead ‘prayer and mental renewal’. Qualified Christian Science practitioners charge adherents for their services of encouragement in this. Yet Mrs Baker Eddy is reliably recorded as wearing

both glasses and dentures, as well as receiving regular pain-killing morphine injections.

Christian Science is pantheistic, that is, it holds that God is the universe and the universe is God. It thus has no time for the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is Christian Science, and Jesus, it maintains, was just a Jewish man who lived 2000 years ago. He is totally separate from Christ—which is the name for the divine idea. Jesus did not really suffer or die, so there was no resurrection. He was just a good example to us.

Since sin, evil, and even material things are delusions of our mortal mind, there is no need for any atonement. ‘Salvation’ simply means being saved from wrong ideas.

Christian Scientists believe the Bible to contain many errors, yet they accept Mrs Baker Eddy’s writings as inspired and without error.

3. Non-Christian Cults

The Moonies

The proper name for this cult is *The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of Christianity*, or *Unification Church* for short. Its nickname relates to



Rev. and Mrs Moon

its founder, *Rev. Sun Myung Moon*, a Korean, who established the group in 1954.

Although it calls itself a church, the cult is not Christian at all. Moon had a Christian background but was led astray by visions unrelated to the truth of the Bible. He came to see himself as the new messiah, but was more than once accused of immoral practices. Certainly he made a lot of money from his weapon-manufacturing business. In 1957 he published his religious views in *Divine Principle*.

The cult expanded during the 1970s, especially in America, but now seems to be on the wane. In 1982

Moon served an eighteen-month prison sentence in the USA, along with a stiff fine, for tax evasion.

The appeal of the Moonies has been particularly to young people, who are drawn away from their parents and brainwashed into making money for the cult.

The Unification Church uses the Bible only in order to draw Christians to itself. It believes that, once the Christian church is absorbed, the Bible can be dispensed with, because Moon’s *Divine Principle* is a book of far superior spiritual value. Similarly, Moon regards himself as superior to Jesus Christ.

Not surprisingly in the light of this, the cult’s doctrines are anti-Christian. God is not personal. Jesus was just another man, though sinless. He was to have taken a bride in the place of Eve and to have produced perfect children. But he failed, being crucified before he could marry. The Holy Spirit is female. Jesus will not personally return as he is already here in the person of the Rev. Moon, whose influence will unify all things, so that everyone will eventually be saved.

Scientology

Lafayette Ron Hubbard, the founder of *The Church of Scientology*, was born in Nebraska, USA, in 1911. He spent time in the Far East, where he explored both Asian religion and the workings of the human mind.

Recovering from a period of ill-health, he published what he saw as the reasons for his recovery in *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, which dealt with the subconscious. His views caught on and the Church of Scientology, formed in 1952, grew rapidly. It appealed to young people, especially wealthy young people, and the cult itself became extremely wealthy.



L. Ron Hubbard

It is now well-established that Hubbard was a conscious fraud, a drug addict and a dabbler in the occult. His writings were produced, not out of years of study, as he claimed, but as the result of drug-induced trances.

He died in California in 1976, yet millions continue to be deceived by his writings.

God, in Scientology, is whoever you want him to be. Jesus is rarely mentioned, though acknowledged as a great teacher. The Bible is just one of many records of man’s search after the truth. The only final authority is Hubbard and his writings.

Human beings are trapped in material bodies and need to be released to achieve their original god-like

state. Scientology practitioners are available to help people achieve this, charging extortionate fees. Salvation consists in overcoming the psychological problems ('engrams') that get in the way of this fulfilment.

4. Eastern imports

New Age religion

This is not an organisation or formal set of teachings, but a loose collection of views about life and the universe that have become increasingly popular in the West since the 1960s. Some of these views can be traced back to Eastern religions, brought to the West particularly since around 1970.



New Agers are disillusioned with life and culture as it is and believe we stand at the threshold of a new age where all differences of religion, culture and politics will gradually disappear, to be replaced by a worldwide spirit of unity and love. Meanwhile, all religions—and even non-religious philosophy—lead eventually to God. But New Age teaching is superior to them all and, if embraced, will help reach the goal more quickly.

As part of this process, humanity is now moving out of the Age of Pisces (2000 years long and the period of Christianity) and into the *Age of Aquarius*. While this is happening, 'power points' exist at places like Glastonbury and Iona where individuals can make contact with a higher energy. New Agers believe that these energies are strongest at times like equinoxes, solstices and the full moon, and meditation is the key to tapping into them.

Nature is to be given great respect because God is in everything, and everything is God—the view known as pantheism. God is thus not a person, just power. Jesus was just a man, but a Master in that he was the first to recognise the Godness within him, as we all can now do.

Because man is not a sinner, there is no need for a Saviour or any act of atonement. We need to become aware of our divinity by developing our psychic powers or 'higher consciousness'. Means to this end include hypnotism, meditation, martial arts, drugs, yoga and occult practices.

Most New Agers believe in reincarnation, though not in the sense of punishment. Each reincarnation is a step along the pathway to awareness of one's own

divinity. The time will come when the whole of humanity embraces this way of life and all people will live in harmony with each other and with the world around them.

Hare Krishna

This movement, properly called *The International Society for Krishna Consciousness*, began in 1965 when a 70-year-old Indian 'holy man' arrived in New York to propound the teachings of his Hindu guru. The arrival was A.C.



Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Young people quickly responded—many of them disillusioned with life and addicted to drugs—and the movement spread rapidly in both America and Europe. Prabhupada died in

1977 and leadership of the movement was taken on by an international group of twelve.

Devotees of the cult wear saffron robes and shave their heads. They live in idol-filled 'temples', following an austere regime, beginning with rising in the small hours for chanting, worship and the study of the Hindu holy book, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Their diet is vegetarian, with no tea, coffee or alcohol allowed. During the day they spend up to eight hours asking the public for donations before returning to their temples for further study, worship and housework.

According to this religion, which is Hindu in basis, Krishna (or Vishnu) is the highest deity, remote and inaccessible, and beyond good and evil. He calls upon humans simply to surrender to him. Christ was



Above:
Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

Left:
Back to Godhead—the Hare Krishna magazine

a pure devotee of Krishna, sent to earth from another planet whose inhabitants pitied the people of earth.

The world is an illusion, as is man's body, and as are good and evil. Our problem is that we have become preoccupied with temporal things and forgotten Krishna. Salvation lies in dealing with that problem. This is done through chanting the divine name—Hare Krishna—aided by a string of beads and repudiating the material world. Devotees thus seek to attain

'Krishna consciousness'. A 'Spiritual Master' is provided to help them.

Transcendental Meditation

A widespread movement, TM owes its current success to *Maharishi Mahesh Yogi*, born in India in 1918. This guru came to London with the aim of popularising in the West some of the Hindu meditation techniques of his native land. He met with little success until 1967, when the Beatles became his disciples. He later returned to India feeling that his mission had failed, but came back to Europe with a new plan for the worldwide development of the group. Since then the movement has grown steadily.



Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

TM is marketed in the West chiefly as a system of non-religious meditation techniques with a scientific basis. The group have worked hard to try and provide scientific proof that the techniques reduce stress and bring inner peace. But it remains essentially religious, using Hindu *mantras* (phrases to be repeated), leaning on the Hindu holy book the *Bhagavad Gita* and speaking of making a conscious connection with the fact that we are truly divine—and the initiation ceremony invokes Hindu gods.

With such a background, TM is pantheistic. There is no personal God; instead, God and creation are the same thing. Jesus is no more than one of the world's great teachers, whose death was unnecessary. Salvation lies in self-realisation: becoming aware of one's deity. Right and wrong do not exist.

The purpose of life is to become bliss-conscious, that is, totally absorbed in the divine. This way, the devotee can escape the cycle of reincarnation and enter the eternal liberation known as *nirvana*.

Yoga

For many in the West, Yoga is simply a form of exercise aimed at enhancing both fitness and relaxation. They accord it no religious significance and it probably does them no harm. But in the East it is a deeply religious activity, and those who practise

Yoga in the West should take care, because it is easy to cross the line into non-Christian religion without realising it.

Yoga finds expression in both Hinduism and Buddhism. It is a complete way of life designed to achieve 'union' (the meaning of 'Yoga') with the divine consciousness. This is achieved through up to eight yogic practices. Of these, *Hatha Yoga* is the one that uses bodily control to help achieve it, and it is this that lies behind the Yoga exercises common in the West.

Yoga is a pantheistic religion, believing God to be everything and everything to be God. Jesus was just a good teacher but not a Saviour. Salvation lies in enlightenment in this life and escaping from the ties of the material world at death. But several reincarnations may be necessary before true freedom is realised.

5. World religions

Hinduism

Hinduism—the religion of most of India—is highly complex and could be described as a family of religions rather than a single one. It has given rise to a large number of sects who worship different Hindu gods. Nirvana, reincarnation and the various forms of Yoga are all expressions of basic Hinduism.

Hindus have a very large collection of holy writings, the oldest being the *Vedas*. Others include the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and, most sacred of all, the *Bhagavad Gita*.



A representation of Brahma, the Hindu supreme being

Reincarnation is basic to Hindu belief. A person's present state of existence is determined by his performance in previous lifetimes. This is linked with

the concept of *karma*, which means 'action'. One's present actions have consequences that govern one's state in any future existence, and the performing of righteous acts is the key to eventual liberation from the cycle of rebirths into eternal bliss.

Hinduism is responsible for the Indian *caste system* which, though now outlawed by the Indian government, continues to be an integral part of the social order. It is responsible, too, for the revering of the *sacred cow*, which is allowed complete freedom of movement and action.

To a Hindu, Christ is merely one of many great teachers. The supreme being is *Brahman*, impersonal and indefinable—a philosophical concept rather than a personal being—and man is a manifestation of Brahman, with no true individuality and no intrinsic worth. Sin is simply the expression of ignorance, and salvation may be achieved in one of three ways: the way of knowledge (knowing oneself to be a part of Brahman and not a separate entity), the way of works (following ceremonial ritual), or the way of devotion (obedience to a particular one of the many Hindu deities).

Yoga, Hare Krishna and Transcendental Meditation are all forms of Hinduism that in recent times have become popularised in the Western world.

Islam

Islam (the word means 'submission') is the main religion of the Middle East, North Africa and Western Asia.

It revolves around the figure of *Mohammed*, who was born around 570 AD in the town of *Mecca* in present-day Saudi Arabia. Religion at the time was largely polytheistic (many gods), but it is likely that contact with Jews and several varieties of Christians inclined him towards montheism (one god). His one god was *Allah*.



The name Allah in the Arabic of the Koran

At the age of 40 Mohammed had the first of many visions, which are recorded in Islam's holy book, the

Koran (or *Qu'ran*). The Koran is in Arabic, and translations are frowned upon. He continued to receive revelations until his death in AD 632. In his capacity as the receiver of these revelations, Muslims see him as the last and greatest of the prophets.

Mohammed's wife became his first disciple, but general opposition led him to leave Mecca for Medina. Later, he returned to Mecca in triumph and the new faith spread rapidly among the Arab people, helped along by Mohammed's militant approach. Religion and state became one, the new faith defining a way of life for individual, family and nation.

Islam is not united. Several sects maintain different emphases. The majority of Muslims are Sunnis, the two other major groups being the Sufis, whose approach is more mystic than mainstream Islam, and the Shi'ites (dominant in Iran), but there are also many smaller sects. The practice of Islam is highly legalistic, based on the *Koran* and the *Shari'a* (Islamic law).

Islam recognises Jesus as a prophet, but inferior to Mohammed. Where the New Testament accounts differ from the Koran, the latter is to be believed. Muslims deny that Jesus was the Son of God and that he rose from the dead. In fact many deny that he was crucified, or maintain that, if he was, he did not die. Certainly he achieved no atonement.

Allah alone is God. He is a complete rigorist, lacking in love or grace, and is totally transcendent. To call him 'Father' is considered blasphemous. He is the predestinator of all things and therefore the author of both good and evil. The popular phrase, 'It is the will of Allah', expresses the fatalism of Islam.

Allah rules by inspiring fear, not by grace. Salvation is by adhering legalistically to the requirements of Islam. Those who make the grade will, at the last day, enjoy Paradise, while the rest will be tormented in hell.

Buddhism

Buddhism began around 500 BC as an offshoot of Hinduism. Its founder, born in India, was *Siddhartha Gautama*, known as *the Buddha*, meaning 'enlightened one'.

From a wealthy background, he chose to forsake the good life for that of a beggar and, having experienced *nirvana* (total God-consciousness) under a fig tree, he began to pass on his teachings to a group of disciples. From this small beginning the movement quickly expanded.

One variety of Buddhism—*Mahayana Buddhism*—found wide acceptance outside India, chiefly in China and Japan, and it is with these countries that Buddhism today is chiefly associated. It has a huge

collection of sacred writings, with no clear limit to the canon.

The aim of Buddhism is to achieve *nirvana*. This is a difficult term to define, but it focuses on losing touch with all consciousness of the material world in order to become lost in an awareness of the divine. But it is



The Buddha

chiefly monks and other serious devotees who pursue this goal with fervour. The ordinary Buddhist aims to live by the five precepts: kill no living thing (including insects); do not steal; do not commit adultery; tell no lies; and do not drink intoxicants or take drugs.

In the last half-century a Japanese variety of Buddhism has gained popularity. This is *Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism*, and its surge in popularity can be traced back to the founding in Japan in 1930 of the *Soka Gakkai* (Value Creation Society). It has a much more restricted canon, believing that only one work, the *Lotus Sutra*, contains the true interpretation of the words of the Buddha. Worship centres around a small black wooden box, the *gohonzon*, which is in effect a personal altar, a tiny replica of a shrine at the base of Mount Fuji, Japan. This movement has been very missionary-minded.

The variety of Buddhism best known in the West, however, is *Zen Buddhism*. 'Zen' means 'meditation'. This is a form of the religion that recognises no particular sacred writings but focuses instead on non-verbal activity, chiefly meditation techniques. It requires rigorous self-discipline and emptying oneself of unhelpful interests. Meditation is done in the classical seated position that has become the movement's trademark, and is usually carried out under the supervision of a Master.

The aim is to experience enlightenment, known as *satori*. This is expected to come suddenly and to be of brief duration, but it may be experienced

repeatedly. Logical thought and evaluation are considered hindrances to its achievement.

There is no personal god in Buddhism and therefore no divine person to sin against. Jesus Christ has no status at all.

For further reference:

Concise Guide to Today's Religions by J. McDowell & D. Stewart (Scripture Press)

Truth Under Attack by E. Davies (Evangelical Press)

The Universe Next Door by J.W. Sire (IVP)

Understanding the New Age by R. Chandler (Word)

Much material is also available on the Internet

Christian Witness

In Western society today intolerance is the worst sin. No-one, people believe, has the right to claim exclusivity for their religion. Instead, everyone is free to choose and practise their own faith—provided they don't try to press it on others.

While this view may at present be politically correct, it stands opposed to the teaching of the Bible (e.g. 1 Timothy 2:5) and the command of Jesus to preach the gospel everywhere (e.g. Matthew 28:19-20).

How, then, should we go about witnessing to those of other faiths, and those in the cults?

1. Treat them with respect. Regardless of race, culture and religion, every person is made in God's image and is thus worthy of our respect.
2. Ensure that your attitude is Christlike: caring, interested, humble and helpful.
3. Acquaint yourself with the basics of the other person's religion so that you can show yourself familiar with it and so establish a rapport.
4. Mention some aspect of that religion which in general is socially helpful and which you can comment on favourably.
5. Share your testimony of Christ's love and grace, and your life in the Holy Spirit. Speak warmly of the blessings of knowing Christ here and now, and of the prospects awaiting you at his return.
6. Leave the person with one key verse from the Bible.
7. Don't try to convert the person on the spot. Rarely will this happen. Be content to sow a few seeds and look for opportunities for further contact. Meanwhile, pray for them.