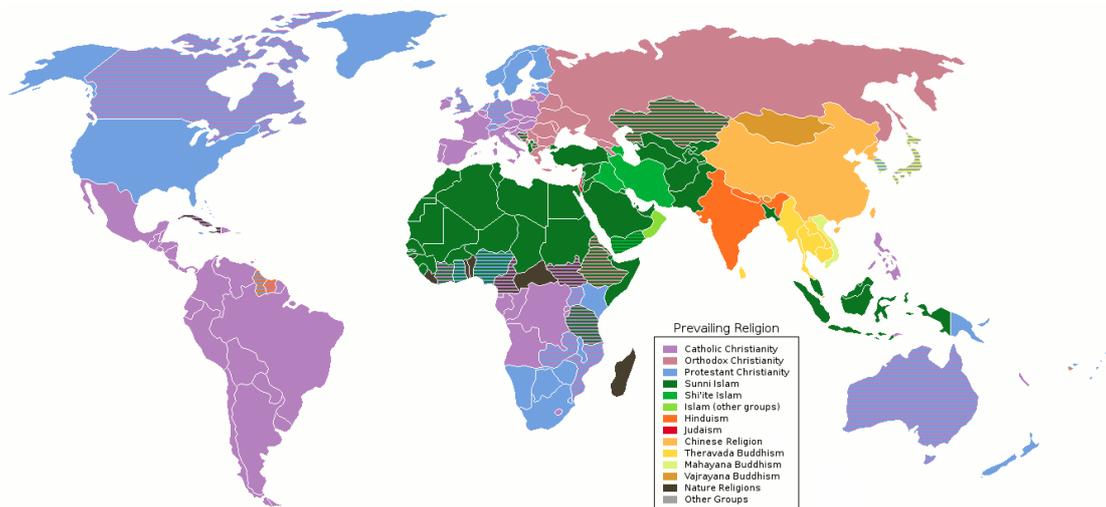


How Many Religions Are There?

Peter Ditzel



According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 19 major religions share the earth (not always peacefully, of course). A closer look shows these further subdivided into 270 large religious groups with many smaller ones. This source identifies 34,000 separate Christian groups. Other experts might differ on the exact numbers, but the point is that most people would say that this planet sports a great many religions. But is that really true? I mean, if you were to distill these religions down to their basic essence, how many would you really wind up with? Or, to put it another way, if you can sift 19 religions into 270 by examining their finer points, can you go in the reverse direction and aggregate them into a smaller number? What if I were to tell you that, when it comes right down to it, the people of this world can be divided into only two religions? That's right, I'm making the claim that when we use the most basic component of a belief system as our criteria, we will find that only two religions exist on the earth and that all of the other divisions arise merely because of details. Sound crazy? Let's see.

A Representative Example of Religions

Obviously, in this article, we cannot examine 19 divisions of religion, let alone 270. What I propose instead is to examine the top half dozen. From these six named religions, I believe we will see a common

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denominator that I am convinced holds true for the remaining religious divisions.

The most popular religion in the world is Christianity, with about 2.1 billion adherents. But for reasons that will become clear later, I am going to save Christianity for last. So let's begin with the second most common religion.

Islam: Islam has about 1.5 billion followers. They are called Muslims. The word Muslim is an Arabic word that literally means "one who submits (to Allah)." Throughout this article, I am going to use the website, faithology.com. It is very useful for this kind of study because it so succinctly summarizes the beliefs of each religion. For Islam, this website says, "Main Belief: Attainment of heavenly rewards in the afterlife depends upon submission to the will of Allāh." Further, it gives the following Five Pillars of Islam as comprising the core of both Sunni and Shia (subdivisions of Islam) beliefs:

1. Declaration of Faith: To become a Muslim, one must declare, "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God."
2. Prayer: Muslims are expected to offer set prayers at five set times throughout the day.
3. Alms giving: Muslims are expected to pay 2.5 percent of their wealth and assets to the poor annually.
4. Fasting: Each year during the month of Ramadan, Muslims are expected to fast each day from dawn to sunset.
5. Pilgrimage: Every Muslim who is physically and financially able is expected to visit Mecca at least once during his or her lifetime.

Secular/Nonreligious/Agnostic/Atheist: Even non-belief is a belief, and we always worship something—even if it is ourselves. Some reports separate these groups and some lump them together. As one group, they comprise 1.1 billion people. Obviously, it is hard to state their beliefs except to say that they hold a non-belief in, or at least a skeptical approach toward, God and an afterlife. Yet, I think it is possible to say that most of these people hold another view in common. They generally hold that this life is all there is and that the paramount attainment for a human is to better life for ourselves and others. To achieve this, we should develop a social consciousness, and

the outcome of this should be social works. Or, to put it more simply, we do what we can with our lives to make a better world.

Hinduism: There are estimated to be 900-950 million Hindus in the world. According to faithology.com, "Adherents of Hinduism generally believe in an uncountable number of deities. Sects of Hinduism often exalt one deity as supreme over all others. However, the deity raised to this position differs from sect to sect. Generally, the goal of Hinduism is to eventually unite one's spirit with this particular deity. This is often accomplished through meditation, ritual means, and sometimes by mystical practice." In fact, Hinduism is very diverse, and it is hard to generalize about it. Nevertheless, the Wikipedia article on Hinduism says, "Prominent themes in Hindu beliefs include (but are not restricted to), Dharma (ethics/duties), Samsāra (the continuing cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth), Karma (action and subsequent reaction), Moksha (liberation from samsara), and the various Yogas (paths or practices)." Also, "Karma translates literally as action, work, or deed, and can be described as the 'moral law of cause and effect.'" And, "The vast majority of Hindus engage in religious rituals on a daily basis.... Devout Hindus perform daily chores such as worshiping at dawn after bathing (usually at a family shrine, and typically includes lighting a lamp and offering foodstuffs before the images of deities), recitation from religious scripts, singing devotional hymns, meditation, chanting mantras, reciting scriptures etc."

Chinese Folk Religion: The adherents to Chinese Folk Religion number over 390 million. The website faithology.com says, "Chinese folk religion is an unsystematic and ritualistic system of deity worship and ancestor reverence. It draws on traditional belief systems and ideologies of China and varies widely from one location to another."

According to that same website, the beliefs generally consist of:

- **Inclusiveness:** Unlike many other religions, Chinese folk religion places no emphasis on exclusivity or on doctrine. Due to the lack of exclusivity, practitioners of Chinese folk religion may easily practice other religions such as Daoism or Buddhism.
- **Ancestral Veneration:** Ancestors are venerated and rituals are performed on their behalf so that ancestral spirits might be persuaded to equally aid their living descendants on earth.

- Deities: Deities that are worshiped in Chinese folk religion, such as Tudi Gong, are often related to wealth, fortune, or destiny. They may also be related to more common aspects of nature, such as the sun, the moon, or the land. Geographical features, such as mountains, are also worshiped. Deities are often thought to reside in such places. Temples are erected for these deities around sacred places and in cities.
- Sacrifices: Sacrifices to ancestors or deities are still often performed. Generally speaking, living beasts are no longer sacrificed. Instead, bamboo paper replicas—especially of money—are burned in order to send these sacrifices to deities, spirits, and ancestors.
- Rituals: Talismans inscribed on paper have a ritual efficacy and may be used for a variety of ritual purposes. They may be used to designate sacred space or to otherwise spiritually empower other ritual objects.

Further, under the heading of "Main Belief," they state: "The veneration of shen and ancestors encourages them to aid their living descendants, and helps adherents escape potential damnation."

Buddhism: Estimates for the number of Buddhists in the world range from 350 million to 1.6 billion. Nevertheless, Buddhism is usually ranked sixth in world religions based on the more conservative figures. Faithology.com states that to "eliminate suffering through attaining nirvana" is the main belief of Buddhism. The website also states the following:

Buddhist doctrine can be traced to Siddhartha Gautama and his central teaching of the Four Noble Truths. According to this teaching:

1. Human life in itself is suffering.
2. This suffering is caused by desires or cravings.
3. There is a method to stop desire, and thus stop suffering.
4. The method to stop desire is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path encompasses eight different actions that allow Buddhists to curb their desires and thus to end suffering:

1. Right view – Believing in the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist community.
2. Right intention – Practicing Buddhism with selfless motivations.
3. Right speech – Speaking positively and truthfully.
4. Right action – Refraining from murder, theft, and violence.
5. Right effort – Striving vigilantly to attain nirvāṇa with a positive attitude.
6. Right livelihood – Refraining from taking jobs that cause violence to other creatures.
7. Right concentration – Refraining from dwelling on the past and anticipating the future.
8. Right mindfulness – Keeping alert for things that negatively or positively affect the body or mind.

The Common Denominator

These top religious divisions minus Christianity so far represent about 4.3 to 5.5 billion people. Have you noticed something about their beliefs that they all have in common? Every one of them is based on human works. Whether it is attaining heavenly rewards, pleasing deities or ancestors, avoiding damnation, being liberated from the cycle of reincarnation, attaining nirvana, or achieving the best society in the here and now, every one of these world religions depends on human works.

Christianity

I have saved Christianity for last because it can be divided into two major divisions—one that is very much like the other world religions and one that is very different.

Human-Works-Based Christianity: This is the Christianity of the majority of the institutional church. I don't know how many places could be cited to show that the Roman Catholic Church is a works-based religion. But a couple of authoritative quotes are enough to prove the teaching. The Sixth Session of the Council of Trent (1547) says, "If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema (Canon 9).... If anyone says that a man who is justified and however perfect is not bound to observe the commandments of God

and the Church, but only to believe, as if the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life without the condition of observing the commandments, let him be anathema (Canon 20).... If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema (Canon 24).... If anyone says that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified; or that the one justified by the good works that he performs by the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living member he is, does not truly merit an increase of grace, eternal life, and in case he dies in grace, the attainment of eternal life itself and also an increase of glory, let him be anathema (Canon 32)" (<http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/trent06.htm>).

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* says, "Even the greatest saint, should he die in the state of mortal sin, arrives in eternity as an enemy of God with empty hands, just as if during life he had never done anything, meritorious. All his former rights to grace and glory are cancelled. To make them revive a new justification is necessary" (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10202b.htm>).

On another page, the Encyclopedia teaches that the grace of God disposes a sinner for salvation from sin. But that the sinner must then be justified, and that this justification is an actual inner change that is brought about "either by reason of a perfect act of charity elicited by a well disposed sinner or by virtue of the Sacrament either of Baptism or of Penance according to the condition of the respective subject laden with sin" (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13407a.htm>). Clearly, Roman Catholicism is a works-based religion.

Roman Catholic theology explicitly teaches the merit of works. The works-salvation connection in other theologies is not always so obvious. One example is Arminianism (for an explanation of Arminianism, see this article: <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/ArminianQA.htm>). Arminianism is the theological system of such churches as the Wesleyan Church.

Notice these statements from the Articles of Religion of the Wesleyan Church (<http://www.wesleyan.org/beliefs>): "We believe that Christ's offering of himself, once and for all, through His sufferings and meritorious death on the cross, provides the perfect redemption and atonement for the sins of the whole world, both original and actual. There is no other ground of salvation from sin but that alone. This

atonement is sufficient for every individual of Adam's race.... We believe that for men and women to appropriate what God's prevenient grace has made possible, they must voluntarily respond in repentance and faith. The ability comes from God, but the act is the individual's." This requires some analysis.

Wesleyans believe that Jesus Christ's death on the Cross provides atonement "for the sins of the whole world." Yet they would admit that not all are saved. What do they say, then, distinguishes those who are saved from those who are not? To be saved, a person "must voluntarily respond in repentance and faith." Now, possibly realizing that this would make repentance and faith a human work by which a person would merit salvation, they add another step or layer to the process. They say that the ability to voluntarily respond in repentance and faith "comes from God." Now, if they left the explanation at this point, they would be saying that God chooses the people He will give repentance and faith to and who He will not give repentance and faith to. But Wesleyans are certainly not going to leave it at that because they believe that everyone has the free choice to be saved or not. So, they add yet another layer and say that, although the ability comes from God, "the act is the individual's." But this would make the individual the final determiner of his own salvation and thus his own savior. So, you guessed it, the Wesleyans add still another layer. At this point, they say, "Repentance is prompted by the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit." But, of course, this sounds like they are saying that the difference between those who are saved and those who are not is that the Holy Spirit does not convict everyone. And that would mean that God has chosen some to be saved and some to not be saved, and Wesleyans don't want to say that. So, yes, they add another layer. Here, they say, "It [repentance] involves a willful change of mind that renounces sin and longs for righteousness, a godly sorrow for and a confession of past sins, proper restitution for wrongdoings, and a resolution to reform the life." And so we are now back to it all depending on "a willful change of mind," which, of course, is a human work.

Now, lest they sound too clear on the matter, the Wesleyans add more equivocation. They say, "Repentance is the precondition for saving faith, and without it saving faith is impossible." Then, in the next sentence, they teach, "Faith, in turn, is the only condition of salvation." If I say that it takes me two steps to span a length of five feet, that the first step is a precondition to the second step and without it the second step is impossible, can I then say that the only condition to spanning the five feet is the second step? Of course not! A

precondition is a condition. Both the first and second steps are necessary to span the five feet.

Yet Wesleyans would have us believe that repentance is a precondition to faith but that faith is the only condition of salvation. What utter nonsense! Obviously, if, as the Wesleyans say, repentance is a precondition to faith, and faith is a condition of salvation, then both repentance and faith are conditions of salvation. But why don't the Wesleyans outright say this? Because they ultimately say that repentance is a human work: "the act is the individual's... it involves a willful change of mind." This agrees with their idea of freewill. But it also implies that, ultimately, man saves himself by the work of repentance. Apparently to avoid this, they have tried buttering it over by saying that faith is really the only condition of salvation. So, when we cut through this multilayered onion of Wesleyan theology, we find that it is really a religion of human works. Without human choice based upon human freewill, there is no salvation.

The work of human choice is foundational in all Arminian churches, which include (besides Wesleyans) Anabaptists (Amish, Hutterites, and Mennonites), Church of the Nazarene, Free Will Baptists, General Baptists, Methodists, The Salvation Army, and Seventh-day Adventists. Many churches in the Southern Baptist Convention lean toward Arminianism, as do a great number of independent churches. Immediately after saying that salvation is "by grace alone and not of works," the National Association of Freewill Baptists contradicts itself by saying, "It is God's will that all be saved, but since man has the power of choice, God saves only those who repent of their sin and believe in the work of Christ on the cross" (http://nafwb.org/?page_id=325). Do you see that if God wants all to be saved but man has the power of choice, it is ultimately man's power of choice that saves him? His choosing is a work and it is this work that saves. Arminianism is a religion that is based on human works.

There are many other forms of human-works-based Christianity. Legalism puts a requirement, however small, of law-keeping upon the Christian. One of the legal obligations found in many churches is keeping a certain day. Some churches also teach that Christ's sacrifice saves us from our past sins but that, from the time of our repentance, we must then save ourselves by keeping the law. There are also those who say that the only real Christians are those who faithfully attend church, or who abide by church covenants, or who put themselves under the authority of an elder or accountability partner.

Then there is the common error of so trying to emphasize faith that it becomes a work. But we are not saved *because* of our faith. Our belief, trust, or faith is the instrument *through* which we receive Christ's imputed righteousness. God gives this instrument only to His elect, the only people for whom Christ died. We are saved because of Christ's atonement on the Cross and because we have His perfect righteousness applied to us (for more information, read, "The End of Sola Fide—"By Faith Alone" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/endofreformation2.htm>).

All of these distortions of biblical Christianity—for that is what they are—ultimately rely on human works to earn or merit salvation. Human-works-based Christianity is really just another of the world's religions that depends on human works.

Biblical/Gospel-Centered Christianity: In contrast to all of the religions that depend on human works, the Bible says that salvation is a work of God: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5). Instead of man being able to merit anything with God, the Bible teaches, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away" (Isaiah 64:6). We are all helpless sinners who can do no good. "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one.... They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Romans 3:10-12). But God "hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (2 Timothy 1:9). "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1).

How has He done this? The Apostle Paul wrote, "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Jesus Christ, the Son of God, humbled himself and died for our sins: "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:6-8). Yes, work is involved in our salvation. But it is not ours. It is the work of Jesus Christ. We are given forgiveness of sins, new life, and

reconciliation to God because of the work of Jesus, "Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

Jesus Christ expiated (or paid the penalty for) our sins, ransomed us from our sins (Mark 10:45), propitiated or appeased God's righteous indignation and wrath against us (Romans 1:18; 3:25; 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10), and reconciled us to God (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Ephesians 2:16). Because of Jesus' works, "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Yes, we are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Ephesians 2:10), but they don't save us or earn us any merit with God. In fact, the Bible clearly states that our salvation cannot be by our works: "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (Romans 11:6).

Only Two Religions

So, we see that there are only two religions. They are the religions of:

The works of man	The free, sovereign grace of God
Earning	Receiving the free gift (Romans 6:23)
Hagar	Sarah (Galatians 4:23)
Ishmael	Isaac (Galatians 4:28-31)
Sinai	The Jerusalem above (Galatians 4:25-26)
Esau	Jacob (Romans 9:11-13)
The Law	Promise (Galatians 3:18)
Bondage	Freedom (Galatians 5:1)
The wide gate and broad way	The strait gate and narrow way (Matthew 7:13-14)
Destruction	Life (Matthew 7:13-14)
The letter	The Spirit (Romans 7:6)
Law	Grace (Romans 6:14-15)

In short, there is the wrong religion and there is the right religion. And you are either following the one or you are following the other.