



## John Bowker, 'I live by faith: the religions described'

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### [A] Hinduism

[...] Hinduism is not a single, simple religion: it's a coalition of many different teachings and practices; it's a religion without a founder or a founding figure (such as Jesus or Muhammad), but it does have many teachers (gurus), many holy men and women, who have their own succession of disciples. The uniformity of Hinduism is much more in the way society is organised than it is in religious belief. In fact, that's the point that was made to me most often by Hindus, that Hinduism is not a religion! It's a *dharma*, to use their word: a way of life leading to the goal; and it's only one way among many. Dr Gokal, a consultant renologist at a Manchester hospital, explained this:

Hinduism is a way of life, rather than a religion. And I think if you practise religion and base it along those lines, then all religions seem to blend into one. The principles of Hinduism are no different in reality from Christianity or Islam or Buddhism. The basis seems to be honesty, being unselfish, caring for others, and trying to bring about a betterment of mankind. If you can achieve that, then you are a good person. So the whole aim in life should be to attain oneness with the Almighty; and if you can achieve that oneness and unity, then the Hindu philosophy says that you don't have to come back to this earth time and time again: you achieve it, and that's it. You have achieved the utmost.

Already we have picked up two key points in Hinduism. The first is what the goal is: it is to achieve unity with the Almighty – or in the Hindu term, *Brahman*. Some Hindus regard *Brahman* as the personal God from whom all things are derived and to whom the divine within us can relate; others regard *Brahman* as beyond any idea or concept of God, being itself eternal, self-existent, impersonal, but still the origin and end of all things. Since the abiding, eternal reality is already within us, as atman, soul, the purpose of our life must be to realise what is already the case, namely, that you (what you really and essentially *are*) are *Brahman*. The goal of life is to realise – or bring into reality as a matter of fact – our union with *Brahman*.

The second key point is that it may take a long time to do that. Dr Gokal referred to the fact that when you have achieved that 'oneness and unity', you no longer have to return to this earth; but if you don't achieve it, then [...] you may have to be reborn millions of times. That's why Dr Gupta, a Hindu who has now returned to India, emphasised the importance of following the example of holy teachers *in practice* – thinking and arguing about it leads nowhere. Hinduism is a *practical* philosophy leading to enlightenment and union with the One:

I was born in a family where my parents used to practise all the religious rituals; my father used to wake up early in the morning (we always preferred to wake up early in the morning), and he used to read an epic called *Ramayana*. So in my life I have been greatly influenced by *Ramayana* and the *Gita* [the *Gita* is part of another epic, the *Mahabharata*, and it is the

holy book held in greatest reverence by most Hindus], and I've also come in contact with many saints and holy men – and I listened to them very carefully. So now I'm coming to the conclusion that if I want to search out all these things, then I'm going to spend my whole life without coming to any conclusion. So it's better to follow what has been practised by others, and I believe that I *must* practise.

I asked him what the point of the practice is – where is it all leading? He answered:

I believe that if I've done any good deeds in my life, then I'll be reborn as a human being. It has been said in Hinduism that there are 84,000, if I'm not wrong – or 840,000 – different kinds of living creatures on this earth, some in the water, some that can fly. And according to our deeds, we have to pass through these. This is a cycle. But there are some who do good deeds: they may bypass all this. Otherwise we have to go through the cycle. The main aim of this whole life, as I trust, and as it has been said in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and in all the religious books, is to attain Enlightenment; and if we can achieve that, we won't come back. So first of all, I must detach myself from all my possessions. Even though I have the possessions, if anybody wants this jacket, if I give it without any feeling that I am giving anything, then it means I'm totally detached from it. But if I'm giving it and I'm saying, 'Oh, I'm giving it', it still means I've not reached to that state. When I reach *that* state, then I've passed one stage; but then there are further stages, and then I must find my eternal Master, who can guide me; because without the Master, it's impossible to achieve Enlightenment. You can reach to a certain stage, but he is the only one who can guide you properly.

So Hinduism is so simple – and so difficult. But those who are ignorant, and know only a few norms of the religion and their followings, well, someone has said, 'Truthfulness is the only Hinduism.' So if that person follows that, throughout his life, and is truthful, then I think he has at least achieved something – rather than a person who knows he must be honest, he must be truthful, he must be well-behaved, and he must not hurt anybody, while he is not practising. So the important point is, you *must* practise. So if you inspect the basics of any religion, they will come out the same. But the only necessity is, you must practise.

So Hinduism offers many different ways, leading through many different lives, to Enlightenment and union with *Brahman*; and to attain that union is *moksha* – release from our attachment to this world and to the constant succession of rebirth:

*Moksha* emanates from the cycle of birth and death. I don't want to be born again. This is my last journey in the world, and I never want to come back. I'll be one with God, and I have that positive thinking that I am sure he would want me to be with him. He would never send me back now, because this world is full of miseries and so on. I am not miserable, but I don't want to come back to this world. There is far more happiness with him, and I hope I will attain that.

We shall hear much more about *moksha* and Hindu practices later on. At the moment, we need simply to recognise that Hinduism does not claim to be the *only* way leading to the goal; but it is *all-embracing*, as Mr Singh explained to me in Leeds:

Hinduism is not a religion, in the same sense in which Christianity is a religion, Islam is a religion, and even Buddhism is a religion. Hinduism really doesn't mean the religion of a group of people: it's supposed to mean the religion of human beings. In human beings, there is the element of wonder at this universe – the creation, and the creator, and the self. Therefore, Hinduism deals with these fundamental things. The other things are just accessory to it, you see. They are involved with life, because life has got so many aspects. But this basic aspect, of this spiritualism, that is – well, you may say, it's Hinduism. But it's not confined to Hinduism, because it is also in Christianity, it is in Islam, it is in all other religions. But in Hinduism this is the basic thing. Therefore, the main point in Hinduism is about the self

and the creator, how this universe has come into being, what is at the back of this, and how it is related to our own self. And the realisation of this unity of the soul with that force that has created all this universe, this is the main topic of religion, this is the main subject.

## [D] Judaism

The three religions which we have looked at so far all belong together: there are strong differences between them, and some of their beliefs contradict each other – for example, is there an immortal soul within us, or (as Buddhists say) is there ‘no-self’? Is there One who is the source and creator of the whole universe? To that last question, Hindus (in general) and Sikhs say, Yes; Buddhists say, No (although most Buddhists believe that there are gods to whom they can pray: but the gods are themselves part of the process of change and decay within the universe). So there are differences between these three religions. But despite the differences, they belong to the same general outlook; and historically, as we’ve seen, Buddhism and Sikhism are derived from the Hindu tradition – in fact, Hindus regard Buddhism, not as ‘another religion’, but as one of three *nastika* (unorthodox) *darsanas* (interpretations of the Indian tradition).

Our three other religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, also belong together in the same kind of way: they have sharp (all too often murderous) disagreements about life and belief, but they share the same general outlook; and both Christianity and Islam are (*historically*) derived from Judaism – though both Christianity and Islam would claim *theologically* that they are also derived from the particular initiative of God.

Jews believe that Judaism goes back to the original creative act of God: ‘In the beginning God created,’ says the opening verse of Jewish Scripture, Genesis (*Bereshith*) i.1. Genesis goes on, in the early chapters, to describe how men and women have become separated from God and divided against each other. It then tells how God began to heal those separations and divisions by entering into a covenant (a bond of commitment and trust), first with Noah, then ‘with Abraham and his descendants for ever’. The terms and conditions of this agreement were finally summed up and entrusted to Moses.

So the Jews see themselves as chosen by God to keep the terms and conditions of the covenant (or at the very least to live in the spirit of the covenant agreement) as a kind of pledge or demonstration – a demonstration in miniature of how *all* human beings should live with each other, and with God, until the day will eventually come when, as their own prophets put it, ‘the knowledge of the Almighty will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.’

Therefore, at the very root of Judaism is this sense of being called by God to undertake his mission on behalf of the whole world, as a Jewish husband and wife, Mr and Mrs Dresner, explained to me:

*Mrs Dresner:* We are chosen for a purpose of carrying out a mission which he has shown us throughout history. The mission is the responsibility of upkeeping his laws despite the suffering and the non-understanding of the reasons behind them. It’s a mission of faith.

*Mr Dresner:* Specifically, it’s been the role of the Jewish people, by way of the Ten Commandments, to form the corner-stone of the Western civilisation – in a sense, with the rule of law. The Ten Commandments have formed the basis of legal systems in Western society – and I think that’s been a very valuable contribution.

Both Mr and Mrs Dresner referred there to ‘commandments’ and ‘laws’. That is a reminder that the covenant people (the restored and restoring community under God) has to keep *its* side of the agreement, and that includes specific commands and prohibitions. All this is summarised in the term ‘Torah’, which is often translated as ‘Law’, but which covers much more than that: it is the term applied to the *whole* of the Pentateuch (the first five books of Scripture), and it is sometimes also applied to the whole of Scripture itself. So Torah is guidance and instruction, which *includes*

specific laws and commands. The basic point of this is *holiness* – which means, being separated from all that contaminates and corrupts in order to be close to God. Mr Jack Schild (who was born in Galicia, but who came to this country when he was four, and is now retired) emphasised that ‘holiness’ is the basic reason for Torah as Law:

The Bible says, ‘I want the children of Israel to be holy, as I am holy’, you see. God was supposed to have said that to Moses. He wants the children of Israel, his chosen people, to be holy as he is holy. So from that point of view of holiness, it’s believed that the various foods that we’re not supposed to eat, and some foods that we *are* supposed to eat, are commanded because of holiness: some animals are clean animals (those that are cloven footed, or cloven hooved right along, and they chew the cud, those are considered the clean animals), and the others are unclean animals. So the question of holiness is basic; and also there is another reason for the Law. We believe that the Law was passed in order to keep the Jewish people – prevent the Jewish people – from assimilating. It was a kind of fence against assimilation. But actually the main reason is the holiness. It’s a lot to do with holiness, you see.

But of course Torah (written Scripture) doesn’t cover every detail of life. So written Torah was extended in what is known as *Torah shebe’al peh* – Torah transmitted by word of mouth. This ‘Oral Torah’ is collected in Mishnah and Talmud – collections of interpretations of Torah made by Jewish teachers, or Rabbis. *Some* Jews believe that Oral Torah was *also* entrusted to Moses on Mount Sinai, but that it was only gradually made public, as the changing circumstances made it necessary.

In addition to that, some Jews (a much smaller number) also believe that a third form of Torah was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, the mystical meaning of Torah, which is preserved in what is known as the Kabbalah. One of the forms of organised Judaism, in which this belief is held, is Lubavitch Hasidism. The Lubavitch Hasidim are Jews who are carefully observant of Torah in its traditional form; and one of them, Mr Douber Klein (who is a teacher at a Hasidic, though not Lubavitch, school), described these expressions of Torah:

When Moses went to heaven to receive the Torah, there were revealed to him all the different aspects of the Torah: first of all, the written Torah, as we can see it today, as it is written in Hebrew, in the sacred text. Secondly, he was given the laws which are known as the Oral Torah. These laws are a deeper explanation of matters which, in the written Torah, are very scantily expressed. For instance, in the written Torah it is explained that the Jewish people shall make a sign on their hands, and between their eyes. It is not explained in very much more detail what this sign should be. The Oral Torah explains that this sign takes the form of what are known as *tefillin*, or phylacteries, and it explains in exact detail how these phylacteries are to be made, and in exactly what position on the arm and head they are to be placed. So therefore it is obvious that the Oral Torah is an essential part of the Torah for our practical purposes. As well as receiving the Oral Torah, which later on was written down in the form of the Mishnah and the Talmud, Moses was also given the mystical explanation of the Torah, which has come down in the form of Kabbalah and Hasidic philosophy.

There are other Jews (in Liberal, Progressive, or Reform Judaism) who do not accept so strong or so extensive a view of revelation, but who would hold that the interpretations of the instructed teachers (the rabbis), which end up in Talmud, are precisely that – interpretations for particular circumstances; and they would argue that this process of interpreting Judaism and making it relevant for life must continue. One Jew, who has moved from the Orthodox to the Reform community, saw the point about *change*; and of Torah remaining relevant for life, as the key issue:

The idea that Judaism has been the same for thousands of years is historically false. It's had to change, because society has changed. And although it's very much a religion with a strong legalistic basis, even that legal framework has changed. What Reform Judaism is attempting to do is to maintain that change, out into the twentieth century. Certainly I think it's fair to say that in the early days of reform in Judaism (and we're now talking of the last century, and of Germany, particularly), it almost became a secularisation. Reform Judaism now is much more in the mainstream of the historical pattern of Judaism, but with a strong emphasis on trying to make Jewish law and Jewish practice and worship consistent with the environment in which most people live. And because it's doing that, for people who take their Reform Judaism seriously, it's possible to be a Jew, and a thinking Jew, seven days a week.

His wife added:

I have a great respect for people who honestly keep the laws because they feel that this is a way of preserving a Jewish identity. But as far as I'm concerned myself, it's only a part of Judaism; it's not the whole of Judaism. And if you talk about survival, you have to talk also about, survival for what? The point of Judaism is not just to survive, but to survive for something. And I believe that the laws that have grown up – if you start off with a central ethical concept, the laws grew up as a fence to preserve that central ethical concept, and that central belief in one God. And, yes, they're important to ensure continuity. But you mustn't lose sight of the central message, by making your fences too high.

So Judaism, like Hinduism and Buddhism, is not a single, or simple, thing. But all Jews are agreed that they are *Jews*, and that they live under the command to be holy, even as God is holy; and to be holy, as we've already seen briefly, means being separated from all that is contaminating or unclean – everything, in other words, which might destroy the bond (the covenant) between God and his people. Putting it more positively, the purpose of Judaism is the sanctification – the making holy – of both life and time. This is how Mrs Dresner put it:

For me, Judaism is the practice of an ancient tradition which involves the sanctification (if it's not too difficult a word) of time and of certain aspects of life itself, so that you are living your life in some sort of relationship with your past and with God. There's a lot more to it than that, obviously, but I think that it's summed up in that way, that it sanctifies and makes holy a certain area of your life.

So Judaism, is a *practical* religion, worked out in life (especially in the family), and it's much less concerned with theological or philosophical problems, as both Mr and Mrs Levy explained, when I asked them the rather philosophical question, of how they could reconcile the evil and suffering in the world with their belief in God as a wise creator:

*Mr Levy:* Judaism is not a very theological religion, in the sense that thinking about God and trying to work out the nature of God is in fact very unJewish. Moses attempted to understand God, and was told fairly forcibly that even for him there wasn't any way in which he would know the nature of God; and so Jews don't spend much time trying to fathom out the nature of God. They tend to accept that there is a God. *Some* of us philosophise about the nature of God, but more about the creation process.

*Mrs Levy:* Judaism doesn't actually distinguish between God and the Devil, and have a sort of theological system, as it were. God is the creator, and he created the world as it is: and why, I don't know, but I accept that basically all the suffering and all the evil must be compensated. That there is a purpose to living, I accept that; and having accepted that, then I have a responsibility to act in a certain way.

So above all else, Judaism is immersed in its past – in its history – through which God has laid his claim upon his people and entrusted his covenant to them. As Stuart Dresner summarised

Judaism: 'Judaism is an ethical way of life, set in the particular historical context of the Jewish people.'

It is, therefore, inconceivable for a Jew to betray his or her past, because to do so would mean that they were betraying God. Many Jews made this point to us, but this is how Mrs Jacobs put it:

Judaism is my inheritance. If I'm going to hand down an inheritance, the Jews have got to keep on going – otherwise, what a terrible waste of suffering for all those thousands of years, if we're going to allow ourselves to disappear – through lack of effort, through lack of faith, through lack of love. I mean, what would God say? What would Abraham say? What a let-down!

## [F] Islam

Islam is derived from the call of God to Muhammad to be his prophet, to be one who warns people and calls them back to the truth, that they and all people and all created things come from God and depend on God for their life and being. It is his duty also to warn people that their lives are returning to God who will judge them by an exact balance according to their good and evil deeds.

For the Muslim, Muhammad (who lived in Arabia from 586–632CE) is the last of the prophets, the seal of the prophets, through whom the Quran, the uncorrupted revelation, has been transmitted into the world. There have been many previous prophets – Moses and Jesus among them – all with the same message. So Islam is connected to Judaism and Christianity, in the sense that God has sent a prophet to every nation. But Islam is different, in the sense that Muslims believe that they are the only community which has preserved the message of God (the Quran) in a pure and uncorrupted form. Mr Abdul Rahman, a taxi driver in Coventry, talked to me about this:

From Adam to Jesus, every prophet has preached this religion which is called Islam. Of course, there was no name for it at that time. Then the last prophet came, when the prophet of Islam went on pilgrimage to Mecca. And he called everybody (about 140,000, I suppose, but I don't know what was the right figure) all Muslims in front of him; and then Gabriel came, and he read this verse to the prophet: *alyaum* (that means, today) *akmaltu* (has been completed) *lakum* (upon you) this religion. So 'Today this religion has been completed and you have done your duty. And it is my will that I have named this religion for you, and the next future world; and this religion will be called Islam.' It's not that the earlier prophets *have* been rejected. They have been rejected by the people that never listened to them, but they have never been rejected by God. They did their duty. It's like building a house: one person comes and he builds the walls, and he's called, bricklayer. The next comes and he builds the window, and he's called the carpenter. Then the glazier, then the roof-tiler and everything; so everybody is called by a different name. Adam came with a different duty. Noah came with a different duty. They were doing a chapter, you know. We say they have done a chapter. The Bible does not tell all those things in detail which the Quran does. Those books were for their own time, and Quran is for the whole time until the end – the end of the world.

So Islam is the one – and same – religion which God has always intended, and to which he has continually called men and women through his prophets. Indeed, those earlier prophets foresaw Muhammad as the final prophet and talked about him – a point which Hajji Cassim Mohammad made, while also emphasising that there cannot be another prophet:

God sent his messengers at different times to different nations. Islam is not a new way of life, it is the same old way of life, the same religion of Abraham, the same way of life coming down, Judaism, Islam, right down the line. God sent thousands of prophets. In the Holy Quran God says so (and we believe that the Holy Quran is the word of God, and God does not tell lies). In Deuteronomy, God, speaking to Moses, said, 'I will raise the prophet from among thy brethren, and he shall not speak of himself, but what he shall hear, that he shall speak, for I, God, shall put my words into his mouth.' Now this prophet, we believe, is the holy prophet Muhammad. The holy prophet Muhammad was an unlettered prophet. He did not know how to read or write. He was untaught by man, but he was taught by God; the angel Gabriel taught him. In all the religious Scriptures the advent of the holy prophet Muhammad was foretold; and in Deuteronomy, it's very, very clear. Muslims believe that the person referred to there is the holy prophet Muhammad. There is no doubt about it. In the Holy Quran, God says, 'I am its author, I am its protector: no one can change it.' 1400 years have passed, not even one *ayat* [verse], not even one word in the Holy Quran, has changed.



How has God managed to protect it? He caused the Muslims to memorise the whole Quran by heart. God has sent his final messenger as a seal of the prophets. And he has sent his final message, the Holy Quran. So there is no more need for any more messages, or any more prophets. What the holy prophet did say was that, after me, reformers will come, *mujaddids*, who will come at different times simply to correct you when you drift away from that straight path. So there is no need for any further prophets or books, because the message is complete.

It follows that Muslims must live their lives as the Quran instructs and encourages them – with the help of what are known as *hadith*: they are the records describing what Muhammad did and said, which can, so to speak, illustrate the Quran, and give practical guidance to the ways in which Muslims should behave.

The word *Sunni* means that I am following the thing that the prophet has done in his life: the movement of his body (what he has done by his hand, by his foot, by his eyes, mouth, ears, anything), following the movement of his body is called *sunna*. The word he has said from his mouth is called *hadith*. His sayings are called *hadith*, his movements are called *sunna*. So we are following both things.

That attention to detail explains why many Muslims emphasise (like some of the Jews speaking of Judaism) that Islam is not a religion, it's a way of life. As Cassim Mohammad put it, 'We don't refer to Islam as a religion. It's a way of life. The Holy Quran refers to Islam as a *din*, and a *din* is a way of life.'

That way of life is summarised in what are known as the Five Pillars of Islam – the five fundamental affirmations and practices. Mr Mohammed Ali, who works as a guard for British Rail, and who is a member of an interfaith dialogue council, told me what the Five Pillars are:

The first of the Five Pillars is the Kalima: that is, *La Ilaha illa Allah, wa Muhammad rasul Allah* – it is to say, There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Apostle. The second is the prayer, the five-times-a-day prayer, which I start in the early morning when I get up. It's the most important thing in our life, prayer: prayer keeps us away from lots of things – from all bad things, and bad thoughts. And the third is the fasting [during daylight hours] which we do for a month; I do it anyway, and most of my family does, and most of the brothers and Muslims I know, we all do – regardless of time or anything: this last year we have to keep fast over 18 hours in a day; that's the longest we have. And then the next Pillar is the *Zakat* [almsgiving]: so if we have £1000, £25 is for the poor people. It's 2% of our earnings – and it's not much. It's like a tax. And then the fifth one is the *hajj*, the pilgrimage – that is, whoever goes to the blessed place (Mecca), that's the *hajj*, and they are purified.

Although Islam emphasises the unity of God and the unity of all life and all creation as derived from God, Islam itself is divided into two main communities, the Sunni and the Shia'. The Sunni claim to follow the *sunna*, or path of the prophet, without adding any new practice or teachings. The Shia' are the party of Ali – the word *shia'* means 'party'; and the Shia' are those who believe that Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, should have succeeded him, on the grounds, as one Shiite Muslim put it, that it is the close family of a person which knows him best.

The political implications of the Sunni/Shia' divide can still be serious, as we can see in Iran and Iraq. Nevertheless, virtually all Muslims, Sunni and Shia', say that they are Muslim first and foremost – and that being Sunni or Shia' is more a matter of lifestyle and inherited history than it is of being a true or false Muslim.