

Do You Consider Yourself a Religious Person?

My wife and I are spending some vacation time with one of our daughters and her family. My son-in-law and I enjoy wandering through used bookstores, and he wanted to show me a couple he had heard of in a nearby town.

At the largest bookstore, I asked where I would find their Religion section. I don't know why, but I was a little surprised when the worker asked me, "Which one? Which religion?" I responded, "Christian" and the worker pointed to a wall of shelved books and said, "Christianity begins here and goes to the end of the aisle." Of all the thousands of books in that store, "Christianity begins here" and goes to there. Their large selection of Christian faith and practice was really just a small section of the whole inventory of recorded thought and understanding collected there.

Many Ways Up the Mountain?

There are five religions that dominate the world today: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism. In addition, there are all the various branches or sects and "isms" that flow out of those. You may have encountered some of them by means of printed materials left under wiper blades on your car's windshield, persistent pairs of practitioners at your doorstep or even architectural symbols featured on prominent buildings. These belief systems may have some similarities, but they do not teach the same truths or worship the same God. Each has its own "truths" and is just one of many roads up the human mountain of belief. However, if one is right, the others are wrong.

As I scanned the book titles and some pages from the many shelves of Christian-related books in the store, I thought of

the apostle Paul, standing in Athens on the elevated Mars Hill, in the middle of the Areopagus. He said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious. For as I passed by and looked up at your objects of worship, I found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom you therefore unknowingly worship, Him I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23, MEV).

Author Jim Denison has summarized distinctions in these alternate faiths to Christianity:

- **Muslims** are convinced that Allah is the only god, who is the maker and controller of all things and people. He cannot be known personally but only submitted to by obeying the revelations and requirements of the Qur'an, which is his full and final revelation to mankind. Their founder, Muhammad, is considered Allah's messenger. Collected customs and sayings of Muhammad are considered sacred.

- **Buddhists and Hindus** reject the concept of a personal afterlife in eternity, believing we will eventually be absorbed into reality and cease to be. Hindus believe in many reincarnations, while Buddhism offers an ascetic spirituality that contrasts with the materialism of Western culture.

- **Judaism** is the oldest of monotheistic religions. Jews see themselves as descendants of the Hebraic patriarchal clan, beginning with Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel, and his descendants became known as "the children of Israel.") As a clan, they were "chosen by God" to become "a great nation" and as a "blessing to all the families of the earth." Jews believe in the revelations and writings found in the Old Testament of the Bible but not in the New Testament. Nearly all of them reject the claimed divinity of Jesus and the Christian belief that Jesus is their Messiah (the "chosen one") and our Lord.

Contemporary Judaism and Christianity

Although several current candidates for president of the United States are non-Christian Hindus, I would like to focus our remaining thoughts together this time on contemporary Judaism and Christianity.

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Like the other major religions, contemporary Judaism has several branches of belief and practice. The three largest groups of observant Jews are known as the Orthodox, the Reformed and the Conservative. Here are some of their distinctives:

– **Orthodox:** This traditional group maintains that the written and oral Torah (the first five books of their Scripture) was divinely revealed and thus unchangeable. A 16th-century collection of this revered revelation and rabbinic commentary and practice became a fixed and binding standard for proper Jewish life among Orthodox.

– **Reform:** This “progressive” group of Westernized, modern Jews rejects the idea of a permanently binding religious law. They have adapted or abandoned many traditional Jewish beliefs and practices to better fit in with modern social, political and cultural conditions while maintaining their ethnic and ethical identities.

– **Conservative:** This category of religious Jews believes the Reformed believers go too far in rejecting Jewish law. However, they see the Orthodox branch as too fundamental in rejecting ritual changes or the adaptation of religious thought and practice, within contemporary Judaism. This modernized group is known as Masorti Judaism outside of North America.

Many Follow a Fourth Branch of Judaism

A relatively new sect of Jews believe in the promises in the Jewish Tanakh (holy Scriptures, combining the Law, Prophets and the Writings) of a Jewish Messiah ("the Christ" in Greek) to be sent by Father God to save or permanently deliver humankind from the consequence and guilt of their sins.

Christianity is a faith movement from the first century of the common era (C.E.) that accepted a rabbinical teacher from Nazareth as the promised Jewish Messiah, the Christ (*Yeshua HaMashiach* in Hebrew). This belief is the foundation of their entire faith and practice.

The history book of the early disciples of this Jesus tells how He fulfilled Jewish prophecy: "Let all the house of Israel assuredly know that God has made this Jesus, whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). A later historical note explains these disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:20-26), a prominent town 300 miles north of Jerusalem in what is now southern Türkiye).

However, most Jews still do not believe this Jesus of Nazareth is the chosen one, the Messiah sent as a kinsman redeemer to save mankind. Rather, they view Jesus as a historical figure in the tradition of teachers and prophets. Others even despise Jesus for what some who claimed to be His disciples did with anti-Semitic atrocities during the Holocaust.

However, one relatively modern faith movement, known as Messianic Judaism, combines Jewish and Christian beliefs by accepting Jesus as the promised Messiah. These Messianic Jews seek to retain their Jewish heritage, ethnic identity, and Jewish lifestyle, while at the same time embracing New Testament theology and *Yeshua HaMachia*.

A Call to Recognize Messianic Judaism

In early 2004, after more than three years of a major Palestinian uprising against Israel which greatly impacted tourism in Israel, I was with Pastor Jack Hayford in Jerusalem

for the Prime Minister's Conference on Israeli Tourism. He had been asked to be there to speak from the dais as an evangelical Christian leader who had led many tours to Israel in the prior decades.

After several minutes of gracious and encouraging remarks to the assembled Israeli political and tourism leaders, Hayford acknowledged the leaders from the three branches of modern Judaism. He tactfully suggested that to assist in restarting Israel's sagging tourism industry, they also needed to acknowledge the growing reality of Messianic Judaism as the "fourth branch of modern Judaism."

He mentioned that individuals could be agnostic or even atheistic and still be recognized in Israel as an accepted Jew, in good standing. But to accept and acknowledge someone who believed in a Jewish prophet who taught about God, loved people and healed the sick somehow disqualified a Jewish person from Jewish life and identity. How could this be right and helpful to the modern nation of Israel?

At first, there was awkward silence, and then people began to scoot their chairs around and clear their throats, as Pastor Jack left the dais and came to the table where I was sitting. A member of the Los Angeles office of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism (whom we knew and had worked with for local events in Los Angeles) came to our table to let us know the Jewish religious leaders "did not appreciate" Pastor Jack's remarks. He said he knew, but he purposely made them because those leaders needed to begin to accept and acknowledge the reality of this "fourth branch of Judaism."

Now, after nearly 20 years, that still has not happened. Yet it was estimated as recently as 2018 the total number of Messianic Jews worldwide exceeded 350,000, with about 250,000 living in the United States and nearly 20,000 living in Israel. There, they observe Jewish lifestyles, pay Jewish taxes and serve in Israel's military and civil service. It is

high time to recognize the reality of Messianic Judaism as this fourth branch of modern Judaism. {eoa}

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