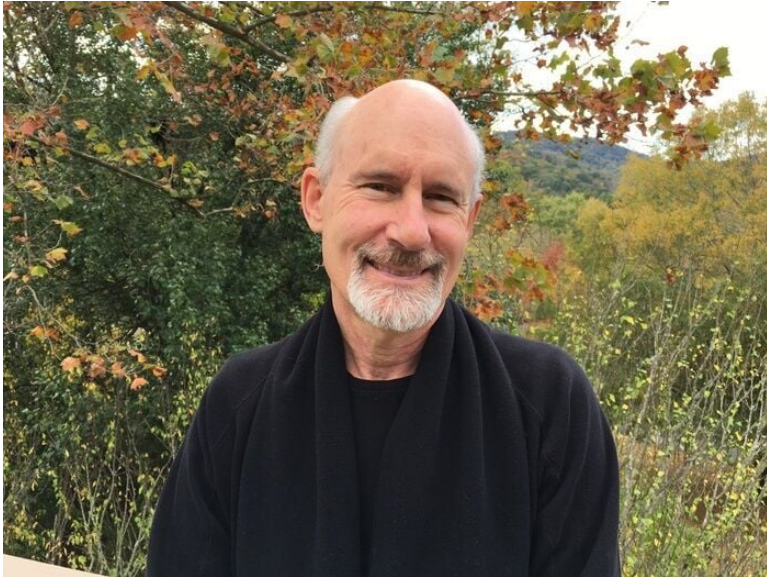


https://www.blackbeltnewsnetwork.com/religion/friendly-freethinker-buddhism-hinduism-taoism-judaism-christianism/article_95c6f9f2-2a54-4d17-b0e4-e47a6ef8c1d5.html

Friendly Freethinker: Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Judaism ... Christianity?

By Chris Highland
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I first noticed the implicit bias when studying World Religions in my Evangelical college. All faith traditions other than Christian were “isms.” Confucianism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Mormonism and the rest were interesting to study as historic cultures of belief. Presumably Western Christian scholars referred to non-Christian faiths as human-made philosophies, as opposed to the only religion with divine origin. I picked up on

this bias during college, but it became even clearer in seminary, and then in classes I taught in congregations.

For balance, shouldn't we say "Christianism" or "Christism," maybe "Jesus-ism"? The religion that emerged and morphed from the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth offers one philosophy of life. Exactly what that is depends on who you ask. Some insist the main message is to believe—faith is central. Others argue the central message is living a compassionate life of service. Both claim they know what the "good news" meant two-thousand years ago and in our own time. As I see it, the fundamental problem with treating the Way of Jesus as something more than a way of life is that it assumes the lessons of Jesus are superior to the instructions of all other religious teachers.

I mentioned teaching courses on religion in churches. Along with presenting basic teachings on the founders of faiths, and summarizing the essential doctrines passed down by traditions through the centuries, I encouraged students to "go to the sources"—to at least be familiar with the scriptures of each faith. I chose verses and passages that I thought were "written representatives" of the religion. In several classes I was able to arrange visits from "human representatives" of each faith tradition. This proved to be the most meaningful experience, beyond the books, theologies and doctrines, that made each religion come alive for us (those

relationships were the grounding for my years of interfaith chaplaincy). After all, the religions we were studying are “living religions,” not dead or lost to history.

The question circles back to: Why treat Christianity any differently than other “isms”?

The only argument for believing it must be superior boils down to “I believe it is unique.”

Whole books have been written on “the uniqueness of Christ,” but other than simply quoting Bible miracles and the “high Christology” of Paul, there isn’t much to set him apart from other “divine men.” In significant ways, the Jesus of the gospels doesn’t look much like the Christ of Christian tradition. Once he became a “divine human being,” believers could claim he was above all others (his name above all names, as Paul wrote).

All this ignores the actual history of religion.

Many make these claims to superiority knowing little or nothing about other religions. “We’re the best” rings hollow when there is no serious, educated comparison—only a imagined “strawman” of a dead and inferior faith. This challenges the incessant attempts to convert a person from one faith to another. “My faith is exceptional” often reveals little more than ignorance of all the choices, the array of alternatives, in our wide world of religions.

All of this can raise uncomfortable questions. Why am I a Christian and not a Buddhist? Why am I Muslim and not Hindu? Why am I a person of faith at all, and not an agnostic or atheist? I'm sensitive to these troubling moments of uncertainty. But unless that's really what we're after—ever-elusive certainty—an honest person has to accept that whatever faith they have chosen for themselves (or were born into) is only one among many options.

I know it can be difficult for some believers to view their faith as one philosophy of life, even a set of opinions passed through the ages. Accepting the fact that every belief system has uniqueness, that each founder of a religion offered, or emphasized, at least something unique in history, seems sensible and realistic. It may be good to realize that even if one's chosen religious tradition offers something others don't offer, this doesn't mean they are better philosophies.

And, it's important to stress that not every faith is a philosophy, in the classical sense. At its core, Philosophy is literally "love of wisdom." Is it truly wise to think or believe that one's chosen (or inherited) opinions are superior to all other perspectives? How does the open, rational, fearless questioning that defines the way of wisdom relate to a practice of faith? Keeping in mind that we aren't talking about mere words or

wise thoughts, but a living practice of wisdom, I think this is the fundamental test of any belief or tradition.

A serious study of religions can be insightful, meaningful, even enlightening. However, education isn't possible when one faith claims they are God's favorite.

Chris Highland

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Chris Highland was a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a writer and teacher in Asheville, NC. www.chighland.com, (chris.highland@gmail.com)