

The Mall of Religions

by
Karyn Henley



Karyn Henley Resources

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What's the Big Deal?



“God is dead.” – Nietzsche
 “Nietzsche is dead.” – God
 - Unknown -

Friedrich’s father and grandfather were both Protestant ministers. But Friedrich, born in Germany in 1844, began to question their beliefs as he grew up. In university studies, he concentrated on philosophy and the classics, the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. When he graduated, he began to teach and write. Then, around 1883, Friedrich Nietzsche (nee’ chuh) proclaimed that God was dead. By 1901, Friedrich was dead, and God was still being worshiped around the world. ¹

Nietzsche’s ideas, however, influenced lots of writers, philosophers, and teachers. Some people today still agree with him. But most people, from the beginning of time through today, have believed in some kind of Higher Power, even if they didn’t know who or what the Higher Power was.

Imagine ancient cavemen or nomads. They didn’t know how to write or read. They had not been taught much about God. But they would sit by their campfires at night and gaze into the star-filled sky and sense the presence of Someone Great. Or with the wind whipping their hair, they would stand on a hill and watch storm clouds billow dark on the horizon. Lightning zagged across the sky. Thunder crackled. And they knew in their bones that there was a Higher Power.

Maybe you've experienced that same feeling. Or maybe, like Nietzsche, you are asking some hard questions. Today most people don't often get a chance to sit in a field away from city lights and contemplate the vastness of space or watch a storm roll over the horizon. Still, most people believe there is a greater dimension to life, a *beyond* that we can't see, a spiritual side of the world. People are interested in religion and spirituality. But, as a satirical choose-your-own-religion guide says, "we put more thought into the cars we buy than the gods we worship." ²

So . . . what if there were a Mall of Religions where we could go and shop for our belief system? Well, this book is going to be our mall. Want to join me for a little shopping?

Why would that be important to *me*, you ask. Haven't I already decided on my beliefs? Don't I already have my religion or my faith settled? Why look around at other religions?

Ask yourself this: Why do you believe what you believe? If someone hasn't already asked you that question, someday they will. (Unless you keep yourself hidden in a 24/7 Christian community and don't ever meet any nonbelievers.) Besides, believe it or not, if you don't know why you believe, one day you will probably question yourself. (Unless you are too scared to shake up your thoughts, secretly suspecting there's no basis for your beliefs.)

And what if you want to talk intelligently about spiritual matters to someone who does *not* believe what you believe? They have sacred writings; you have sacred writings. They have moral values; you have moral values. They have a worldview and a perspective on spirituality; you have a worldview and a perspective on spirituality. They may be morally good, accepting, and nonjudgmental. Who's to say which of you is on the right track? Is there a right track? And if you think it's *you* who are on the right track, what is the one simple explanation that shows that your beliefs make sense and feel right?

What is Religion, Anyway?

As you would guess, religion has to do with the big questions most people ask at one time or another in their lives. How did the world come into existence? Why are we here? What or who is the Highest Power, and how should we humans interact or respond to this Highest Power?

Our perspective of the world guides the way we act, the choices we make, and the goals we set for ourselves. Any person's

worldview, their “take” on life, usually comes from their religion. Most religions have sacred writings that contain their wisdom and rules for right living. Usually a religion has rituals or ceremonies that its believers follow. In most religions, there is some kind of worship and prayer. Some, but not all, religions believe in life after death. Some, but not all, believe in a God or gods.

Religions that don't believe in a personal God or gods may seem to be simply philosophies. But they are still often called religions, because they deal with the big questions, and the people who follow these beliefs make moral choices and life decisions based on those philosophies.

God-Isms

Before we go inside any of the stores in the Mall of Religions, let's check out the kiosk in the center. There's a yellow neon sign glowing above it: *Higher Power*. On the counter, there are stacks of free brochures that tell about general categories of religions. Let's look at some of these god-isms.

Animism: The higher powers are spirits that live in or around certain objects, like a tree or rock. Believers can displease or appease these spirits. There are still tribes of people today who are animistic. For example, in a hill tribe in Thailand, if one of the tribe members gets sick, the shaman of the village might ask the man where he peed on the way home from the field. The man points out a certain tree. The shaman says the spirit at the tree got angry when he peed there and made the man sick. So the family sets a bowl of glutinous rice at the foot of the tree to appease the spirit so the man will get well.³

Deism: The Higher Power is one being or spirit that is supreme and “other” and uninterested in our world. Many of the Founding Fathers of the United States, including George Washington, Ben Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, were Deists.

Dualism: (Sometimes called “bitheism.”) There are two beings who are co-supreme, usually morally different from each other, i.e. the “good guy” and the “bad guy.” Star Wars is dualistic: the Force and the Dark Side are in battle, and

either one could win. Zoroastrianism (modern-day Parseeism) is dualistic. This was the religion of Persia in the time that Daniel and his friends lived there.

Dynamism: (“Dyna” means power. Think “dynamite.”) The Higher Powers are actual inanimate objects that hold great power or force. This is one of the most ancient beliefs. Some people who join Earth Religions today are trying to return to this belief.

Henotheism: The Higher Power is a god or gods that belong to only one certain tribe of people. Another tribe has a different god or gods. This is the way it was in the days of the Old Testament when Abraham lived and when the Israelites moved into the land of Canaan. If one tribe won a war, usually everyone in the losing tribe converted to the winning tribe’s god. They thought the winner’s god must be the strongest. In some parts of the world today, there are still primitive tribes that have their own gods.

Monism: Reality is one organic whole with no independent parts, so there are no individual souls. Everyone is part of the same big soul.

Monotheism: There is only one Highest Power. This being does not come from any other power. Nothing limits what this highest Power can do and know. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monotheistic.

Pantheism: (“Pan” means “all.”) The Higher Powers are spirits that live in all things. In that sense, “all is God.” In other words, the whole world, including humans, is a cosmic being. So anything or everything can be revered and worshiped. Wicca, Paganism, Native American beliefs, and other Earth Religions are pantheistic.

Polytheistic: The Higher Powers are gods who live in another world, but visit this one. They usually have personalities. Think of Zeus, Athena, Mercury, Thor, and other gods and goddesses of Greek, Roman, and Norse myths.

Theism: The Higher Power(s) have personal qualities and are able to interact with humans. This includes polytheism, dualism, and monotheism.

There are a few more obscure god-isms, but these are the easiest to understand and the most common, so we'll stop here.

You can find almost all these types of religions in our own society today, because we are global and *pluralistic*. A pluralistic society is one in which each different ethnic, racial, religious, and social group keeps its own identity and culture within a common civilization.⁴ All religious teachers and traditions are considered equal, so everyone is expected to tolerate and respect each other's religious choice.

Speaking of choice: People sometimes choose a religion based on the fact that a friend recommended it. Or someone they admire believes it. Or a movie star or other famous person says it's the greatest. But a choice of religion – a worldview, a system of beliefs that is going to guide major life choices – is pretty important. Is it something we really want to leave up to someone else? Or should our choice be more informed?

Let's go through this Mall of Religions and see what some of the choices are. Maybe the first store we should check out is one of the Isms that we didn't talk about: atheism ("a" means "against"). We should probably consider atheism first, because the question of God is at the center of what religion is all about. So . . . step right in. Is there or isn't there a god?

