

PATHS TO GLORY: COMPARING WORLD RELIGIONS

1. Making Comparisons

Criteria for Comparison

- common features of world religions
- definitions of religion
- dimensions of religion
- key questions
- Eastern and Western traditions

Points of Departure

- some simple examples using the criteria

2. What Religions Have in Common

4. The Mystical Experience

- some definitions

5. Writings of the Mystics

- excerpts from Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

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COMMON FEATURES OF WORLD RELIGIONS

CRITERIA FOR COMPARISON



The Oxford textbook, *Exploring World Religions: The Canadian Perspective* offers thirteen points that can be used for comparing religions:

- a belief in the supernatural and in a spiritual world beyond our physical material world
- a belief in the existence of a soul
- a collection of sacred writings or scriptures
- organized institutions
- strong sense of family and community based on rituals and festivals that represent and celebrate shared beliefs and practices
- a set of answers about the most pressing human questions, for example, the meaning of suffering
- rules of conduct designed to help followers lead an honourable life and to provide order and purpose to individual and community life
- a system of ethics that provides a guide to moral behaviour
- significant founders or inspired leaders who introduced or spurred the development of the faith
- a search for perfection or salvation
- a life of faith and worship
- techniques for focussing or concentrating one's awareness
- an enriching impact on the lives of its adherents

POINTS OF DEPARTURE



	Buddhism	Christianity
Organized Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ different schools, e.g. Theravada, Mahayana, Tibetan, Zen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ different denominations, e.g. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant churches
System of Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ focus on compassion based on the inter-connectedness of all life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ focus on compassion based on Jesus' command to love one another
Search for Perfection or Salvation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ goal of reaching Nirvana 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ goal of spending eternity in heaven
Techniques for Focussing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ use of koans in Zen Buddhist meditation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ use of icons, especially in Eastern Orthodox churches

DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION, 1

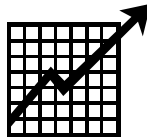
CRITERIA FOR COMPARISON



The definition of religion that you use with your class will provide elements that can be used as criteria for comparison. The definition I use:

- a system of beliefs, practices, and rituals by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate questions about human life.

POINTS OF DEPARTURE



	Hinduism	Judaism
Beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ reincarnation based on karma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ one life with an ultimate reward or punishment
Rituals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the use of statues of the deities in worship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the use of phylacteries and prayer shawls during prayer
Group of People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ approximately 300,000 Hindus in Canada 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ approximately 325,000 Jews in Canada
Ultimate Questions: does "God" exist?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ yes: Brahman is an impersonal, mysterious force 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ yes: God is an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent being

DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION, 2

CRITERIA FOR COMPARISON



Willard G. Oxtoby offers a more complex definition of religions in his 2-volume work *World Religions: Eastern and Western Traditions, second edition*.

Religion is:

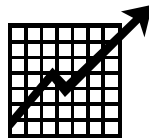
a sense of power beyond the human,

- apprehended rationally as well as emotionally,
- appreciated corporately as well as individually,
- celebrated ritually and symbolically as well as discursively,
- transmitted as a tradition in conventionalized forms and formulations

that offers people

- an interpretation of experience,
- a view of life and death,
- a guide to conduct, and
- an orientation to meaning and purpose in the world.

POINTS OF DEPARTURE



	Taoism	Islam
Interpretation of Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ things operate in the world according to Tao 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ nothing happens without the knowledge and permission of God
View of Life and Death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ death is a natural part of life, but ultimately mysterious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Well-being in this world and well-being in the Hereafter."
Guide to Conduct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ wu wei 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shariah law
Meaning and Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ live in harmony with Tao 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ live in submission to the will of God

DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION

CRITERIA FOR COMPARISON



In *The World's Religions, second edition*, Ninian Smart discusses seven aspects or dimensions of religion that can be used as criteria for comparison:

- the practical and ritual dimension
- the experiential and emotional dimension
- the narrative or mythic dimension
- the doctrinal and philosophical dimension
- the ethical and legal dimension
- the social and institutional dimension
- the material dimension

POINTS OF DEPARTURE



	Buddhism	Judaism
Practical and Ritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ multiphonic chanting of Tibetan monks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ important role of the cantor in prayer services
Narrative or Mythic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the story of the Four Sights explains the motives behind the Buddha's search for enlightenment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the Torah recounts the early history of the Israelites
Ethical and Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 5 Precepts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 10 Commandments
Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ sand mandalas are swept away after their purpose has been served 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Torah scrolls are kept in the Holy Ark in a synagogue

KEY QUESTIONS



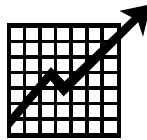
CRITERIA FOR COMPARISON

You can develop questions that focus on the concepts you stress with your students when teaching the course.

The questions I use:

- What is the nature of the Infinite?
- Why are humans separated from the Infinite?
- What is the remedy for this separation?
- How do we encounter the Infinite?
- What is the nature of the physical world?
- What must we do to be good human beings?
- What happens to us when we die?

POINTS OF DEPARTURE



	Taoism	Christianity
Nature of the Infinite	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Tao is an ineffable force that is the source of all life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ the Trinity: God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
Encountering the Infinite	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ religious Taoism offers many rituals, including exercises to balance chi	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ communal and individual prayer
How to be Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ wu wei	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ commandment to love
What happens after Death	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ return to the force of Tao	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Heaven or Hell, depending on the merits of one's life

EASTERN AND WESTERN TRADITIONS

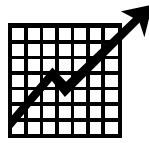
CRITERIA FOR COMPARISON



You can make generalizations about Eastern and Western worldviews.

EASTERN AND WESTERN TRADITIONS		
The Human Predicament: Separation from the Infinite		
	Eastern Worldview	Western Worldview
Cause of the Separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ ignorance ♦ difficulty in comprehending the Infinite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ sin ♦ choosing to go against divine rule
Remedy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ seek enlightenment, find truth, achieve liberation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ seek redemption and forgiveness
Nature of the Infinite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ transcendent: a remote, impersonal, unknowable force that is removed from human care ♦ immanent: a force that pervades all of life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ transcendent: omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent ♦ immanent: a personal being who thinks and feels, and who is concerned with human life
Universe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ has always existed and will always exist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ was created by the Infinite, but is itself finite
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ cyclical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ linear
Progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ unimportant: one should accept the world as it is 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ important: one should try to make the world better
Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ unimportant: one will lose one's individual identity in the final liberation of the soul upon achieving enlightenment and union with the Infinite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ important: individual souls remain intact, and one will be rewarded or punished for eternity based on the quality of one's life on earth

POINTS OF DEPARTURE



	Hinduism	Islam
Cause of our Separation from the Infinite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ maya: not understanding the true nature of life and the universe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ sin: not submitting to the will of God
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ cyclical, e.g. souls are reincarnated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ linear, e.g. life began when God created the universe
Progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ unimportant: must accept and fulfill one's station in life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ important: must work for the improvement of the life of the community
Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ unimportant: atman is identical with Brahman 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ important: individuals are responsible for their own actions at the Final Judgement

WHAT RELIGIONS HAVE IN COMMON

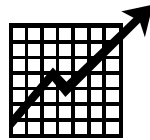
CRITERIA FOR COMPARISON



There are three things that all religions do:

- acknowledge the mystery of the Infinite
- recognize the sanctity of life, especially human life
- teach a system of ethics based on compassion

POINTS OF DEPARTURE



	The Infinite	Sanctity of Life	The "Golden Rule"
Hinduism	Brahman is difficult to comprehend so there are different manifestations of Brahman for humans to relate to and worship.	"That which is the finest essence – this whole world has that as its soul." (<i>Chandogya Upanishad</i>)	"This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain to you." (<i>Mahabharata</i>)
Buddhism	Nirvana is impossible to describe to one who has not experienced it.	"Every being has the Buddha Nature. This is the self." (<i>Mahaparinirvana Sutra</i>)	"Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." (<i>Udana-Varga</i>)
Taoism	Tao is ineffable: "If Tao can be Taoed it's not Tao." (<i>Tao te Ching</i>)	"To be in accord with the eternal means to be enlightened." (<i>Tao te Ching</i>)	"Regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain and your neighbour's loss as your own loss." (Lao Tzu)
Judaism	Jews do not pronounce the proper name of God.	"Let a man always consider himself as if the Holy One dwells within him." (<i>Talmud</i>)	"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole <i>Torah</i> ; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it." (<i>Talmud</i>)
Christianity	The Holy Trinity expresses the mystery and majesty of God.	"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (<i>I Corinthians</i>)	"In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (<i>Matthew</i>)
Islam	Traditionally, there are 99 names for God, each identifying one of God's attributes.	"I have breathed into man of My spirit." (<i>Qur'an</i>)	"Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself." (<i>Hadith</i>)

sources: *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology* edited by Andrew Wilson, and *The Golden Rule across the World's Religions* poster produced by Scarboro Missions

THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

A simple definition of mysticism: a powerful religious experience of unity and connection.

R.C. Zaehner identifies two types of mystical experience based on the descriptions of the content of the experiences.

- monistic: complete identity with Ultimate Reality (the individual and the Infinite are identical)
- theistic: union of the individual with God (the individual and the Infinite have a close relationship like lovers)

W.T. Stace identifies two types of mystical experience based on the process of the experiences.

- extrovertive: in looking at the multiplicity of the world around us, the mystic can be spontaneously struck by a vision of the interconnectedness of all the things in the world
- introvertive: through conscious contemplation the mystic can break through her own individual consciousness to see the unity of all things in the world

HINDUISM

FROM THE *CHANDOGYA UPANISHAD*

1. "Place this salt in the water. In the morning come unto me."
Then he did so.
Then he said to him: "That salt you placed in the water last evening – please bring it hither."
Then he grasped for it, but did not find it, as it was completely dissolved.
2. "Please take a sip of it from this end," said he. "How is it?"
"Salt."
"Take a sip from the middle," said he. "How is it?"
"Salt."
"Take a sip from that end," said he. "How is it?"
"Salt."
"Set it aside. Then come unto me."
He did so, saying, "It is always the same."
Then he said to him: "Verily, indeed my dear, you do not perceive Being here. Verily, indeed, it is here."
3. That which is the finest essence – this whole world has that as its self.
That is Reality. That is *Atman*. That art thou, Svetaketu."

source: *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* edited by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore

BUDDHISM

FROM THE *SHRADDHOTPADA SHASTRA*

. . . . So long as doubt, unbelief, slanders, evil conduct, hindrances of karma, weakness of faith, pride, laziness, a disturbed mind, persist, or their shadows linger, there can be no attainment of the Samadhi of the Buddhas. But once attained, in the luminous brightness of the highest Samadhi, one will be able to realize with all the Buddhas the perfect unity of all sentient beings with Buddhahood's Dharmakaya. In the pure Dharmakaya, there is no dualism, neither shadow of differences. All sentient beings, if they are able to realize it, are already in Nirvana. The Mind's pure Essence is the Highest Samadhi. The Mind's Pure Essence is. . . .Highest Perfect Wisdom.

source: *A Buddhist Bible* edited by Dwight Goddard, as quoted in *The World's Great Scriptures* by Lewis Browne

TAOISM

FROM THE *TAO TE CHING*

If Tao can be Taoed, it's not Tao.
If its name can be named, it's not its name.
Has no name: precedes heaven and earth;
Has a name: mother of ten thousand things.

For it is
Always dispassionate: see its inwardness;
Always passionate: see its outwardness.

The names are different but the source the same.
Call the sameness mystery:
Mystery of mystery, the door to inwardness.

source: *The Way of the Ways: Tao* translated by Herrymon Maurer

JUDAISM

FROM *TALES OF THE HASIDIM*

It is told of one master that in times of entrancement he had to look at the clock in order to keep himself in this world; of another, that when he wanted to contemplate individual things he had to put on spectacles in order to subdue his spiritual sight, for otherwise he saw all the individual things of the world as one.

It is told:

When Rabbi Shelomo drank tea or coffee, it was his custom to take a piece of sugar in his hand the entire time he was drinking. Once his son asked him: "Father, why do you do that? If you need sugar, put it in your mouth, but if you do not need it, why hold it in your hand?"

When he had emptied his cup, the rabbi gave the piece of sugar he had been holding to his son and said: "Taste it." The son put it in his mouth and was very much astonished, for there was no sweetness at all left in it.

Later, when the son told this story, he said: "A man, in whom everything is unified, can taste with his hand as if with his tongue."

source: *Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber

CHRISTIANITY

FROM THE REVELATIONS OF JULIAN OF NORWICH

Because of the great, infinite love which God has for all humankind, he makes no distinction in love between the blessed soul of Christ and the lowliest of the souls that are to be saved We should highly rejoice that God dwells in our soul, and still more highly should we rejoice that our soul dwells in God. Our soul is made to be God's dwelling place, and the dwelling place of our soul is the god who was never made. It is a high knowledge to see inwardly and to know that God, who is our creator, dwells in our soul. And it is a higher and more inner knowledge to see and to know that our soul, which is created, dwells essentially in God. From this essential dwelling in God we are what we are. And I saw no difference between God and our essence, but it was all God.

source: *Ecstatic Confessions: The Heart of Mysticism* collected and introduced by Martin Buber

ISLAM

FROM RABI'A'S PRAYER FOR MYSTICAL UNION

O my God, the best of Thy gifts within my heart is the hope of Thee and the sweetest word upon my tongue is Thy praise, and the hours which I love thee best are those in which I meet with Thee. O my God, I cannot endure without the remembrance of Thee in this world and how shall I be able to endure without the vision of Thee in the next world? O my Lord, my plaint to Thee is that I am but a stranger in Thy country, and lonely among Thy worshippers.

source: *Every Eye Beholds You: A World Treasury of Prayer* edited and annotated by Thomas J.