



Understanding Buddhism, Hinduism & the 'Religions Next Door'

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On July 5, militants stormed a shrine in India claimed by both Hindus and Muslims, killing six people. In June, Hindu youths beat three American missionaries and tried to kidnap one as they held a bible study in Bombay. A group calling itself "The Secret Organization of Al Qaeda in Europe" has posted a claim of responsibility for the July 7 blasts in London, saying they were in retaliation for Britain's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fox News reports that the statement was published on a Web site popular with Islamic militants.

With increasing frequency, news reports seem to show that tension and misunderstanding between world religions is mushrooming out of control. People of various faiths can't seem to live side by side peacefully.

Here in the United States, pop singer Madonna touts Kabbalah, a spiritual movement rooted in Jewish mysticism. Actor Richard Gere espouses Zen Buddhism and has declared himself a disciple of the Dalai Lama. Our own neighborhoods are full of religious diversity. But does that mean we all "get along?" And do we truly understand the differences between Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism?

In his book, *The Religions Next Door*, Dr. Marvin Olasky provides insights into the beliefs of four growing religions in America and educate readers about the danger of believing that all religions hold different variations of the same tenets.

Olasky is often called the father of compassionate conservatism and was an informal advisor to George W. Bush during his presidential campaign. He is a professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, a senior fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, and the editor-in-chief of *World*, the national weekly news magazine from a biblical perspective. Olasky has written 13 books of history and cultural analysis, including *Compassionate Conservatism*, *The American Leadership Tradition*, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, *Fighting for Liberty and Virtue*, and *Abortion Rites*.

During an interview this spring, Olasky provided a snapshot of world religion and pointed out the key contrasts with Christianity.

Chismar: What would you say is the key thing Christians need to understand about Hinduism?

Olasky: Hinduism is the world's third largest religion and the dominant one in India and Nepal. Its 900 million adherents include many in Sri Lanka as well. Perhaps close to one million Hindus live in the United States. Sometimes Hinduism is defined as a monistic religion, sometimes as a polytheistic religion. I won't go into all the different definitions

here, but having spent some time in India and in Hindu temples, in practice it certainly does seem polytheistic. Now a Hindu would say these are all manifestations of one God, but you know people are worshipping idols. In India, statues are actually referred to as idols and people bow down to them and worship them, leave them various offerings of food and grain and so forth. Hindus tend to choose a particular god who's going to do something for them while they, in return, do something for that god. It's more of an exchange religion as opposed to Christianity, which is a grace religion. We can't do anything for God.

We also need to free ourselves from the superficial notions we may have gotten from reading about Gandhi or seeing the Gandhi movie that Hindus are pacifists. They aren't at all. In fact the most read and known Hindu scripture is basically a justification for military action. There's no contradiction between a strong Hindu army and the supposed pacifism of Gandhi, because Gandhi actually picked up the practice of non-violence from the west and merged it with Hinduism. If we typically associate Hinduism with Gandhi or if we associate Buddhism with the Dalai Lama, both times we fail to understand the essence of what is going on.

Chismar: What are some key things that Christians need to understand about Buddhism that are currently misrepresented by the press?

Olasky: Well, the press normally portrays Buddhism as a happy, warm religion in which people are kind to each other; they're not asking others to do things or believe things. They're just part of a giving brotherhood. Now, in reality, the central principle in Buddhism is nonattachment and I'll tell you a story. In my college class, I sometimes bring in Buddhist monks so the students can hear directly from them, "Here's what I believe." There was one monk who started talking about the principle of nonattachment and he was mentioning that we should not be attached to our cars. If we buy a new car and we're all proud of it and then it gets dinged, that ruins our day and we're letting the material object have control over us. He also said we shouldn't be attached to our houses. As long as he was talking about cars and houses, some of the students were saying, "Yeah, that sounds pretty cool."

Then he moved on and I asked him a question, "What about attachment to your pets?" He replied, "No, you shouldn't be attached to your dog because your dog will die, and you're going to be sad, and you shouldn't be sad." At that point, some of the kids in the class who have pets and are very attached to their dogs started to wonder, "Well, gee, is it bad to have a dog?"

If you go deeper into Buddhist books and read Buddhist web sites, you'll see the principle of nonattachment carried to people. Buddhist monks show the principle of nonattachment by leaving his wife and young child, abandoning them in a sense because they are obstacles. When you understand the principle of nonattachment theologically, then it's something that doesn't look so warm and cuddly. Another example I use - if a guy is out with a good-looking young lady and if he feels moved to physical passion, Buddhists advise him to visualize what the lady will look like after she's been dead for a few days or

what's going on inside her kidneys and stomach. Visualize those processes and that may reduce your amorous ardor. The theology behind it is basically don't be attached.

Chismar: Do you think Hollywood is glamorizing Eastern faiths? Why are so many jumping on board?

Olasky: You have to go individual by individual, but a lot of it comes out of animosity to Christianity. Buddhism is seen basically as the anti-Christianity. While Christianity has a set of commandments, Buddhism supposedly doesn't have that. They have grown to see Christianity not as a religion of grace but as a set of rules. So sometimes people rebel against that and say in Buddhism we can just live and enjoy different parts of this theology or that theology. It's seen as a much more relaxed, flexible religion.

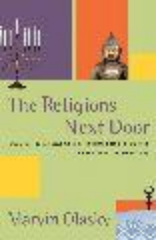
Buddhism has perhaps 350 million adherents worldwide, including one million in the United States. I know people associate Buddhism with probably the most popular form in the U.S. right now, which is Zen Buddhism. There have been some scholarly books that have come out recently, explaining how Zen Buddhism was very important in the Japanese military during the 1920s and 1930s. The samurai ideal came out of Zen Buddhism in the sense that warriors go "into the zone." They concentrate on what they're doing at the moment. They can go and kill people without having any qualms about it because they're not really there; the material does not really exist. The soldiers have done very terrible things but felt, "Well I'm not really doing those terrible things because I and the people I am hurting in this moment really don't exist as material objects."

Chismar: Regarding Jewish people, some Christians view them as "brethren" and even saved or set apart. Should we witness to Jews? What are some key misunderstandings about Judaism?

Olasky: Christians in a polite and thoughtful way should witness to everyone. That is what evangelism is all about. I think one misunderstanding a lot of Christians have is that most Jews are orthodox and so Christians who are preparing to talk with a Jewish neighbor or co-worker may feel the need to immerse themselves heavily in Old Testament prophecies. That's totally irrelevant to most Jews in America. Most Jews tend to be highly secularized and theologically very liberal. Basically a Jewish person can be approached the way any secular person can be approached. Now, a minority of Jews in the United States are orthodox and that's actually a growing minority because orthodox Jews tend to have big families whereas secular Jews tend to have really small families. According to current projections, it's quite likely that in a generation or two, the orthodox will be in the majority minority of American Jews. But right now they're not.

Another thing to understand is that when it comes to social issues such as abortion and homosexuality, orthodox Jews and Christians can and should work very closely together. Those are just several things we'll have to keep in mind.

Chismar: Help us to understand the appeal of Islam



Olasky: Islam, like Judaism, appeals to those seeking a rule-based structure to life. Muslims believe in one god, all-powerful and ever present, uncreated, without beginning or end. The power of Islam moved Arabs and many other people from polytheism to monotheism. Islam has gained one billion followers - of which only 15 percent are Arab - by welcoming people of every color and ethnicity. Its most distinctive appeal is that it highly values attachment to material pleasures. If a Muslim believes in Allah and has accumulated good deeds that outweigh bad deeds, and sincerely repents of sin, he will go to heaven. There, each person shall get all he or she desires, including a perfect sexual partner as a reward.

Chismar: Do Christians have a responsibility to educate themselves about other religions?

Olasky: Number one, as part of general knowledge, we should know about other religions if we want to understand something about American history, world history, and different cultures of the world. For the purpose of understanding the world and people, then sure we want to do that. Number two if we want to take practical policy actions in regard to say Islam as well as other religions then we have to understand how that works out. That's going to heavily influence our judgment on what we can do in Iraq and lots of other places. Number three, there are evangelistic purposes that are significant and I think the approach of taking a bullhorn and shouting out Bible verses is not particularly effective. It's much better to discuss something with a person, find out where that person's coming from, and be able to deal with the real questions that person has.

Chismar: I have heard the most dangerous misperception is that "all paths lead to heaven." Can you comment on this?

Olasky: The more you learn about different religions, you learn they can't all be true because there are huge differences. Buddhism, for example, says it's going to take a long time but we can move closer to sanctification by our own efforts. Christianity emphasizes God's grace. Christianity emphasizes that we die but yet our souls live on and there is the hope of heaven afterwards. That's very different from Buddhism or Hinduism with the endless cycles of reincarnation. They both can't be right.

Christianity is very much a religion of peace that has had some moments in which people identified as Christians have opposed peace. Islam is very much a religion of war. Christianity grew by having its adherents suffer martyrdom. Islam grew by martyring others. You can't say that both are true. You can't even say that elements of different religions are true because the elements tend to contradict each other so much. If you have a very superficial knowledge of religions, you might be able to say they all take the same path, but the more you learn, the more you understand the differences.