The World's Religions Study Guide

The World's Religions by Huston Smith

Contents

Plot Summary

The World's Religions can best be described by taking note of what it is not. Author Huston Smith states emphatically that the book is not one of comparative religions. It is as objective a look as possible at the major religions of the world today for the purpose of enlightening people of different cultures and beliefs about each other. In this respect, Dr. Smith has achieved his aim.

In *The World's Religions,* Huston Smith has limited his focus to seven more or less organized world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) with one chapter on Primal Religion. Under these broad headings, where necessary, Dr. Smith examines large sects within each main category. The book is not written in the standard textbook mode but rather is geared toward the general reading public, which makes the work extremely readable.

The chapter on Hinduism is the longest in the book, in part because of the various faces of Hinduism, primarily in India. Insofar as it is possible for a western writer, Smith manages to make it read from an Indian point of view. He is more successful at that with Hinduism and Buddhism than he is with other Asian religions. The Hinduism chapter is followed by the one on Buddhism, which first goes into some depth on the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the founder. It is almost impossible to separate the religion from the life of the Buddha, especially so because he did not intend to start a new religion.

The far eastern religions—Confucianism and Taoism—give insight into both the religions themselves as well as the cultures from which they sprang. As with Siddhartha, Dr. Smith spends a great deal of time on what is known about the life of Confucius before launching into a detailed study of the religion he left behind. Principles more than personalities are the focal points of these Asian religious treatments.

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity spring from the same well, so to speak, and are looked at more in terms of their agreements than in terms of their differences. The predominant character studies are of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad. These three chapters manage to sidestep the areas of greatest contention among them.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book is the one devoted to the Primal Religions, which are oral traditions that predate any organized religion in the world today. Smith is able to present the true values of these religions, which in earlier times were considered heathen. It is, in fact, from these primal religions that later, more organized religions sprang. The moral and familial codes of these religions are in many ways more strident than in later written creeds. In all, *The World's Religions* achieves its aim of broadening the view of divergent cultures and their religions.

Chapter I, Point of Departure,

Chapter I, Point of Departure, Summary and Analysis

The first chapter of *The World's Religions* consists of notes by the author explaining his intentions in writing about the world's religions. These notes are essential in order to comprehend the subsequent chapters, each given to a specific description of a world religion. In the notes, Huston states that the purpose of the book is not to evaluate the various religions, but rather to describe "well-defined themes" (p. 2) in each of the religions discussed. He categorically states that the work is not intended to be a history of religion. The focus is on *ideas* that are the base of the various religious systems examined. A further important point he makes in the notes is that an arbitrary limit has been placed on the number of divisions within each religion under consideration. Economically, he decided on three points of view for each religion "lest trees obscure the woods" (p. 3). In deciding *which* views to represent, his criterion was simply that he selected those that would have the greatest relevance to the intended readers. His purpose extended to the universality of themes in the various religions that speak to all men everywhere.

Smith warns emphatically that the book does not represent a "balanced account" of its subjects (p. 4). His examinations are about values, which he likens to a course in music appreciation where only the best of music is presented during the instruction. His thesis is that "the theological and metaphysical truths of the world's religions are inspired" but that "religious institutions" are another story (p. 5). In other words, Smith is interested only in the deposits of wisdom within each religion studied rather than with the complexities of the institutions that have preserved them. The book is by no means an analysis of comparative religions; there is no effort made in regard to the value of one religion over another.

After explaining what his book is *not*, Smith continues in the notes to delve into what it *is*. First, he seeks to embrace the world, recognizing that such an approach must eventually fall short. He therefore limits himself to writing in English for the Western mind. Because we live in a shrinking world, he insists, it necessarily follows that mankind must come together "and take each other seriously" (p. 7). In that coming together, there must of necessity be a resulting wider range of vision that ultimately leads to a greater understanding of the various world religions. Religion in this book is taken seriously, avoiding patronizing points of view. It looks at the challenges to the soul of man as an epic journey toward confronting reality. In the final note, Smith indicates that one of his main goals is communication and bridge building, delineating those truths that have the greatest relevance to the world today.

By limiting both the scope and selectivity in *The Word's Religions*, Huston Smith has laid the groundwork for understanding the content of each succeeding chapter. These limitations do not dissect the observed religions; but rather, they reach for the heart of their wisdom as related to the needs of all mankind.

Chapter II, Hinduism,

Chapter II, Hinduism, Summary and Analysis

Leading into this chapter on Hinduism, Smith refers to two men whose life work has had a profound impact upon the world as we know it today. Those men are Robert Oppenheimer and Mahatma Gandhi. By contrast, Oppenheimer oversaw the introduction into the world of the greatest power of destruction ever before seen while Gandhi became the model for the power of non-violent protest.

Chapter II, Hinduism, What People Want,

Chapter II, Hinduism, What People Want, Summary and Analysis

Hinduism advocates that people can have what they want, which sounds hedonistically exciting but, in reality, tosses the problem of "wants" into the lap of the individual. Surprisingly, the *aesthetic* Hindu does not scold people who seek pleasure in life. Man is born with pleasure-pain reactors that inherently lead all humans to seek the former and try to avoid the latter. Hinduism recognizes that the world is filled with vistas of beauty and pleasure that are appealing to man. So long as the search for pleasure does not harm another living being, Hinduism allows mankind to indulge itself. Testing this theory, the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard attempted a life guided by the search for pleasure and found that it ultimately led to complete failure. The Hindu is not surprised by such a conclusion, and recognizes the ultimate futility of seeking pleasure alone.

When pleasure seeking fails to satisfy, it generally leads to another human goal—worldly success. Although this goal lasts longer because it is a social achievement, involves other people, and becomes more important that selfish pleasure. Interestingly, this idea fits neatly into Western thinking, but like pleasure seeking, it has its limitations. Seeking wealth, fame, and power are exclusive to the individual and, therefore, result in competition, which is always precarious. These goals do not multiply when shared but rather diminish, thus becoming susceptible to changing hands. Furthermore, the drive for success is insatiable. Left unchecked, it produces a constant desire for more and more. Another problem with seeking wealth, power, and success is that ultimately it results in the same ennui as hedonism. There simply is no end to it. Finally, worldly success can never be anything but temporal, an idea summed up in the well-worn expression, "You can't take it with you".

After pleasure seeking and drives for worldly success have proven to be ultimately futile, Hinduism offers an alternative to the Path of Desire. This alternative, the Path of Renunciation, has often been misunderstood in the West as a "life-denying spoilsport" (p. 17). It should rather be seen as comparable to the athlete who avoids those indulgences that will hinder his or her training to reach specified athletic goals. When Western man listens to the testimony of men like Kierkegaard who have tried the hedonistic life, the Path of Renunciation begins to make more sense. Leo Tolstoy observed that once people begin to sense futility in seeking pleasure and success they begin to die. Nonetheless, Hinduism understands that for certain individuals a life of pleasure seeking and striving for success may be fulfilling when the novelty of the search never wears thin. Some, if not most, however, will ultimately come to the realization that the self they have striven to serve is, after all, extremely small and that there is something larger and far more significant than a life of triviality. The first signpost of the Path of Renunciation reads, "the community". This alters the attitude of "getting" toward the idea of "giving," and is, therefore, of more lasting value than the

self-centered desires of human nature. However, even this more altruistic pathway eventually fades away. Smith then leads the Western mind in a gentle transition toward better understanding of Hindu thought.

Chapter II, Hinduism, What People Really Want,

Chapter II, Hinduism, What People Really Want, Summary and Analysis

Smith opens this section with a quote from Aldous Huxley: *There comes a time when one asks even of Shakespeare, even of Beethoven, is this all?* (p. 19). The question appropriately applies to Hinduism as it unequivocally affirms that there is far more to life than satisfying pleasures. This is especially true given that the basic tenant of Hinduism is that what people want they can have, and that includes the spiritual ideas of infinite being, infinite awareness, and infinite bliss. Moreover, Hinduism declares that humans already posses these things but until a certain point they remain hidden. The *Atman* (God within) remains hidden until actively sought after and the human self is never complete until the *Atman-Brahman* (Godhead) is accounted for. The answer to discovering this *Atman-was able to* distractions and false assumptions surrounding the person. Therefore, the life problem to the Hindu is that of cleansing away the dross of being until the infinite shines through like a lamp in a dark room.

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Beyond Within,

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Beyond Within, Summary and Analysis

Western thought suggests getting as far away from imperfection as possible, whereas Hinduism avows a purpose of by-passing imperfection altogether. The question then arises whether humankind can go beyond the variants of joy, knowledge, and being (things people really want) into a less circumscribed state of awareness. For example, the inhibitor of joy is pain. Physical pain can be conquered by focusing on that which distracts the mind from the pain itself. Ramakrishna, greatest of the nineteenth century Hindu saints, was able to withstand the doctor's probing of his cancerous throat before his death. There are countless examples even in the west where physical pain was overridden by another concentration, such as that of an injured player in sports who is so intent on the game that the pain is not noticed. However, psychological pain, such as disappointment, is dealt with by rising above the pain and seeing the larger picture. For example, when the loser can share the joy of the victor, the disappointment of the loss is negated. Again, there are accounts of Ramakrishna feeling the pain of others with whom he empathized. In a positive way, this kind of detachment lifts life above the possibility of frustrations and ennui, the third threat to joy.

The second limitation to human life is ignorance, which the Hindu claims is also removable. By gaining an insight into the point of everything, there is no need for the details of how things occur. In Western psychology, the attempt is made to put light into a mental darkness, whereas the Hindu maintains that it is possible to attain that state of awareness where there is no darkness at all.

The third limitation to life, and perhaps the most difficult to surmount, is restricted being. Even those who identify more with humanity than with self must eventually die. If, however, the approach to understanding being is in terms of time rather than spatially, the Hindu concept of the mind as being infinite formulates an entirely different picture of being. At that point, the natural laws cease to be confining. Such minds are serene with strength flowing outward without regard to personalities or human conditions. The Hindu estimate of being is that there is more to ourselves than we expect. The metaphor and parables of Hinduism are designed to awaken an awareness of the gold hidden in the depths of our being, but describing it is like trying to "describe the sunset to one born blind" (p. 26).

Chapter II, Hinduism, Four Paths to the Goal,

Chapter II, Hinduism, Four Paths to the Goal, Summary and Analysis

All people carry within themselves great strength, full wisdom, and unquenchable joy; but those things are so deeply buried within that they are difficult to extract. This is the core of Hindu religion, an obsession with attaining higher states of being. The directions for reaching the human potential falls under the heading of *yoga* that conjures up images of bearded men in loincloths twisted in various contorted shapes. Now, the West has appropriated the word into a form of wellness exercise. The word *yoga* is from the same root word as the English word *yoke*. This *hatha yoga* originally led to the more *spiritual yoga*. In Hinduism, it was not concerned with physical beauty but rather perfect control. There are four spiritual trails in Hinduism toward spiritual identification with *Brahman*. Which of the paths one takes depends upon the condition of the person at the outset. Each of the four types of individuals (the reflective, the emotional, the active, and the experimentally inclined) will take a different path to enlightenment, but ultimately any of the paths will arrive at the goal. This preamble leads then to a discussion of the distinctively different *yoga* instructions.

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Way to God through Knowledge,

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Way to God through Knowledge, Summary and Analysis

Jnana yoga is prescribed for those who have a spiritual bent and are highly reflective in their thought. This type of *yoga* requires that a person be able to distinguish clearly between the larger inner self and the surface self. The idea is that one's being is Being itself. In this kind of thinking, the *Atman* (God within) becomes a realization. The mind, even as the body constantly changes, yet there is that which remains Self in the mind. The aim is to distinguish Self from one's lesser physical being. The task, then, is to correct false identification leading to a transient image of the inner being. One manifestation of this idea is to think of the physical personal in the third person, which drives a wedge between the lesser surface and the true self-identification.

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Way to God through Love,

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Way to God through Love, Summary and Analysis

The *yoga* of knowledge is the shortest, but also steepest, path to divine realization and limited to only those highly spiritual few. *Bhakti yoga* is the most popular form and has the most followers. It is centered on love of all kinds—fraternal, conjugal, and ethereal—seeking God not as an internal part of the self but as an infinite Being. *Bhakti* believe that there is separation between the human self and the infinite Me, a division expressed in the saying "I want to taste sugar, not be sugar" (p. 33). The idea is that healthy love is outgoing and devoid of love for oneself. The *bhakti* goal is to adore God in all aspects of life. The three features of a *bhakta's* (practitioner of *bhakti*) approach are *japam*, the practice of repeating God's name incessantly; ringing the changes on love, putting to use the different kinds of love; and worship of one's chosen ideal, which accounts for the thousands of different Hindu idols. The selected ideal becomes one's *ishta*, the preferred form of the divine. The appeal *bhakti yoga* has for the masses is its humanness, it seems, rather than a more esoteric approach to religion.

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Way to God through Work,

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Way to God through Work, Summary and Analysis

Karma yoga approaches religion on the basis of work and may be practiced in either the *jnana* or *bhakti* mode. Its principle is one of surrender to God according to the nature of the individual. It stresses doing what one must do without attachment, adapted to the way each individual sees himself—introspective or looking for the infinite Me. By concentrating on work with a kind of detachment, putting all-out effort into the work, there is no time for laziness, which is a form of selfishness. Whatever style one has for practicing *karma*, the objective is similar—the *jnani* sending love energy outward, diminishing self, and the *bhakti* seeking naughtness by focusing on the *Atman* within, thus diminishing the ego.

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Way to God through Psychophysical Exercise,

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Way to God through Psychophysical Exercise, Summary and Analysis

Raja yoga (the royal road) is designed for those with a scientific bent. The theory behind this method is that human beings are layered entities and seek to delve into the deep-lying areas of the psyche. Theoretically, the practice of *raja yoga* leads to a direct personal experience beyond what is within. It comes, however with certain risks; for at the extreme it could be a waste of time or (if done incorrectly) could induce psychosis. There are eight steps to the process. One and two involve preparation in clearing the mind and attaining mental clarity.

Step three involves assuming a *yoga* position that gets the body into the best possible position to remain still and alert. Step four is proper *yogic* breathing, which prevents intrusions from disrupting the meditation. The next step is excluding the outward universe for the inner universe. Finally, it is necessary to close the doors to perception to the point that even drum beats in the same room are not heard by the *yogi*. At this point, the mind's strongest opponent is itself, bouncing around like a crazed monkey in a cage. To control this activity, the *yogi* concentrates on one thing to the exclusion of all others, for example, the tip of his nose or the glow of a joss stick. In the last two steps, concentration gradually deepens into meditation. The concept of self is completely eliminated and the mind at last becomes able to see the invisible.

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Stages of Life,

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Stages of Life, Summary and Analysis

In Hinduism, the first stage of life is that of the student. Traditionally, this stage lasts from about the time of initiation (ages eight to twelve) and lasts for a period of about twelve years. Following that is the stage of marriage where energies are turned outward toward providing for a family. The elements of pleasure, success, and duty are involved in this stage. Some may never progress beyond this stage. The fourth stage of retirement arrives approximately after the birth of the first grandchild, bringing on the time of pondering the meaning of life. Beyond retirement comes the stage of *sannyasin*, defined in the *Bhagavad-Gita* as one who neither hates nor loves anything" (p. 53). This stage is just the opposite of desiring to be "somebody". In the extreme Jainist offshoot of Hinduism, the *sannyasin* saints are "clothed in space", going about stark naked. The unwise lives life as a struggle with death, trying to deny the erosion of time; not seeing the inevitable as natural and good. Hinduism sees life on a continuum that moves naturally through all the stages, and only the wise conquer the art of seeing life as friendly.

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Stations of Life,

Chapter II, Hinduism, The Stations of Life, Summary and Analysis

Going back to the basic tenet of Hinduism, life is conceived to be one of stations or castes. No one really knows how the caste system actually arose in the pattern as it is practiced today. The original system, however, became perverted over time though many religious leaders have sought to remove the untouchable classification from the vernacular. However, today many educated Indians continue to support the ideas of caste though in its basic form. The levels once again are, from highest to lowest: (1) the *brahmin,* or seer; (2) the *kshatriya*, or administrator; (3) the *vaishya*, or producer; and (4) the *shudra*, or servant. Few today would try to defend the extremes that this caste system developed into. However, the idea that the separation provides a certain security in that a person from one caste does not have to compete with those of another caste. Furthermore, the higher the caste, the greater the punishment for the same sin or crime. To this point in the overview of Hinduism, practicality has been the main theme.

Chapter II, Hinduism, "Thou Before Whom All Words Recoil,"

Chapter II, Hinduism, "Thou Before Whom All Words Recoil," Summary and Analysis

The human mind is adapted to deal with the finite; therefore, the Hindu insists that it must learn what to leave out. The goal of Hinduism is to go beyond consciousness and any possibility of frustration to where God lies beyond being as we understand it. This concept of God is beyond the philosopher's God-with-attributes. Yet, Hinduism allows for both concepts at the same time, a seeming contradiction; but viewed through the eye of the Hindu, it accommodates the individual mind. The transpersonal mind becomes so possessed by the goal of achieving *Brahman* that it forgets everything else, including the encouragement of companions. Hindu concepts of God eventually transcend the anthropomorphic and become total abstractions, non-images that take years to master.

Chapter II, Hinduism, Coming of Age in the Universe,

Chapter II, Hinduism, Coming of Age in the Universe, Summary and Analysis

To the Hindu the spirit does not depend upon the body any more than the body depends on the clothes it wears. The spirit is eternal and changes its habitation when it outgrows an old one. Once residing in the human form, however, the soul ceases its "automatic" growth and the law of *karma* comes into effect. This idea implies a completely moral universe that requires individual moral responsibility and denies the concept of lucky breaks. Tiring of the mundane, the soul craves a higher stratum of existence when the novelty of daily human pursuits wears thin. This is accompanied by the idea that the soul is never truly alone but is around the nucleus of the *Atman*, the God within.

Chapter II, Hinduism, The World—Welcome and Farewell,

Chapter II, Hinduism, The World—Welcome and Farewell, Summary and Analysis

The Hindu conception includes innumerable galaxies centering on worlds of finer or coarser natures from which souls journey on the ultimate pathway to God. Utopia on earth is a fiction as the world is simply a bridge to the eternal. Nevertheless, the Hindu denies the independence of the natural world, suggesting that if the divine base of everything were removed, the earth would instantly collapse into nothingness. There are, however, different perceptions of the world as in the case of the average person who perceives only through human senses, and that of the *yogi* who has risen to a higher level of consciousness. The natural world is not illusion, the Hindu says, but there is something tricky about it, like how a rope lying in the dust may be mistaken for a snake. Such a concept raises questions for which there is no answer, reliant on the cosmic dance of God and its timeless streams of divine energy. The world, then, to the Hindu is tiered, *karmic*, middling (or in between), a training ground, and *lila* or the grace radiating from infinite vitality.

Chapter II, Hinduism, Many Paths to the Same Summit,

Chapter II, Hinduism, Many Paths to the Same Summit, Summary and Analysis

Hinduism has shared land with Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Parsees, and Sikhs with an attitude that other religions are alternate paths toward the same goal. Hindus do not advocate conversion from one religion to another. Sri Ramakrishna set about to experience all the great world religions and concluded that the ultimate realization in all of them was the same as in Hinduism. He likens his experience to getting on top of a roof by rope, ladder, bamboo pole or some other device. The end result is the same—arrival on the rooftop. Sri Ramakrishna related a story of Vishnu's displeasure with a devotee who loved him but hated all other religions. To demonstrate his point, Vishnu assumed half of the body of Shiva and half of himself to make the man understand. The innate tolerance of other religions in Hinduism is made clear by these examples.

Chapter II, Hinduism, Appendix on Sikhism,

Chapter II, Hinduism, Appendix on Sikhism, Summary and Analysis

Hindus tend to look at Sikhs as wayward Hindus, although Sikhs reject that idea. The emphasis in Sikhism is on God alone rather than any organized religion. In that respect, the two entities are remarkably alike in that Hindus have the ultimate goal of God. Originally, there were ten *gurus* in the Sikh religion, who were ultimately displaced by the written words of sacred wisdom. The institution of the *Khalsa*, or the five Ks (since all parts begin with the letter K), gives purity to the Sikh order. Those Ks include uncut hair (usually tied up in a turban), the comb for good order, a steel bracelet that binds the wearer to God, a dagger (symbolic of self-defense), and undershorts (replacing the Indian *dhoti*), as a symbol of preparedness. The Sikh seek unity with God through love and have no traditions of reunification, asceticism, celibacy or mendicancy (begging for alms). They are householders who provide for their families and donate one tenth of their incomes to charity.

Chapter III, Buddhism, "The Man Who Woke Up,"

Chapter III, Buddhism, "The Man Who Woke Up," Summary and Analysis

When bewildered people approached Buddha, asking him who he was, his answer was, "I am awake". The Sanskrit root of the word *Buddha* literally means, "to wake up and know" (p. 82). Therefore, the Buddha is the "enlightened one", or the "awakened one". He is out of the world of dreams known as the state of human life and into an awareness of enlightenment.

In 563 B.C., Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakya was born into the lap of luxury. He grew to be a handsome man with all the wealth and privilege of his station. In his twenties, however, he felt unsettled, as is expressed in the "Legend of the Four Passing Sights". His father spared no expense to try and keep his son attached to the world, because fortunetellers suggested that he might take a more meditative course as he matured. The young prince was shielded from sickness, decrepitude, and death. According to the legend, the king ordered runners to clear the path for his son whenever he went out so that he would not lay eyes on these things. However, once the runners overlooked an old man, and Siddhartha got his first glimpse of old age. On a second day, he encountered one whose body was diseased. On the third day, he saw a corpse lying beside the road; and, on the fourth day, he saw a monk and learned that there was a life of seclusion and meditation.

Soon afterward, Siddhartha took leave of his palace and went to live in the forest. There he learned solitude and silence. Then he joined up with ascetics and learned to defy the body. Finally turning his back on physical mortification as a means to find enlightenment, he turned to a combination of rigorous thought and meditation.

In a story that is remarkably like the temptation of Christ by the devil, as Siddhartha sat meditating under the *bo* tree, *Mara*, the Evil One, realized that the former prince was on the verge of understanding and paraded three temptations in front of him to disrupt his concentration. The first temptation was that of beautiful women, but they failed to get his attention. The second was the threat of Death, but that did not concern him. Finally, *Mara*, himself, came and challenged his right to do what he was doing. The story goes that Siddhartha only touched his fingertip to the earth, which responded loudly that it bore witness to his right to reach enlightenment. As the Evil One and his minions retreated, the gods of the heavens descended with garlands and perfumes and the *bo* tree rained its red blossoms. In the morning, Gautama emerged as the Buddha.

Mara returned one more time to tempt the Buddha by challenging him as to where he would speak the words he now knew that were so high above the language of the

material world. The Buddha dispatched him by saying that some would understand and others would not.

The Buddha's ministry was long and arduous as he went walking everywhere, gathering disciples who were acutely aware of being in the presence of greatness. He resisted attempts of his followers to declare himself a god and even kings bowed down to him. Yet his concentration was always compassionately outward others. On his deathbed, after he had eaten a meal in the house of Cunda, the smith, he was concerned that Cunda might blame himself for the Buddha's death. He sent word to Cunda that his wonderful meal was sending him on his way to *nirvana*.

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Silent Sage,

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Silent Sage, Summary and Analysis

As the Buddha went about teaching, he was constantly bombarded by questions, which he subjected to clear and dispassionate analysis. He was not aloof, however, and was so compassionate that his teachings became known as "a religion of infinite compassion" (p. 88). Even at the height of his fame he could be seen with his begging bowl in hand, patiently waiting for whatever food people brought to him. He meditated three times a day in circumstances that most would consider uncomfortably detrimental to meditation. He admitted his temptations and used his weaknesses to show others the fallibility of man. The assemblies that gathered to hear him were not only large, but also incredibly silent. He accepted even the social outcasts into his *sangha,* or order. There was always an element of mystery about him because of the depth of his character and unfathomable mind. He was looked upon as the "silent sage" that came among the people.

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Rebel Saint,

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Rebel Saint, Summary and Analysis

The rise of Buddhism might be compared to the Protestant Reformation in that it was a reaction to the excesses of the Hinduism of the day. The religion of Buddhism arose full-blown almost overnight. Inherently, religion requires people above average to occupy administrative positions, and rituals come into existence. Following administration and ritual, speculation finds its place in answering the mysteries of life, and that is followed by traditions. These things lead to the grace or beliefs of the religion and ultimately its mysteries. In the Hinduism of the day, these six features had become overblown and distorted.

The Buddha preached a religion devoid of authority by admonishing his followers to "be lamps unto yourselves" (p. 94). His religion was also lacking in ritual as he ridiculed rites as mere superstitions, trappings irrelevant to the business of finding enlightenment. He skirted speculation by stressing noble silence. He eschewed tradition, telling his followers not to go by what was handed down but by what they discovered within. His message was one of intense self-effort and dismissed the idea that only *brahmins* could attain enlightenment. In Buddhism, there was no supernatural and he condemned all forms of soothsaying and mysticism.

Buddha's religion was empirical, scientific, pragmatic, therapeutic, psychological, egalitarian, and individualistic.

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Four Noble Truths,

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Four Noble Truths, Summary and Analysis

The Buddha's first sermon was preached after a ninety-four mile walk toward the city of Banaras. Just six miles short of his destination, he came upon a small group of aesthetics who began asking him questions. Without hesitation, he gave them the Four Noble Truths. First, life is *dukkha,* or suffering. His idea was not, however pessimistic. He was simply recognizing the facts that life, typically, is unfulfilling and insecure. He did not rule out the notion of having an enjoyable time but recognized that those moments did not last. He did not allow the *dukkha* to be vague, but rather he outlined six distinct areas of human suffering. First, was the trauma of birth. Next came the pathology of sickness. Following that was the morbidity of decrepitude. Then came the phobia of death. Tied to all others was the idea of being burdened with what one dislikes, an infirmity one is bound to for life. Finally, he talked about separation from loved ones.

The Second Noble Truth involves the cessation of *tanha,* loosely translated as *desire*. The "desire" here, however, relates to all kinds of selfishness that diminishes all other forms of life. It insists that the suppression of self-identity in favor of others is a noble undertaking. The Third Noble Truth involves the overcoming of human cravings on the path to enlightenment. In so doing, we can eliminate the torment of unfulfilled cravings. The Fourth Noble Truth relates the way out of our *tanha* by following the eight-fold path.

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Eight-Fold Path,

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Eight-Fold Path, Summary and Analysis

The Eight-Fold Path of the Buddha is his recipe for progressing beyond the pushing and pulling of life into a way of intentional living. The first of the steps in the path is Right Views. The Four Noble Truths prepare the mind for right thinking and use human reasoning to good advantage. The second step is Right Intent, which advises making up the mind to follow the better way. The third step is Right Speech, ridding oneself of lying, uncharitable words, and poor motives. It directs the mind toward charity. The fourth step is Right Conduct. The guidelines for right conduct in Buddhism read a lot like the Ten Commandments. The proscriptions for the Buddhist include not killing, not stealing, not lying, keeping oneself chaste, and avoiding intoxicants. The fifth step on the pathway is Right Livelihood. This includes finding occupation that is conducive to spiritual growth and not becoming so enraptured of making money that it becomes life's end rather than life's means. Step six is Right Effort, which involves steadiness and proper timing. Right Mindfulness is the seventh step, recognizing that we are the results of what we think. The Buddha, unlike other religious leaders, saw ignorance and not sin to be the chief downfall of man. Continual self-examination, he taught, overcomes ignorance. Self-examination requires the inspection of motives and recognizes the small amount of control we have over our untrained minds. Finally, Right Concentration is very similar to the *raja yoga* of Hinduism, except that the Buddha taught that it was not exclusive to the highest caste.

Chapter III, Buddhism, Basic Buddhist Concepts,

Chapter III, Buddhism, Basic Buddhist Concepts, Summary and Analysis

Getting a total outlook on the Buddha's concepts is difficult because he wrote nothing during his lifetime, although he taught for forty-five years. There is a gap of almost a century and a half between his actual teaching and the first transcriptions of his words. There appears to be some partisan slant to many of the writings, even to the point of minimizing the Buddha's break with Brahmanic Hinduism. Added to that, the Buddha's own silence by shunning even the appearance of philosophy leaves other voids in our present day understanding of the man and his teaching. For example, when asked about the nature of *nirvana,* the Buddha turned the question around and asked about the wind. The idea is that some things defy description. Because *nirvana* excludes description, the Buddha dismissed the idea of a personality of God. He did, however, tell his monks of an Unborn that neither became, was created, or formed. The Buddha did not share the idea of a separate soul within man. He saw life and transmigration as a succession of candle being lit by the candle before it. The Buddha clearly did not state that enlightenment ceases to exist at death nor does he suggest it lives on. That is the vague picture our minds can form about *nirvana*.

Chapter III, Buddhism, Big Raft and Little,

Chapter III, Buddhism, Big Raft and Little, Summary and Analysis

Buddhist history parallels all other major religion in that hardly a century after the death of the Buddha it began to show signs of schism. Furthermore, the divisions arose over questions that have historically divided religious thinkers. Three of those questions relate to the independence or interdependence of man, how man relates to the universe, and whether man should be ruled by the head or the heart. Two major groups divided over such questions, both of the groups including the word *yanas* (with the literal meaning of "raft") in their identifications. The "rafts" symbolized that which carries one across the sea of life to the shores of enlightenment. *Mahayana* Buddhism stressed a cosmic grace that aided people in the journey and became the largest of the divisions as the "Buddhism of the people". This is the big raft. On the opposing side, the *Hinayana* Buddhists insisted that attaining *nirvana* is a full-time job that requires people to "go out of the world" into a life of total meditation. Thus, it developed into the little raft of only monks.

Leaving the history of the two schools and their subsequent disputes, some major differences appear between the Theravada and Mahayanist views of Buddhism. Theravada, which insists that the path to enlightenment is up to the individual, looks individuals as being on their own in the universe, whereas the Mahayana sees grace as a fact, a boundless power drawing everything to its proper goal (p. 123). Theravada counts *bodhi,* or wisdom as the most important factor in achieving enlightenment, whereas the Mahayana looks more toward *karuna,* or compassion. The *sangha* (monastic order) is paramount to the Theravada, but Mahayana is primarily for laypeople. Consequently, the Theravadin strikes out alone for *nirvana,* the Mahayanist stresses making it available to all. It is like two men walking in the desert when they come upon a compound with high walls. The first man scales the wall, sees what is inside, and jumps in. The second man scales the wall and sees the beauty inside, but he declines to jump inside, waiting for the next weary traveler to share the peace he has found.

The differences relate to the different views of the Buddha himself. Theravadins view the Buddha as the greatest sage who, through his own efforts, discovered *nirvana*. The Mahayanists view him more as a savior, someone who spent his time teaching others the way out of suffering. This view, naturally, accomplishes what the Buddha resisted during his lifetime, making of him a God. By far the larger of the two, Mahayana Buddhism was expanded throughout Asia by Asoka (ca 272-232 B.C.) a Himalayan king who discovered it as an Indian sect and propelled it into a world religion.

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Secret of the Flower,

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Secret of the Flower, Summary and Analysis

One of the off-shoots of Mahayana Buddhism is *Ch'an,* or Zen Buddhism, which flourishes in Japan. It is difficult to define in words because Zen Buddhism speaks in conundrums, which the untrained ear finds confusion. Zen Buddhist monks set verbal traps for one another and delight in sidestepping them. Zen Buddhism contends that people fool themselves by constructing artificial worlds, using words that describe inadequately, and by not realizing that the highest experiences cannot be expressed in words. Therefore, Zen cannot be expressed through any verbal formula (p. 131). Zen abhors creeds and is not founded on any written word. It strives to go past any word barrier with a unique mode of understanding. Zen students are brought forward through the three approaches: *zazen* (sitting in meditation for long hours); *koan* (presentation of problems like the classic "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"); and, *sanzen* (private consultation with a master). Zen is not otherworldly, but rather is very much a part of the world. There are four areas in which it has had a profound impact upon Japanese culture: the *sumie* or black ink landscape painting; the refined Japanese garden;rt of flower arranging; and, the elaborate tea ceremony with its slow and graceful movements.

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Diamond Thunderbolt,

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Diamond Thunderbolt, Summary and Analysis

Vajra, originally the thunderbolt of Indra (from Hinduism), was transformed into the diamond scepter of Buddhism. The Tibetans perfected this version of Buddhism, and its main addition was the *tantra*. The Tibetans claim no special differentiation from mainstream Buddhism other than that it enables achieving *nirvana* within a single lifetime. The three M's of Tantric Buddhism are *mantras,* which convert sounds into holy formulas, *mudras,* which are elaborate hand gestures, and *mandalas,* which offer visual icons. The temporal and spiritual authority of Tibetan Buddhism is the Dalai Lama, who is perpetually reincarnated.

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Image of Crossing,

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Image of Crossing, Summary and Analysis

Regardless of the seemingly different threads of Buddhism, there is a unity in the theme of a crossing from the sufferings of life to the wisdom of enlightenment. In each, the imagery is that of crossing a great stream where the earth-bound shore from which one embarks becomes less real as the farther shore takes on its spiritual substance. The Buddhist monk takes refuge in the Buddha, who made the first crossing; the *dharma*, which is the means of crossing; and the *sangha*, which is the religious order helping to navigate the trip. The destination of the crossing is not a place—it is where the person stands upon arrival (for the Buddha, it was under the Bo tree). The final insight does away with opposites, having crossed the river of ignorance, and diminishes the distinction between time and eternity.

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Confluence of Buddhism and Hinduism in India,

Chapter III, Buddhism, The Confluence of Buddhism and Hinduism in India, Summary and Analysis

It is ironic that Buddhism, which began in India by rejecting ritual and mystery, evolved by bringing all that it originally rejected back into practice. A further irony is that Buddhism flourishes all over Asia except in India where it was born. Nevertheless, Buddhist principles left their mark on Hinduism. Theravada Buddhism is considered the same as non-dual Hinduism in India today.

This chapter on Buddhism admittedly looks only at the major Buddhist practices, which appear very diverse at face value but are incredibly alike beneath the surface. The ironies of the religion lie in the evolution of its practices which appear to be at odds with what available literature tells about the Buddha himself and the elevation of the Buddha to god stature, which he adamantly resisted during his lifetime.

Chapter IV, Confucianism, The First Teacher,

Chapter IV, Confucianism, The First Teacher, Summary and Analysis

Called the First Teacher because of his prominence in China as a teacher, Confucius was born ca. 551 B.C. His father died when he was three and his mother who brought him up was impoverished. Confucius was a teacher of great candor; respected, but also feared by the politicians of his day. At the age of fifty, he realized his true mission and spent the next thirteen years traveling about to fulfill it. Having once abandoned his home province, he was invited to return when there was a change in the public administration. Then, being too old for public office, he spent the last five years of his life teaching and died at the age of seventy-two.

Confucius used a method of teaching not unlike that of Socrates. He was open with his students and never considered himself a sage. He was not in any way "other worldly", loving the company of people and the enjoyment of a good party. He was a kind person but could speak with a sarcastic tongue when he perceived a situation warranted such speech. , Confucius was exacting of himself, more than he was of his students, always seeking wisdom.

Like so many other great teachers, after his death his disciples began to glorify him. It was an immediate movement and up into the twenty-first century Chinese school children pored over his sayings. It was not Confucius' personality that made him so stellar with his disciples. His sayings at first glance appear to be rather commonplace, but they had a power to influence generation after generation of Chinese people.

Chapter IV, Confucianism, The Problem Confucius Faced,

Chapter IV, Confucianism, The Problem Confucius Faced, Summary and Analysis

Prior to Confucius' time, there had been a collapse of the Chou Dynasty, and rival baronies were left to their own devices. There was a considerable amount of warfare among the rivals. By the time Confucius came along, the rivalries had lost all pretense of chivalry and bloody mass slaughters often occurred. Confucius emphasized tradition and the cohesiveness of the family, reminding the people that early in their history, there had been no laws and the clans simply did what was right. Yet, at the same time, a new individualism was arising in China that held no respect for tribal traditionalism. Such was the problem faced by Confucius as he began his teaching.

Chapter IV, Confucianism, Rival Answers,

Chapter IV, Confucianism, Rival Answers, Summary and Analysis

One idea put forward to rectify the social order of China was that of the Realists. In simple terms, the Realists believed that people were basically bad, greedy, nasty, and brutish. The Realists solution was to hit people with stringent laws and severe punishments. It involved an elaborate system of penalties and rewards in a system of laws that was lengthy and detailed. The Realists pointed out that an Enlightened Ruler would temper the laws so as not to become too strident. The low estimate of people by the Realists pointed out that people would feign moral attitudes when it appears to be in their self-interest to do so. Even countries might fall into that pattern of behavior. Furthermore, the Realists believed people in general were shortsighted and could not see the long-range picture. They did not deny nobler sentiments; they simply believed that those were in very short supply.

A rival idea of the time was *Mohism* after Mo Tzu, or Mo Ti, who taught a doctrine of love. In opposition to the Realists, Mohism considered people basically good and that through love all things could be made orderly. Mo Tzu's idea was that a loving God created people and, therefore, love and kindness would perfect social order.

Chapter IV, Confucianism, Confucius' Answer,

Chapter IV, Confucianism, Confucius' Answer, Summary and Analysis

Confucius rejected both the Realist and Mohist concepts, stating that the first was too clumsy and external and the latter was too utopian. Confucius held fast to the idea of tradition as the answer to social order. Nevertheless, he understood that changes in the world precluded a complete reversal to past traditions. His approach was to redirect thinking into a conscious reorientation of traditional behaviors. This idea called for a conscious and constant direct evaluation of correct attitudes and internalizing them. The routine for this internalization included peer pressure and emulation of political leaders who were admired. The result of Confucius' teaching was to create a second nature for Chinese citizens for centuries to come.

Chapter IV, The Content of Deliberate Tradition,

Chapter IV, The Content of Deliberate Tradition, Summary and Analysis

Confucius outlined his idea of deliberate tradition in five main areas and considered these the broadest basis of education. The outline consisted of key terms:

Jen, which combines the ideas of *human being* with the number *two* becoming the ideal for relationships between two people. The perfection of *jen* leads toward becoming supremely human.

Chun tzu is the idea of the mature person, that person who has mastered *jen.* Instead of seeking self-acquisition from a relationship with others, *chun tzu* will seek ways of serving others.

Li has two meanings. One is that of propriety while the other is the understanding of correct terms. Propriety has to do with the knowledge of chow to conduct oneself at all times. The correct terms are expressed in Confucius' teachings on the Rectification of Names, the Doctrine of the Mean, the Five Constant Relationships, the Family, and Age. Since all human thought proceeds through the use of words, Confucius taught that the words must be used correctly. His *mean* is literally the middle ground avoiding extremes. His Five constant Relationships are the basic one of human reality—those between parent and child, husband and wife, older and younger siblings, older friends and younger friends, and rulers and subjects. In his concept of the Family, Confucius' idea was that respect for Age does not stop within the family but should be venerated everywhere. With a social life thus choreographed, life is spelled out from the highest ruler right down to receiving the lowest person into ones hospitality.

Te literally means the power by which men are ruled. Confucius' disregard for the Realists is demonstrated in the rise and fall of the Ch'in Dynasty that rose to power on brute force and united China (also giving the country its name) but lasted only one generation. By exercising *te* (virtue), Confucius suggested that rulers would lead their people in the right way.

Wen is understood to be the "art of peace". Confucius valued the arts and people indifferent to the arts as only half human. He believed that poetry stimulated the mind and music aroused the spirit.

Chapter IV, Confucianism, The Confucian Project,

Chapter IV, Confucianism, The Confucian Project, Summary and Analysis

Contrary to the *yogi* tradition of retiring from human contact to discover the God within, Confucianism puts the individual squarely in the middle of human contact to perfect a social order. It is an on-going process from birth to death. It places the Five Constant Relationships into an atmosphere that fluctuates widely. To circumvent the temptation of rulers to become tyrannical, Confucius insisted that authority must be earned, and he maintains his right to loyalty from his subjects through honesty and just treatment. In other words, the Right to Revolution was built solidly into the Confucian ideology two millennia before the West tossed out the idea of "the Divine right of Kings".

Chapter IV, Confucianism, Ethics or Religion?,

Chapter IV, Confucianism, Ethics or Religion?, Summary and Analysis

If religion is considered from its broader sense as being a way of life, Confucianism might be classified as a religion, albeit approached entirely differently from other world religions. Heaven and Earth in Confucianism are looked upon as a continuum, with Heaven being the abode of the ancestors. Heaven is considered the more important of the two Realms and earthly political institutions that lapsed in the sacrificial offering to the ancestors was considered to have lost its right to rule. Nevertheless, Confucius believed that people come first, emphasizing the practical concerns of daily living. He shifted the emphasis from ancestor worship to filial piety and respect. Duties to family were more important to Confucius than duties to the departed. Yet, he maintained that Heaven "knew him" and believed in a trinity of "man, Heaven, and Earth".

The "theism" of Confucius is foreign to the minds of non-Chinese. It blends the concepts of Heaven and Earth in a way that Western religious thought finds strange. Its emphasis is more on the ethical life that transcends the ego and self-sufficiency.

Chapter IV, Confucianism, Impact on China,

Chapter IV, Confucianism, Impact on China, Summary and Analysis

Confucius is a clear example of the impact of creed on future generations. Over a hundred years B. C., his texts were made mandatory disciplines for Chinese government officials. Confucianism became *ipso facto* the state religion of China. Although there have been notable lapses in the influence of Confucius on the Chinese political systems, there is still today a strong influence on the collective Chinese psyche. Unique among the world's religions, Confucianism allows for the inclusion of other religious beliefs and practices. In Confucianism, the family ultimately emerges as the real religion of the Chinese people. There are over one hundred different names for all the members of a Chinese extended family. Such an emphasis on family is stressed in China that the family name comes first followed by the given name. The blend of Confucianism with art and society has produced a culture that is thousands of years old and was able, as in the case of Kublai Khan who conquered China, to captivate even their conquerors. Today it is clear that Confucius has outlasted Mao Tse-tung.

Chapter V, Taoism, The Old Master,

Chapter V, Taoism, The Old Master, Summary and Analysis

There is scant evidence about the traditional founder of Taoism. It is traced back to a man named Lao Tzu (ca 604 B. C.) whose name, translated, means "the Old Boy" or "the Old Fellow" or "the Grand Old Master". He was enigmatic and once compared to a dragon. Lao's *Tao Te Ching* or *The Way and Its Power* is a slim volume of some 5,000 Chinese characters. He was a loner who was often seen riding off on the back of a water buffalo and appeared to have little interest in the success of his ideas. Yet, it became stylish for even Emperors to claim him as a somewhat shadowy ancestor.

Chapter V, Taoism, The Three Meanings of Tao,

Chapter V, Taoism, The Three Meanings of Tao, Summary and Analysis

Even in the opening line of the *Tao Te Ching,* it is proclaimed that mere words are insufficient to explain it. The *Tao,* or the *ultimate reality*, is that which is "above all, behind all, and beneath all", or the Womb from which everything springs and to which everything eventually returns. The *Tao* continually praises this concept, which taunts its readers with the epigram that "Those who know don't say. Those who say don't know" (p. 198). The second meaning of *Tao* is the idea of the *way of the universe*. It pictures this aspect as the norm or driving power of all nature. The spiritual concept is that the ultimate assumption of flesh draws its power from the spirit and the more it flows, the more it replenishes. The third meaning refers to the way of human life as it meshes with the *Tao* of the universe.

Chapter V, Taoism, Three Approaches to Power and the Taoisms That Follow,

Chapter V, Taoism, Three Approaches to Power and the Taoisms That Follow, Summary and Analysis

As in the *way* of *Taoism*, the concept of power assumes three senses. These three concepts are the basis of three different schools of *Taoism* that, on the surface, seem to have little in common. Notwithstanding this disparity, all three are concentrated on perfecting the *te,* or power as it vitalizes the human being.

Chapter V, Taoism, Efficient Power: Philosophical Taoism,

Chapter V, Taoism, Efficient Power: Philosophical Taoism, Summary and Analysis

Philosophical Taoism has remained relatively unorganized, much like transcendental movements in the West. Its teachers, who are more like coaches, are guides as to what should be understood about *Tao*. Its emphasis is on knowledge, which is a form of power, and, of the three approaches, this philosophical *Taoism* has been the most exportable form of the religion. This aspect concentrates on the idea of *wu wei*, or action that has reduced social friction to an absolute minimum.

Chapter V, Taoism, Augmented Power: Taoist Hygiene and Yoga,

Chapter V, Taoism, Augmented Power: Taoist Hygiene and Yoga, Summary and Analysis

Where Philosophical Taoism seeks to reduce activity, this second type of Taoism aims to increase activity through *ch'i*, or vital energy. In order to accomplish this end, they worked with matter, movement, and mind. In terms of matter, by experimenting with natural herbs and foods, they were able to develop a remarkable pharmacopoeia of both cures and preventatives. They worked with breathing, using air (the lightest form of matter) from which to draw *ch'i*. Supplementing the use of matter, they developed programs of bodily movement such as *t'ai ch'i chuan,* thought to circumvent blocks to eternal flow. Included in this study was the development of acupuncture. The third methodology involves something strikingly similar to the Hindu practice of *raja yoga*. It involved exploring the inner self to dispel anxiety. The keystones of this approach are selflessness, cleanliness, and emotional calm. The expected result was obtaining truth, joy, and a kind of mystical/moral power.

Chapter V, Taoism, Vicarious Power: Religious Taoism,

Chapter V, Taoism, Vicarious Power: Religious Taoism, Summary and Analysis

Religious Taoism institutionalized a system that accommodated fortune telling, soothsaying, shamans, and faith healers. It took shape in the second century A. D. and formalized itself with a religious hierarchy. Although it appears on the surface to be a conglomeration of superstition, it must be remembered that, like the other two forms of Taoism, its purpose is to draw *te* from the cosmos. It formulated rituals that, if perfectly performed, had magical effects. The Taoist church then devised way of harnessing higher power toward humane ends by assuming the reality of magical intervention.

Chapter V, Taoism, The Mingling of the Powers,

Chapter V, Taoism, The Mingling of the Powers, Summary and Analysis

This brief three-paragraph chapter forms a transition to discuss how the seemingly three different types of Taoism actually form one common thread. Summarized, it points out that the three Taoist approaches come together in the ideas of (1) to *be* something, (2) to *know* something, and (3) to *be capable of* something.

Chapter V, Taoism, Creative Quietude,

Chapter V, Taoism, Creative Quietude, Summary and Analysis

In Philosophical Taoism, the idea is to align the daily life with the flow of a sort of boundless tide. Its objective is a quietude that is expressed as pure effectiveness in simplicity and the words of the *Tao Te Ching,* "The way to do is to *be*". In this regard, no motion is wasted and is compared to the flow of water, which adapts itself to its surroundings and seeks out the lowest places. Just as water can round out the edges of sharp stones, the person who follows *wu wei* is said to "work without working". At some point in achieving *wu wei* or quietude, clarity comes like that of a deep and silent pool.

Chapter V, Taoism, Other Taoist Values,

Chapter V, Taoism, Other Taoist Values, Summary and Analysis

Taoists reject all forms of competition or ambition to stand out. Humility in the Taoist renders great respect for the weak and the deformed. They point out that the value of such things as cups and windows is that part that is not there. Taoism avoids aggressiveness and teaches that nature is to be befriended, with one seeking oneness with it and not dominance over it. Pomp and formality are regarded as foolishness. Chuang Tzu taught simplicity and beauty as opposed to the more ceremonial system of Confucianism. Taoism views life in a system of polarities as in the Chinese *yin/yang* symbol. The circle that surrounds them completes the picture of wholeness. In keeping with the Taoist minimalism, the Taoist maintains that meditation of the symbol is the best way to understand life's deepest secrets. In their perspective, good and evil are not head-on opposites but, rather, revolve around one another. They question such things as, "Who knows what is good or bad?" By example, they tell of a farmer lamenting that his son had been in a debilitating accident. However, the next day when the military came around to conscript soldiers, the boy was left at home because of his accident. Taoist aversion to violence borders on pacifism, and decries such things as weapons. Confucius had placed the scholar at the top of the social order, but it remained for Taoism to place the soldier squarely on the bottom.

Chapter V, Taoism, Conclusion,

Chapter V, Taoism, Conclusion, Summary and Analysis

Taoism and Confucianism circle around each other somewhat like the *yin* and the *yang* and the result has been a far richer Chinese culture than if neither had ever appeared. To the Western mind, Taoism may seem as enigmatic as its legendary founder, Chuang Tzu. The *Tao Te Ching* remains a remarkable book that awakens the idea that the *Tao* is within us.

Chapter VI, Islam, Background

Chapter VI, Islam, Background Summary and Analysis

Islam comes from the same roots as Judeo-Christian religion, tracing its beginnings back to the same God, or Allah, as called in Arabic. *Al* means "the" and *llah* means "God" which stresses that there is but one God. It is not until the banishment of Haggar and Ishmael from the house of Abraham that there is a divergence between Judaic and Islamic tradition. According to koranic account, Ishmael went to Mecca and his descendents became Muslims.

Chapter VI, Islam, The Seal of the Prophets,

Chapter VI, Islam, The Seal of the Prophets, Summary and Analysis

The world into which Muhammad was born was tribal and difficult. The scarcity of material goods gave rise to the tradesmanship the Arabic people became known for. In the sixth century A. D., the area around Mecca was perverse and without moral restraint. In 570 A. D., Muhammad was born into that society. Tragedy struck early in life when Muhammad became orphaned and went to live in the house of an uncle whose fortunes began to decline as Muhammad grew older, and he was forced to work hard tending flocks. By tradition, he was pure-hearted and sensitive to human suffering from an early age. At maturity, he became a caravan trader and at the age of twenty-five he married a wealthy widow, Khadija, and began fifteen years of preparation for his ministry. Among the idolatrous Meccans, Muhammad was a *hanif* who worshipped a God named Allah exclusively. Around 610 A. D., Muhammad received an angelic commission the same as had Abraham. A voice from heaven announced, "You are the appointed one". (p. 225). At first, Khadija was his only support. As he began preaching and people wanted to see him work miracles, Muhammad cut them short, saying that God had not sent him for that purpose but to preach. At first, the reaction to his message was almost violent and Muhammad and his followers were subject to abuse and persecution. Slowly but steadily, the number of his followers began to rise. In 622 A. D., Muhammad made the *Hijra* or "trip" to what is now known simply as Medina. There he became a magistrate and justice of the people and used his charisma to persuade more followers. War ensued between Medina and Mecca, and when the forces of Muhammad were finally victorious, that was the turning point in Muhammad's uniting the people under Islam. Muhammad died in 632 A. D.

Chapter VI, Islam, The Standing Miracle,

Chapter VI, Islam, The Standing Miracle, Summary and Analysis

To the Muslim, all of the varied roles Muhammad assumed during his lifetime were exemplary. He gave them the center of their faith, *al-qur'an* (the Koran), which is probably the most memorized book in the history of the world. The Koran is divided into 114 chapters, or *surahs* of varying lengths. The words of the Koran came to Muhammad in manageable sections over a period of twenty-three years and presented itself as the culmination of the Old and New Testaments. Translated, it loses the poetic quality of the Arabic language and therefore loses much of its power to move non-Arabic readers or listeners. Muslims prefer that people learn the language it was written in rather than have a translation. Muslims further see the Koran as a transcription of the words of God Himself rather than a history about God and man as they seem in the Biblical canon. Thus, the Koran to the Muslim becomes a roadmap for daily life.

Chapter VI, Islam, Basic theological Concepts,

Chapter VI, Islam, Basic theological Concepts, Summary and Analysis

Basically, the theological concepts of Islam parallel that of the Judeo-Christian idea—God, Creation, humanity, and the Day of Judgment. The Koran did not introduce the spirit world or monotheism to the Arabic people, as those things could already be found in their tradition. Muslims see Christianity as having compromised God by deifying Jesus Christ, whom the Muslims see only as a great prophet. Islam bases its center on the awesomeness of the power of God who inspires holy dread. It is by Allah's mercy that the Muslim has confidence and joy. To the Muslim, no barrier separates him from God. As in Judaism and Christianity, Muslim theology ascribes to God the willful and purposeful creation of the world. Islam suggests that people may forget their divine origins, and that this mistake needs to be corrected. The Arabic word for "infidel" has more to do with "thanklessness" than with "non-belief". The Muslim believes that each soul will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment. Alternatively, as in the words of god from the Koran, "We have hung every man's actions around his neck, and on the last day a wide-open book will be laid before him". In other words, the Merciful God is somehow removed from the terrible aspects of judgment in a situation whereby men judge themselves.

Chapter VI, Islam, The Five Pillars,

Chapter VI, Islam, The Five Pillars, Summary and Analysis

Every action in the life of a Muslim is nailed down to the "forbidden", the "indifferent" to the "obligatory". The five pillars of Islam are distinct things every Muslim must do at least once during his or her lifetime. First is the thoughtful recitation of the *Shahadah*, "There is no God but Allah". The second is the canonical prayer to be recited five times a day at specified times of the day. The third pillar is charity that involves a religious tax that is levied according to the wealth of the individual. Furthermore, there is an exact prescription for those to whom the charity is to be given. The fourth pillar is fasting for its self-discipline qualities. Finally, there is pilgrimage to Mecca. This pillar is lifted for those who are too ill or economically impaired to make the journey.

Chapter VI, Islam, Social Teachings

Chapter VI, Islam, Social Teachings Summary and Analysis

Before Muhammad, the discrepancies between the wealthy and the poor and the uninhibited tribal warfare were rampant. Islam brought about a great social and moral change among the Arabic people. Part of this phenomenon can be demonstrated in the exactness of the Islamic law based upon the Koran and the *hadith,* or "sayings of the Prophet". Without even attempting to delve into the complex scope of Islamic law, there are four important areas of collective life to consider.

The first is economics, which, in Islam, looks to caring for physical needs as a basic assumption. Giving alms in the name of a departed is one example of this facet. With the distinctions between haves and have-nots blurred under Islam, injustices were enormously reduced from the time of Muhammad. The model for Islamic economics is the circulatory system of the body, which supplies all parts of the body with life-giving blood. It does not condemn enterprise but insists that competitiveness be balanced by fair play. Furthermore, it changed the inheritance laws to be shared by all heirs. The Koran prohibits the taking of interest.

The second area has to do with the status of women. The West has looked askance on the Muslim regard for women mainly because it permits a plurality of up to four wives. Historically, however, before Muhammad, women were looked upon a chattel and had no rights at all. There was no marriage per se before Muhammad in the Arabic peninsula, and Muhammad tightened the marriage bond, forbidding divorce until it was the last resort. Insofar as polygyny is concerned, there is a growing consensus that the Koran leans toward monogamy. The responsibility of the husband of more than one wife is to treat each equally. As far as the veiling of women is concerned, it is mostly a matter of custom rather than the Koranic stipulation that women draw their cloaks closely around them when they go abroad.

The third area is race relations. Equality is stressed in Islam and reinforced in the Muslim mind by Abraham's willingness to take Haggar. The first *muezzin*, Bilal, was an Ethiopian who prayed for the white oppressors of his people.

Fourth is the matter of the use of force. Islam does not advocate pacifism but stresses doing good to overcome evil. It does not deny the punishment of wrongdoers as fair and just. The conquest of the world by Muslims, which exceeded in scope the empires of Alexander or of Rome, according to Muslim tradition, allowed religious freedom so long as a special tax was paid to offset the charitable tax of Islam. Furthermore, they insist that Islamic aggressiveness was no greater than that of other major world religions with the possible exception of Buddhism.

Chapter VI, Islam, Sufism,

Chapter VI, Islam, Sufism, Summary and Analysis

Passing over the Sunni/Shi'ite division that exists in Islam today because it amounts to a kind of in-house debate, a smaller but significant sect called the *Sufis* rejected worldliness and searched for an inner relationship with God. For this special methodology, the *Sufis* collected around spiritual masters called *sheikhs* and formed into orders called *tariqahs* in which the members were called *faqirs*. These orders are not unlike the contemplative orders of Roman Catholicism, with the difference being that the members generally marry and engage in normal business occupations. In their attempts to draw nearer to God, they embrace mysticism of love, mysticism of ecstasy, and mysticism of intuition. In the first, great poetry expresses the love of god for man that is far greater than man's love for God. The second approach, ecstasy, involves a level of concentration that allows for Divine Perception, which includes extraterrestrial realities. The mysticism of intuition produces "mental knowledge" and is expressed in symbolism. In the final analysis, the esoteric, Sufis conclude "there is *nothing* but God". Muslims are of two minds about Sufism. For some it is merely a collection of riffraff; for others, it is allegoric of the *fana*, the transcending in God of the finite self.

Chapter VI, Islam, Whither Islam?,

Chapter VI, Islam, Whither Islam?, Summary and Analysis

It is admitted by Muslims that fervor within the religion has waned. A century after the death of Muhammad, Muslim ideas, culture, literature, science, art, medicine, and architecture had spread all over the world in an area more vast than the Roman Empire. Muslim scholars kept learning alive at a time when it was asleep in the West. It is said that one out of every six people in the world now belong to Islam.

Chapter VII, Judaism, Meaning in God,

Chapter VII, Judaism, Meaning in God, Summary and Analysis

Though not a dull history by any means, the progress of the Jewish people, who eventually settled in the postage stamp land of Canaan, eventually made an amazing impact on the religious history of the world. At the time of their beginnings, the prevailing idea of the world and everything in it held that some form of creation took place and the Jewish concept took on an anthropomorphic form that could walk through a garden with man. The difference between Jewish thought and that of other cultures of the day was the singleness of the god concept rather than the idea of deities governing each major power of the universe. In other words, the religion of the Jews was monotheistic and portrayed a God of loving-kindness rather than the immoral, indifferent, and capricious gods of other cultures.

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Creation,

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Creation, Summary and Analysis

Judaism affirms the goodness of the world through the idea that "God created it". It tells not only the origins of the world, but also of the character of its originator. In this manner, the Jewish affirmation provided a resource for meaning in the form of God who endures forever and combines the spiritual with the physical, material components of existence. In Judaism then, there developed an appreciation of nature and all natural functions of the human being. There follows three concepts: material aspects of life are important; matter can participate in salvation itself (as in the doctrine of bodily resurrection); and nature can host the Divine (p. 279). The Jewish concepts appear in opposition to Hindu thought and more in keeping with the profound love of nature observed in Far Eastern religious ideas.

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Human Existence,

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Human Existence, Summary and Analysis

As in all aspects of their thought, the Jews looked for meaning in the question, "What does it mean to be human?" There were in the Jewish progression fleeting thoughts that humans were in no way different from the animals that were born, lived, and died. The conclusion was, however, that humans are a blend of "dust and the divine". In the Biblical renditions of its characters, they are presented in an unvarnished reality, goodness, and misdeeds alike. The Jewish view included the realities of pain and suffering and the brevity of life. Men, according to the belief, have freedom of choice and are susceptible to temptation, but the loving God yearns over His people in tenderness. Life, therefore, is not estranged and alone on a sea of indifference.

Chapter VII, Judaism, Meaning in History,

Chapter VII, Judaism, Meaning in History, Summary and Analysis

The exact opposite of an indifferent view of history, the Jewish concept looks at history as highly significant, revealing the contest of life that delineates methods of handling problems and taking advantage of opportunities. It draws on the historical collective action that is capable of bringing about change. It opens fields of opportunity because the hand of Yahweh is at work in every situation. Furthermore, the opportunities are not monotonously alike with each being unique. Without the benefit of history, it might not be possible to recognize those opportunities when they arise. With their different concept of God, the Jews outlook is that God transcends immediate reality and those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. In this respect, Judaism lays the groundwork for social protest.

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Morality,

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Morality, Summary and Analysis

Judaism establishes the need for moral restraints in the danger zones of human existence: force, wealth, sex, and speech. These things are well contained in the animal world, but in man, they present serious social problems. Left unrestrained, any one of the four can tear the very fabric of society. The Ten Commandments established minimum guidelines for ordering proper restraint. These commandments established ethical dimensions in a universal proportion and over three thousand years later continue to be a relevant moral guideline for the world.

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Justice,

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Justice, Summary and Analysis

The prophets (derived from the prefix *pro* meaning "for" and *phete* meaning "speak"), established the system of Jewish moral order by "speaking for" God to the people. Moses, of course, is in a class by himself among prophets who later were organized into kinds of guilds. The early major prophets were addressed directly by God rather than through a kind of mystical ecstasy. These prophets established a precedent of denouncing misuse of ruling authority. These early prophets are written about, but did no writing themselves. Later prophets were "writing prophets" and there are biblical books that bear their names. The main theme of these writers deals with the social inequities and the moral delinquency of the Jewish people. The clear idea here is that political stability depends on social justice. The prophets themselves were an eclectic lot, both crude farmers and well-bred city dwellers who possessed a deep and abiding faith and obedience to God. Their legacy is their contribution to the age-old struggle for justice.

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Suffering,

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Suffering, Summary and Analysis

Between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C.E., Israel was besieged by the powers of Syria, Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon. Through the prophets, God cajoled the nations of Israel and Judah to no avail, finally allowing them to be overcome. In the process, the Jewish propensity for digging for meaning became more important. Not to do so would have been a tacit acceptance that the gods of the conquerors were more powerful than Yahweh. Suffering of the people, therefore, produced learning and developed not only within the Jews, but later within all men a passion for freedom.

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Messianism,

Chapter VI, Judaism, Meaning in Messianism, Summary and Analysis

The climax of lessons learned from suffering for the Jews culminates in messianic hope. As underdogs, they have never given up hope and, as a result, have passed that spirit on to the Western world. The messianic idea carried with it the aspects of hope, national restitution, and world improvement. In one camp, the Jews looked for a person through whom God would restore their fortunes; in another, they looked for an age that would improve everything for all men everywhere. Another outlook was that of cataclysmic and abrupt change where God intervened personally. Each of these points of view come together collectively in some form or other and figure strongly in the modern Zionist movement.

Chapter VI, Judaism, The Hallowing of Life,

Chapter VI, Judaism, The Hallowing of Life, Summary and Analysis

Jews are more united in their practices (what they do) than they are in what they think. The ceremonial observances bind the Jewish people together. Ritual plays a large part in the Jewish experience and provides a unifying connection for all people and a connection to the infinite source of all life. It produces a piety that sees the reflection of the glory of God in all things. It is the dual idea that men should enjoy everything while at the same time, sharing that enjoyment with God. Thus, the chief unification of the Jewish people is tradition, which accounts the memories of the past as treasured possessions. The basis, then, for the hallowing of life, rests in the Torah and the traditional ritual that goes with it.

Chapter VI, Judaism, Revelation,

Chapter VI, Judaism, Revelation, Summary and Analysis

The Jews found a more profound meaning for life than any of their Mediterranean neighbors and their explanation for this is that they did not find it on their own but by revelation. In that revelation, God first made Himself known by what He did and then later through words of the prophets. The Exodus revealed, for example, God's saving power, and delineated a time that changed a people into a nation. In the process, the powerfulness of God was made known to the people as well as His divine love for the people. The Exodus further reveals the intervention of God in the daily lives of people. In short, as this became clear to the Jews, the idea of covenant with God was formulated. Therefore, the Jewish passion for "meaning" was simplified through revelation.

Chapter VI, Judaism, The Chosen People,

Chapter VI, Judaism, The Chosen People, Summary and Analysis

The outlook of the Jews on being God's chosen people is not chauvinistic. God's choosing, to them, was a call to serve and to suffer in a mandate to obey a demanding moral code far more stringent than for any other people. It is not, then, universally exclusive of all of God's people. God for the Jews was exceptionally righteous, whereas the gods of the peoples around them were not. All credit for this is given to God Himself which turns what, on the surface, appears to be arrogance into profound humility. At any rate, modern Jewish thought is divided over the idea of divine election. Some feel it has outgrown its usefulness while others insist that until the whole world has been changed, God still needs an elect people.

Chapter VI, Judaism, Israel,

Chapter VI, Judaism, Israel, Summary and Analysis

After the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, the rabbi and the synagogue became the focal points that held the religion together. Judaism is the faith of a people and holds to a tradition of faith in people that calls for a preservation of the people's identity. At times in their history, the Jews have been forced to be separate, possibly because of their distinctiveness. The Jewish people look upon the four sectors of Judaism—faith, observance, culture, and nation—in different ways. The Torah and the Talmud are replete with the lore of the Jewish people and perpetuate the language of the people as well. As a nation today, there are four compelling motifs connected with its existence: (1) security as an escape from terrorism; (2) psychology of having a place where they are not a minority; (3) cultural preservation in a place where Judaism is dominant; and (4) a social utopian concept.

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Historical Jesus,

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Historical Jesus, Summary and Analysis

Christianity, the most widespread religion in the world, has brought a great diversity to religion. Basically a historical religion based on concrete events, it came from a Jewish carpenter who never traveled more than ninety miles from his birthplace. He produced no books and his biographical details are, at best, meager. Jesus was a charismatic wonder-worker who proclaimed that the spirit of the Lord was upon him. This spirit transcended the material world and was invisible. Jesus, who felt the spirit, often removed himself from the company of people to meditate and pray. It was by the "spirit of God" that Jesus cast out demons and worked many miracles. His aspiration was not just to heal the body of sick people, but on a much larger scale, to heal humanity. He proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom at a time when the Jewish people were divided into at least four major sects. The Sadducees were the wealthiest and held a view of making the best of a bad situation at the time when Israel was dominated by Rome. The Essenes were esoteric and withdrawn from society. The Pharisees were bent on revitalizing Judaism; and, the Zealots were revolutionaries, but largely unorganized. Jesus added a fifth component to this pot—the compassion of Yahweh. Closer in ideology to the Pharisees than to any other of the sects of his day, Jesus decried the lines drawn that separated people. He was in effect a social prophet, drawing the tax collectors and the outcasts of Jewish society to his message of divine compassion.

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Christ of Faith,

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Christ of Faith, Summary and Analysis

His believers eventually accepting the idea that he was God in human form sometime after his death. They based their belief on what they saw Jesus do, what they heard him say, and what they sensed him to be. First was the example of going around doing good wherever he went. Jesus did not put emphasis on the miracles he worked. He counseled people and helped them out of quagmires they had gotten themselves into. The effect on the people was one of believing that if divine intervention actually happened, the life of Jesus is exactly how it would manifest. His words were profound, simplistic, and concentrated on the vital. He spoke in an invitational style that invited people to come and see things in a different way. Jesus told his followers that their own hearts attested to the fact that his words came from God. With his beautiful and straightforward language, Jesus presented a moral set of values that were far different from anything in his day. He stressed God's love and the people's need to allow that love to flow through them towards others. Ultimately, his disciples came to say that they had "seen his glory". He was unconcerned about what he thought of himself or what other people thought of him. He was emphasizing what the people should think about God. His integrity was beyond anything ever before seen and his compassion was unbounded.

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The End and the Beginning,

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The End and the Beginning, Summary and Analysis

Jesus' ministry was short and then he was crucified. What happened next is extraordinary in human history. His disciples were convinced that death had not held him and began going about telling his amazing story. Those followers continued to experience Jesus after his death in an omnipresent spiritual way rather than close physical contact. That faith in Jesus produced the Church, which move rapidly into and then took over the Mediterranean world.

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Good News,

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Good News, Summary and Analysis

After the death of Jesus, people who had not been speakers waxed eloquent and began spreading the "good news" everywhere. This news is perhaps best illustrated in the scratched drawings of a fish, which became the logo of the good news that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and our Savior. What the people saw in those who proclaimed the good news were transformed lives of men and women who seemed to have found the meaning of life. These people held each other in high esteem and there was a total absence of social barriers. These bearers of good news were not simply coping with daily living; they were discerning glory. The difference in these early bearers of good news was their release from fear, guilt, and ego. Their rebirth was visible to those who saw them. The underlying aspect of this visible change in people was a divine kind of love never before seen except in the form of Jesus himself.

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Mystical body of Christ,

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Mystical body of Christ, Summary and Analysis

The early Christians did not feel themselves alone and began calling themselves by the Greek name of *ekklesia* meaning the "called out". They began possessing a world that they believed God had already possessed for them. They perceived the spirit that Jesus had promised them as God's empowering presence among them. It was not until the fourth century A. D. that the spirit was given an identity that made up the divine Trinity. The mystical body of Christ that came into existence in an "upper room" in Jerusalem was animated by this spirit. It was a bonding element in the early church. This body on earth falls short of perfection because it is made up of human beings, but it is purified through the "tincture" of the blood of Christ.

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Mind of the Church,

Chapter VIII, Christianity, The Mind of the Church, Summary and Analysis

Experience and not mind was what first drew people to Christ. The need to understand something of the mystery of the church can be summarized in the tenets of the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Holy Trinity. The essence of religion is not primarily ethics but wisdom of the highest order. The doctrine of the Incarnation concludes that God in the form of Jesus Christ became human and lived among us. That idea so foreign to a world where even kings could be thought of as divine, together with the egalitarian nature of the Christians, made them worthy of persecution. Furthermore, the Christian Jesus did not fit the quasi-human, quasi-god model of the Greeks and Romans. The full humanity of Christ is what that set him completely apart from any religious idea, before or since. In the doctrine of Atonement, the death of Christ and his resurrection affected a reconciliation unparalleled in religious thought. The legalistic approach was one of complete obedience to commands, while another saw atonement as that which comes solely from without. The third doctrine is that of the Trinity. Both Jewish and Islamic traditions object to this idea of God in three manifested aspects. Christians love it from the standpoint that if God is love, love is incomplete without others to love.

Chapter VIII, Christianity, Roman Catholicism,

Chapter VIII, Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Summary and Analysis

From the time the church became official in Rome (313 A. D.) up to 1054 A. D., the church was essentially a united body. At that time, however, the Roman and Eastern Orthodox branches split. The Roman understanding of the church held that it was a teaching authority and a sacramental agent. As a teaching agent, the church saw itself as the means of keeping the door of salvation open to all the generations following the Pentecostal beginnings of the church. The argument followed that the church was needed as an interpreter of the Bible. Many scenarios raised in the Bible, the church believed, needed clarification. Ultimately, the consensus was that the doctrine of papal infallibility came into being. As a sacramental agent, the Roman Catholic idea was that the agency gives permission or ability to perform or receive the sacraments. It stressed the need to repeatedly observe the sacrament of confession and to observe the mass, central to which are the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. All of the sacraments are looked upon as the means by which God, through Christ's mystical body, infuses the Spirit into the person.

Chapter VIII, Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy,

Chapter VIII, Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy, Summary and Analysis

A key feature of Eastern Orthodoxy is the autonomy of churches in various locations with varying degrees of intercommunication. In most areas, the Eastern Orthodox Church stands close to the Roman Catholic Church. The division came in 1054 A. D., mainly over what the Eastern Church saw as innovations to the creed. In contrast to the Roman Church, the Eastern Orthodox has no pope and believes that God's truth is revealed through the collective consciences of the churches. There is a kind of corporate mentality within the Eastern thought whereby individuals work out their salvation not simply individually but in connection to the rest of the church. The laity has a much larger say in the decisions of the Eastern church, and the church encourages the mystical life more than does the Roman church. The aim of the mysticism is an actual deification of the person, a life in union with God.

Chapter VIII, Christianity, Protestantism,

Chapter VIII, Christianity, Protestantism, Summary and Analysis

The causes of the division between Roman Catholic and Protestant churches are complex, and include political, economic, and nationalistic differences. The main cause, however, was the rising concern over ecclesiastical abuses. Protestantism emerged as a movement that today is more Christian than Protestant with two major themes that make it different from Catholicism. The first of these is justification by faith. It states that bringing the individual into a right relationship with God requires the total self—mind, will, and affections. Doctrine can be accepted by rote, but service and love cannot. It proposes that no amount of religious observation, no record of good deeds or roster of doctrines can bring about a right relationship with God unless the individual heart is transformed by faith. The idea is that if one really has faith, the good works will follow as a natural expression of that faith. The key, as a result, is inward. Given faith in God's goodness, everything of importance naturally follows.

The second theme of Protestantism might be called the Protestant Principle. Simply put, this is a warning against idolatry. Allegiance belongs to God who cannot be equated with any thing in creation that can be seen, touched, or otherwise conceptualized through the senses. This includes absolutizing dogmas, the Sacraments, the Church, the Bible, or even personal religious experience. None of these, however good, can be equated with God. All human claims to be holder of absolute truth are to be rejected. In effect, this stance is the Protestant keeping faith in the first Commandment—"Thou shall have no other gods before Me". It leaves open the idea that individuals catch—not with just the mind, but rather with the whole being—the truth about God. The Word of God speaks to each individual soul and accounts for the Protestant emphasis on the Bible as the living word of God. The danger here is that religion could slide into total individualism, as can be evidenced in over nine-hundred-odd sects. Most, however, adhere to the twelve major identities of Protestantism (about eighty-five percent) and those represent more of national origin than significant doctrinal differences. Ecumenical movements work to lead to structures, whereby the dynamic character of God's continuing revelation is not restricted.

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions,

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, Summary and Analysis

From Confucianism to Christianity, the historical religions now pretty much cover the earth, but three million years of religious practice preceded all of these. These were tribal religions that were handed down orally because writing was not yet discovered. Some forms of these religions remain in one way or another in cultures from Africa, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, Siberia, and even among the American Indians. This short chapter takes a cursory look at some of these.

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, The Australian Experience,

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, The Australian Experience, Summary and Analysis

In religion, the idea that "later equates to better" does not hold. Everything in the modern religions of the last four thousand years was prefigured in the tribal religions. In the Australian aboriginal experience, there is a distinction between ordinary life and the mystic world they term "the Dreaming". Time measures out the ordinary experience of life, but the unending procession of the "everywhen" cannot be measured. To the aboriginal mind, larger-than-life figures of antiquity were the geniuses that fashioned everything so perfectly in the ordinary world. These figures are not, however, gods. The practice of their religion, therefore, turns not on worship but on participation in the ancestral paradigms.

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, Orality, Place, and Time,

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, Orality, Place, and Time, Summary and Analysis

Literacy was unknown to the primal religions where sacred legends were carefully guarded against encroachments. The spoken word has rhythms and accentuations that make the theater of primal religion a heightened experience. This distinction of orality defies the assumption of the need for the written word where human memory is at the very heart of the religion itself. The entire library of oral tradition is committed to heart, word perfect, and passed down through generations. The resulting impact is ongoing and empowering to its recipients. It involves poetry and music that become an integral part of tribal life. Unlike writing, which can blur the distinctions between the important and the peripheral, orality embeds the essential into the mind.

The primal religion understands place as opposed to space where the former is concrete and the latter abstract. Even historical religions are often attached to place, but none of these are as attached to place as the primal religions. Ancestral setting and attention to detail are unique in that wherever the person goes, place goes with him. The idea is that if sacred things are taken out of their place, the entire universe unravels.

Primal time is not linear, but more like an eternal now. On the surface it seems paradoxical, yet looked at closely, it allows for a constant restoration of the world through rites of constant renewal. Even though historical religions participate in renewals of sorts, they are not the same as the ones primal religions have never abandoned, where pioneers are revered over their descendants. To the primal religion, the earliest ancestors are divine and hold fast the present to tribal roots.

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, The Primal World,

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, The Primal World, Summary and Analysis

Tribal people are embedded within their world, and apart from the tribe, they sense little independent identity. The tribe concurrently is embedded in nature as expressed in totemism. In totemism, the human tribe is joined in a social and ceremonial way with an animal species, which comes to symbolize a life force. The totems are links with the sustained processes of nature and the psychological needs of the tribe. Even the lines between the animate and the inanimate are less distinct in primal religion. The idea that everything is alive heightens the powers of observation to the point that not only are the people embedded in nature, but that nature is embedded in the people. In the languages of the American Indians, for example, there is no word for "art" because to them everything is art. Thus, the primal religion can sense truth in every aspect of human endeavor. Additionally, it should be noted that there is no distinct line separating this world from another world that is over and against it. Historical religions tend to devalue the world we live in as opposed to the other, spiritual world. Primal religions draw no such severe lines and are more concerned with the preservation of natural and cosmic harmony.

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, They Symbolic Mind,

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, They Symbolic Mind, Summary and Analysis

It is not entirely wrong to peg primal religions as polytheistic, but it has nothing to do with the polytheism of Greece or Rome. Albeit, giving deistic position to ancestors, animals, and objects, does not rule out the primal idea of the Supreme Being. This Being is not named because the Being is unknowable. The symbolist mentality (as it has been called) of the primal religions sees connections between the physical and the metaphysical. For example, to an Andean the landscape is seen as a reflection of a superior reality. It must not be assumed, however, that a primal religious people are mystics. Just as in historical religions, there are those who go about their activity with a sense of their belief and those who meditate on mystical things. In many tribal religions there abides a shaman who can bypass symbolism and go directly to the spiritual source, engaging with spirits both good and evil.

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, Conclusion,

Chapter IX, The Primal Religions, Conclusion, Summary and Analysis

Passing time and literacy seem to favor the historical religions, as the primal religions appear to fade. There is no facility to quarantine the primal religions against the onslaught of "civilization". The historical religions have largely abandoned their missionary efforts to convert "the heathen", as these people were once referred to. In retrospect, we can now see that primal peoples were not savage and uncivilized as we once supposed. They were simply different and in the face of the complexities of the modern world, they are now often romanticized. It is hopeful that from the present, peoples of both religious traditions may be able to live out their lives in mutual respect.

Chapter X, A Final Examination, The Relations between Religions,

Chapter X, A Final Examination, The Relations between Religions, Summary and Analysis

To answer the question, "What have we gotten out of the study of these religions?" this chapter looks at three specific things. The first of these has to do with the relation between the various religions. There is the open-ended question of whether one of the world's religions is superior to all others. This book takes the stance that there is nothing to be gained by comparing with the idea of one crossing the finish line ahead of all others. Other outlooks suggest that all religions are alike and satisfy the desire for everyone to be together. Yet attempts to unite Protestantism largely failed because of reluctance to let go of certain tenets. There is the human element to contend with in any hope of uniting the world religiously. A third way to view the picture is like that of a stained glass window where differences come together to form a picture. It might be that the differences represent different angles of looking at the same common goal.

Chapter X, A Final Examination, The Wisdom Traditions,

Chapter X, A Final Examination, The Wisdom Traditions, Summary and Analysis

The question about religions might better be put as "What wisdom do they offer to the world?" In earlier times, it was assumed that religion offered answers to ultimate reality, but modern science has begun to cast doubt on that assumption. On the other hand, science has been unable to answer the questions of ultimate reality, either. Essentially, religion in any of its forms has offered wisdom in the realm of ethics. Charity, humility, veracity, and the obstacles to attaining them are ripe subjects for religion and not science. Religion offers a kind of vision as though looking at a tapestry that suggests things might be better than they seem. Religion's wisdom pictures an awesome immensity about the human self and its inestimable worth. Such ideas emerge as the highest common denominator of all religions, to transform flashes of insight into abiding light. The modern world, however, is not entirely persuaded by such views.

Chapter X, A Final Examination, Listening,

Chapter X, A Final Examination, Listening, Summary and Analysis

There is nothing left but to listen, even critically, in order to open books of understanding. As the world grows smaller, the world is faced with the daunting task of improving human relations. The only power that can face down the fear, distrust, prejudice, and suspicion of man is love. Understanding can lead to that love. Jesus said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". The Buddha said, "He who would, may reach the utmost height—but he must be eager to learn".

Characters

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha

Confucius

Lao Tzu

Muhammad (570 A. D. -632 A. D.)

Jesus Christ (ca 4 A. D. to 37 A. D.)

Asoka

Charles Galton Darwin

Robert Oppenheimer

Mahatma Gandhi

Soren Kierkegaard

Ramakrishna

Dalai Lama

Mao Tzu

Objects/Places

Bhagavata

This is a collection of Hindu religious writings.

Koran

The holy book delivered from God to Muhammad.

Banaras

This city is a spiritual center in India.

Bo tree

This is the traditional tree under which the Buddha sat until he gained enlightenment.

Yanas

These are the "rafts" in Buddhism that transport one to enlightenment.

China

China is the home country of Confucius and Lao Tzu.

Tao Te Ching

It could be called the Taoists' Bible.

Yoga

Familiar in one aspect to the West, yoga is a system of static exercise and postures.

Yin/yang symbol

This familiar symbol is correlative to opposite forces.

Jinn

These are the false gods or evil spirits of pre-Islamic Arabia.

Mecca

One of two holy cities in Saudi Arabia, it was the birthplace of Muhammad.

Egypt

Egypt is the land from which the Hebrew people were delivered.

Torah

The Torah is comprised of the first five books of the Bible, its authorship attributed to Moses.

Jerusalem

Christ was executed here and later it saw the beginning of the Christian church.

Ninety-five Theses

Martin Luther nailed these to the door of a church in the beginning of the Protestant movement.

Totems

These are animal symbols of a primal or aboriginal tribe.

Themes

God

Throughout the book, an emphasis is placed on the nature of God and the different ways God is seen through the eyes of the various religions of the world. In some instances, such as Buddhism, the concept of God is non-existent; whereas in others, he is the creator of man and the universe. In Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, the concept of God is strikingly similar. In these religions, he is portrayed as loving but vengeful toward the unbeliever. This similarity is not surprising when one considers that the roots of all three religions date back to Abraham. The Hindu concept of God appears on the surface to be polytheistic, but when scratched deeper, the many faces Hindus paint of God all amount to a composite of the one Supreme Being. Confucianism and Taoism have only an oblique reference to God, taking a more inner view than that of an external creator and protector. The Buddhist concept has modified over the centuries from the apparent atheistic views of the originator of that religion. Buddhism tends to look inward for answers rather than turn to divine supplication. The strongest stress on God may be among the Sufi sect of Islam, where a mantra of repeating the name of Allah repeatedly is used in their mystic meditations. Strikingly, the primal religions avoid reference to God because they believe God is unknowable; therefore, the approach to God is through mysticism and totemism, and a large percent of ancestor worship. The ancestors (those dead for many long years) are closer to God because they are closer to the beginning, looked upon as something of the eternal "now".

Society

Religion impacts nothing so much as it does the social framework of a people or culture. In all of the major religions, great emphasis is placed on social order and how men should relate towards one another. Although all religions speak to social issues to one degree or another, perhaps none are so focused on the topic as Confucianism. He was uncompromising in his adherence to the principles of social order governing every aspect of life and based on the correct amount of respect due each member of a family. His goal was to create superior persons who were given to propriety and correctness. Confucianism confronts the world head on rather than retreat from the world to be contemplative. Like Confucianism, Christianity stresses a model for social behavior. It does not, however, attempt to make over the social order, but teaches how to live within it. The basis of the messages of Jesus is: love God and love your neighbor—the latter even including your enemies. Another religion stressing social propriety can be found in the primal religion that has all but disappeared in the modern world. In primal religions, as in Confucianism, respect for ancestors figures in prominently. The idea is that by showing proper respect, every person will understand his place in the social order and behave accordingly. The Buddha stressed compassion and leapt across the lines of caste to draw people toward a more ordered and civil society. Islam's emphasis on

caring for the poor is yet another indication of religion's interaction with society as a whole.

Location

The theme of location in the book is not geographical. It concerns where one goes to seek God and answers about the reasons for life. There are two main divisions of this concept; namely, internally and externally. Some, like Buddhism, tend to be contemplative and internally realized. The stress is on finding the "God within," or, in the case of Buddhism, "nirvana". Hinduism is perhaps the most complex religion in terms of where one goes to seek God. The reason for this fact is that Hinduism accommodates both methods. Ultimately, through many lifetimes, the Hindu will turn exclusively to contemplation that is only possible after having been turned outward toward family and society in general. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all point outward to the Creator, with the added instruction of each person examining his own heart. Meditation in these religions is comprised of concentrating upon the written word. Confucianism and Taoism seem to offer a combination of both internal searching and external behavior to find the right balance of living. The theme of location is astonishingly portrayed in the primal religions where the lines between this world and the spirit world are not indelibly drawn. Physical locations, such as ancestral hunting grounds, travel with the descendents of those ancestors no matter where the living tribal member wanders. The concept is a strange combination of time and place in the idea of the "everywhen". The primal religions, as well as Taoism and Confucianism, can find answers in nature where it is seen as the artful representation of something much grander in scale. This location of focus is further seen in the religions of totems and icons that have external properties that elicit internal contemplation.

Style

Perspective

The World's Religions by Huston Smith is a painstaking and objective look at the major religions in the world, including a few of the sub-divisions of those religions. Dr. Smith is a distinguished professor emeritus of Syracuse University and has taught at such prestigious universities as M.I.T., Washington University in St. Louis, and University of California at Berkeley. His life's work has been centered around comparative religions and he has received numerous honors and tributes for that work. In *The World's Religions*, which has sold over two and a half million copies, Dr. Smith takes a non-biased view of the world's major religions. Written in simple to understand language, the book sheds light on the highlights of these religions and points out particular uniqueness of the different approaches to God. The target audience for the book is anyone who has an interest in looking at comparative religions without quantifying the information. It is written in easy to read language that flows almost like a novel in places. Apart from the occasional correction of common misconceptions about the religions, the book makes no attempt to evaluate the various approaches. There is an extensive bibliography supporting the work; and at the end of each chapter, Dr. Smith lists some suggestions for further reading. Obviously one book cannot completely cover any one religion, let alone a collection of the major ones. The reader will put down this book either after some casual interest or with the desire to learn more. Dr. Smith has been the subject of a five-part PBS special with Bill Moyers and has produced films on various religions. His style is direct and easy to follow and there can be no doubt from the reading that he is well versed in his subject.

Tone

Dr. Smith maintains a conversational tone throughout *The World's Religions*. He is not pedantic, but rather makes the reader feel as though he were sharing very interesting information. Nothing that might indicate any of his personal feelings about any of the religions appears in the discussion. His objectivity prevents prejudices or misconceptions from getting in the way of the smooth read of this book. There is a tone of universal understanding and acceptance about the work that makes it a refreshing approach to such a topic. There is neither pandering nor moralizing in the book, and he avoids some of the more sensational aspects of the various religions, especially where some practices in some of the religions might pander to the prurient. Any analysis in the book is done from the perspective of the religion itself rather than some kind of outward look at the subject. At no time is Dr. Smith condescending as he discusses one of the religions. Any humorous passage in the book is strictly from the delight of those from within the religion itself. Although brief, the chapter on Primal Religions is quite possibly the most enlightening of all by subtly correcting commonly held misconceptions. In the end, the reader puts down the book with the feeling of having learned something, which speaks not only to Dr. Smith the writer but also to Dr. Smith the professor.

Structure

The World's Religions is composed of ten chapters of varying lengths, depending upon the scope of the religion it addresses. For example, the chapter on Hinduism is by far the longest because of the complexities of the religion itself. Each chapter is divided into topic sub-headings that make the reading easier to follow. Within the sub-divisions there are often enumerated paragraphs which all pertain to one general topic or area of the religious thought. The final chapter of the book appears to be a concession to the professor in Dr. Smith, a final exam. This brief chapter poses problems to which there are no currently acceptable answers but which, nonetheless, are persistent problems that face the world today. In his best Socratic form, Dr. Smith does not attempt to answer those difficult questions so much as point the way for future thought.

Quotes

"It is one of the illusions of rationalism that the universal principles of religion are more important than the rites and rituals that feed them; to make that claim is like contending that the branches and leaves of a tree are more important than the roots from which they grow." Page 3

"authentic religion is the clearest opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos enter human life." Page 9

"The glamour of yesterday I have come to see as tinsel." Page 15

"If you travel the universe saying of everything you see and conceive, "not this... not this," what remains will be God. Page 60

"Whence do we come, whither do we go, why are we here?—people want answers to these questions." Page 93

"A nation can assume that the phrase "under God" in its Pledge of Allegiance shows that its citizens believe in God when all it really shows is that they believe in *believing* in God." Page 130

"The Master said, 'The true gentleman is friendly but not familiar; the inferior man is familiar but not friendly.'" Page 171

"The Master said, 'The well-bred are dignified but not pompous. The ill-bred are pompous but not dignified.'" Page 171

"If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character." Page 174

"The good man or woman in the Confucian scheme is the one who is always trying to become better." Page 180

"Every Chinese wears a Confucian hat, Taoist robes, and Buddhist sandals." Page 189

"He who tries to shine dims his own light." Page 211

"O men! Listen to my words and take them to heart! Know ye that every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim, and that you are now one brotherhood." Page 248

"Judaism... affirms the world's goodness, arriving at that conclusion through its assumption that God created it." Page 276

"There are four danger zones in human life that can cause unlimited trouble if they get out of hand: force, wealth, sex, and speech." Page 286

"Through the three thousand years that have followed, they [the Jews] have continued their existence in the face of unbelievable odds and adversity, and have contributed to civilization out of all proportion to their numbers." Page 309

"Insofar as it [Christianity] consists of fallible human members, it always falls short of perfection." Page 338

"The welfare of everything in creation is affected to some degree by what each individual contributes to or detracts from it." Page 354

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the Hindu concept of worshipping God according to one's chosen ideal.

Describe the origin of the *Khalsa* and the five *K's* in Sikhism.

Explain the meaning of the Buddha's parable of the arrow.

In what sense do the Chinese refer to Confucius as "the first teacher"?

How did Islam elevate the status of women?

Identify the meanings of Sufi love mysticism and visionary mysticism.

Give details about the Jewish understanding of their suffering.

How is the nature of God disclosed in the Exodus story?

What is the meaning of the statement that it was the disciple's experience that first drew them to Jesus?

Discuss the Protestant concept of "faith".

What is the primal concept of "everywhen" and discuss how it affects their culture.

Compare the temptations of Jesus and the Buddha.