

Rivals of Christianity 3 Buddhism and New Age

There are basically two views of religion and God. Either God is Nature or God is over against Nature. Either the religion is natural or supernatural.

Nature Religion

If the religion is based on nature, then nature is the way to God. This implies that what is natural is good and, in an evolutionary sense, nature can produce God. Expressed another way, it is said that in every person is an inner light which, though dimmed by the passion of the senses, can merge with the ultimate Light which is the source of all Being. The drop returns to the ocean from which it originally came. Nature has its own wisdom and there are methods by which one can listen to one's inner being in order to tap the eternal in every person. The theory of Evolution says that the system fixes itself; it has its own native wisdom; there is virtue in the indigenous or truly native being. Above all, there is no need for something outside nature. Nature is its own saviour, if only we use the right techniques. Ultimately, there is a rejection of individuality; a rejection of individual destiny or of a meaningful individual person. Individuality created by desire and particular intention or task is a futility. Nature is eternal and morality is the process of escaping the eternal round of life, death and re-birth (if one believes in reincarnation).

Supernatural Religion

Opposed to natural religion or the religion of the natural, is supernatural religion or the religion of the supernatural. This is Biblical religion, where God is the creator of nature and the designer of the natural. God, as the Creator, is distinct from the creation. God is not in the creation but over against the creation. God judges the creation and brings the natural to His conclusion. Nature is subject to corruption, not naturally because of the senses, but morally because of the judgement of a holy God. God has a purpose for His creation. Therefore, our lives can also have a purpose, which is ultimately to glorify God. The glory uses the individual task and focus of ability inherent in the person. Creation itself is an individuation or a particular thing, created from nothing (*ex nihilo*), over against the darkness and vacuity of the void. Salvation is to be caught up in the purpose of God and to be significant for what God is doing. One is not merged (or blended) into the greater nature but made into the greater purpose.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a major source of nature religion. Hinduism provides a metaphysic for Buddhism, New Age and strains of Materialism.

Hinduism teaches the following:

- 1) Ultimate Reality, Brahman, is an impersonal oneness beyond all distinctions. The universe is an extension of Brahman.
- 2) The true Self (Atman) is a sample of the Brahman. This is a personal divinity possessed by everyone.
- 3) Individually, we are attached to our senses and we lose touch with Brahman. Karma is the law of moral cause and effect whereby we reap what we sow. Karma explains the moral condition of men: everyone is living out the moral consequences of behaviour across various lives. Karma is inevitable and inescapable. Your life is a statement of your Karma: there is no point in fighting one's state.
- 4) Reincarnation (Samsara) is the eternal wheel of life, death and rebirth. One's karma determines what one will re-incarnate as - human, animal or insect. Reincarnation explains suffering and human misfortune and injustice: we choose the bodies in which we return. Reincarnation and karma explains and justifies what is

happening to us as the consequence of a previous existence. This doctrine is a powerful means of maintaining the status quo of a caste system: the bondage of the untouchables.

5) Salvation is liberation from the cycle of samsara. The individual self is seen to be an illusion. Only the undifferentiated oneness of Brahman is real.

6) Enlightenment is the state of detaching one's self from desire and personal ambition. This is the process of losing self-actualisation (or definition) for absorption in the Universal Self.

Comparison with Christianity

For the Hindu, God is impersonal; humanity is essentially continuous from God; mankind's problem is ignorance of their true origin in Brahman (Inherent divinity); salvation is liberation from illusion and ignorance; the religious life is to detach one's self from the separated ego; the result is the ultimate losing of one's self in the cosmic unity.

For the Christian, God is personal; humanity is a creation by God, separate from God; mankind's problem is sin or rebellion against God; salvation is atonement, repentance and reconciliation with God; the religious life is repentance from sinful behaviour and walking in love with God and one's neighbour (respecting their individuality); the result is individual eternal life with Christ on a new earth. The individual is the means to the purpose.

Buddhism

Buddhism grew out of the Hindu Indian culture. Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 BC). A Buddha is an Enlightened One. The enlightenment Buddha received (525 BC) concerned impermanence, no-self and misery. According to Buddha, all is impermanent, merely a succession of events. There is no ultimate or essential reality to things. The Hindu Atman (soul, self) does not exist. There is nothing within us that is metaphysically real, nor is there an eternal 'I'. Human beings are caught in the cycle of births and deaths because the extinction of life does not mean the end of existence but the projection of a new existence. Existence is subject to misery or suffering.

Buddha formulated **Four Noble Truths**:

- 1) That life is subject to suffering.
- 2) That suffering is the result of craving for pleasure and for being or non-being. We suffer because we desire the impermanent.
- 3) That this craving and related suffering can be eliminated.
- 4) That following the eight-fold path eliminates suffering and its root cause of desire.

The Eight-fold Path

WISDOM: 1) Right Understanding 2) Right Thought. CONDUCT: 3) Right Speech 4) Right Action 5) Right Livelihood. MIND: 6) Right Effort 7) Right Awareness 8) Right Meditation.

The immediate goal is to eliminate the cause of suffering. The ultimate goal is to be liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth. The aim is to break the chain of attachment to the illusory self. When enlightenment is attained and the cycle of deaths and rebirths is broken one attains Nirvana. This is not annihilation of personality as there was never a real person in the first place. One can choose not to enter Nirvana and return as a bodhisattva to embody the ideal of enlightenment and teach others. There are the Mahayana (the greater vehicle) and the Hinayana or Theravada (the lesser vehicle) traditions in Buddhism.

Comparison with Christianity

For the Buddhist, God is nonexistent; humanity is an impermanent collection of aggregates/ perceptions; humanity's problem is desire resulting in suffering; salvation is attaining the Buddha

nature and detachment from the illusory self; the religious life is self reliance on the techniques of good living; the result is Nirvana and eternal dissolution or impermanence (nothingness). **For the Christian**, God is personal, eternal and holy; humanity is created in the image of God and purposed for the glory of God; humanity's problem is sin and the sinful nature: we pass through suffering; salvation is atonement from sin, repentance and the purpose-driven life (the formation of character); the religious life is reliance on God, grace, repentance and love (relating to people in their individuality); the result is individual life on a new earth continuing in the purposes of God. What do we do forever?

New Age

New Age religion is a nature religion taking its basic beliefs from Hinduism and Buddhism. New Age refers to the coming Aquarian Age of astrology (the Zodiac - Aquarius is the water-carrier) which follows the current age of Pisces (which is Latin for fish - the traditional sign of the Christian). New Age is a smorgasbord for spirituality. The consumer can choose from a wide variety of groups, teachers and practices. A New Ager may be a Hindu, Buddhist, Wiccan (witch), astrologer, channeler or parapsychologist. They may be into deep ecology, whale worship, hugging trees, animal rights, holistic healing or UFOs. This is a nature based spirituality with many expressions but core beliefs:

New Age Core Beliefs

- 1) The fundamental problem for mankind is ignorance and the perception that we are not connected to Universal Mind. The old age of Pisces was one of a dualism that separated Man from nature. The Western (Christian) rational, linear culture brings science, technology and economic domination creating international competition, environmental disaster and social dislocation (e.g. designer drugs). A dualism sees two different things such as God and nature. A monism sees one thing only such as nature. In monism everything is explained in terms of or as a derivative of that one thing: a nature monism sees and explains everything as natural.
- 2) Everything is fundamentally one or divine. Everything is deified. Oneness is generated by the cosmic Mind or Consciousness. New Age practice is getting with the fundamental force, energy, Mind, or dynamic of the universe such as psychic energy, colour, mind, light, vibration, vital energy, life force. If one uses 'god' then everything is an emanation from the divine oneness.
- 3) Humans are particularisations of the divine oneness. This can be expanded into the idea that 'we are gods'. Human beings determine their own destiny for they have the divine power inherent in their nature. Visualisation and Mind Science mean:
- 4) If the basic stuff of the universe is Mind, then humans can use a mind technique to transcend the limiting reality of their own particular space. Mind can change reality because reality is Mind.
- 5) Reincarnation is used in different ways. One use of this doctrine is to claim that we choose the body and situation we come into when we are born. We are on a long cycle of deaths and rebirths that explains our human situation because there are always moral consequences. This cycle cannot be avoided.
- 6) New Agers are encouraged to get in touch with their spirit guides to assist their spirit evolution. A guide may be an Ascended Master, a disembodied spirit, UFOs, spirits of animals or angels. This is the deification of the natural menagerie of creatures.
- 7) The Ultimate goal is to merge into the Universal Self. We relinquish the individual ego for the Universal Ego. (Problem: being an individual is hard work and subject to failure.)

Comparison with Christianity

For the New Ager, God is impersonal, the life force, the ground of Being; humanity is divine and capable of divine expansion; mankind's problem is that it has forgotten its inherent divinity; salvation is expanding awareness and being joined to the forces of nature for true liberation; the religious life is acquiring various activities and techniques to elevate spirit awareness and to be in contact with spirit guides; the result is knowledge-based promotion in the evolution to higher life forms ultimately leading to the universal Mind.

For the Christian, God is personal, the giver of Life and the source of Being (not its base); humanity is a creature made in the Image of God (Imago Dei) but not divine; mankind's problem is sin and the need for atonement, repentance and holiness; salvation is freedom from sin and living the holy life; the religious life is living in the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit; the result is individual purpose in the history of God.

Summary of Christian Principles

- 1) God is personal, separate from His creation, holy and just.
- 2) Nature is NOT divine nor does it express divinity or purpose. God gives the purpose. Nature is a creature, totally dependent on and waiting for God (Rom 8:20-22).
- 3) Human nature is created good but fallen, now having a sinful nature inherently capable of and predisposed to evil and rebellion against God (Rom 3:23).
- 4) By Calvary, God provides atonement for our sin-sick nature, allowing us to be saved by His grace, through faith (Eph 2:8).
- 5) By faith and works, the Christian lives a holy life before God and a life of love before his neighbour.
- 6) We are to bring every thought captive to obey Christ (2Cor 10:5)
- 7) Judgement is when God brings His creation to His conclusion.