

## Lecture 11: Religions of the West; Judaism

We're turning in this lecture to the third of our four main categories of religion, to the religions of the West. Up to this point, our attention has been focused on the religions of South and East Asia, and I've introduced you—to be specific—to Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. As we move now toward the western world, we're going to be talking about a religious point of view that will probably be much more familiar to most of you in this class, the worldview shared in many of its essential details by three main traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Scholars refer to these three religions in a variety of ways. First of all they're described—as I myself have been doing thus far—in geographical terms as the *western* traditions. Of course this adjective, just on its own, can prove a little misleading. Spatial terms are relative after all, depending on where you begin. These three religions are “western” insofar as they originated in lands to the west of India and China. (Think back to the map of the world we looked at near the start of the semester, with the center of my “pie”-shaped diagram right at the northern tip of India). Furthermore, in the case of Judaism and Christianity, they've tended historically to spread in a mainly western direction—toward Europe and the Americas. On the other hand, those of us who live in “the West” often refer to the lands where these three religions were born as the “Middle East”. As I said, geography is relative.

A second label we use in designating these religions is *Semitic*: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the Semitic traditions. This word comes from the name of a person, Shem, who according to the Bible was the oldest of the sons of Noah (Genesis 5:32), the builder of the famous ark. The adjective “Semitic” can be used both geneologically and linguistically: it refers on the one hand to the biological descendents of Shem and on the other hand to the family of languages these people spoke, a family which includes Hebrew (the original language of the Jewish Bible, which Christians call the “Old Testament”), Aramaic (which scholars believe to have been the language spoken by Jesus and His first disciples), and Arabic (which is the language of Islam and Muslims).

Yet a third way of classifying this group is to refer to them as the *Abrahamic* religions, after the patriarch Abraham. According to the Bible God promised a man named Abram that he would become “the father of a great nation” (Genesis 12:2); and as a matter of fact this man, later renamed Abraham (Genesis 17:5), is now recognized and honored as foundational to three

important nations or religious peoples. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all look to him as a key historical figure. Born in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq) in the year 1948 after Creation, according to Jewish reckoning—that would be 1813 B.C. in the Christian calendar—Abraham is regarded by Jews as the first of the three great patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Christianity, especially in the New Testament epistles of Paul (see, for example, Hebrews 11), Abraham is held up as a model of great faith and trusting obedience; and in Islam, he is understood to have been one of the greatest prophets in history.

Finally, there's yet a fourth way scholars refer to these three traditions, and it's the most important for our purposes here. The western, Semitic, or Abrahamic religions are all *monotheistic* traditions. Here you need to think back once again to our discussion of the various “conceptions of the Divine” (Lecture 4). Hindus, we saw, are fundamentally monists, though of course exoterically they're also polytheists. Buddhists are basically “a-theists”, using that word (please remember) in the technical religious sense I sketched for you earlier. And Confucians and Taoists are largely panentheists. In contrast with all of these views, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are monotheists. As distinct from polytheism, they believe in only one God; as distinct from monism, they believe this God is not the only thing that exists; as distinct from religious a-theism, they believe this God can be known and related to in a personal way; and as distinct from panentheism, they believe the world is something more than just the content of God—that it's been created and is being ruled by a God who transcends it and is in some sense outside it.

I want to pause here and emphasize this last point in particular—the idea that a transcendent God is the creator and ruler of the world—because it will help to bring into focus what most clearly distinguishes these three religions from their counterparts in South and East Asia. As I've told you before, each of the main historical families of religion is notable for having a particular emphasis or specialty. The South Asian family specializes in the problem of *self*: Who am I, and what does it mean to be “me”? The East Asian family, as we've seen more recently, tends to be more interested in the problem of *society*: Who is my neighbor, and what is the ideal form of human relationships? What we find when we come now to the western or Semitic traditions is yet a third focus or emphasis, in this case on the problem of *nature*. Having figured out who we are and how we should deal with other people, we're all faced with a third question or problem in life: What is the structure of the world around us, what is its purpose, and how exactly do we fit in?

It makes perfect sense that this would be a more important question for westerners than for Asians. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all monotheists, and what this means, as I just said, is that they believe in a God who created and who rules our world. On the one hand God is a great Artist, and the universe around us is His masterpiece. But if that's so, then clearly this universe must be regarded as something of value, as something real and good. If God, who is good, is truly an Artist, and if among all the trillions of other things He made He saw fit to fashion a koala bear—to pick just one of His innumerable creatures—then a koala bear must be good as well, and somehow its fuzziness and furriness and cuddliness, its unique “bear-ishness”, must be worthy of our most serious and respectful attention. And the same thing must be true for everything else we find around us in nature.

The point I'm getting at comes through loud and clear beginning in the very first verse of the very first chapter of the very first book of the very first of the Semitic scriptures. Genesis 1 starts off with the well-known words, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” As I'm sure many of you know, by the time we've reached the end of that chapter and have heard about the creation of everything from day and night to the plants and animals and man himself, we've been told no less than six times that what had been created was *good*, and the chapter concludes (just in case it wasn't clear enough yet) by describing God the Great Artist looking down to survey all that He'd made: and “behold,” we're told, “it was *very good*” (Genesis 1:31). In a sense, this little adverb “very”—it was *very* good—sums up the entire western religious understanding of nature, koala bears included.

This is a very different perspective from the one we encountered in talking about the religions of South Asia. For Hinduism the world isn't really real: it's illusion or *Mâyâ*; and in Buddhism, while the world may have a certain kind of reality, it's looked upon largely as an occasion for *dukkha* or suffering, from which we should be seeking the escape of *Nirvâna*. Not so for the Semitic religions. For them our natural environment is like a beautiful tapestry, in the very patterns and colors and folds of which God has made Himself and His purposes known to mankind. The Christian apostle Paul is speaking on behalf of all the western religions when he says, “Ever since the creation of the world [God's] invisible nature, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20).

I said that for the Semitic traditions God is a Creator or Artist, but He's also pictured as a great Ruler or King, and what this implies is that God has a very definite plan for the world.

Obviously a plan was behind its initial creation—a sort of cosmic blueprint as to what would go where—but there's also a plan for its unfolding through time, and this fact has led the western religions to place a much greater stress than do the Asian traditions on the importance of linear history. Not only are particular creatures of great worth in the West; so also are the specific happenings or experiences that these creatures, and especially we human beings, undergo. Once again you will notice that this perspective is in marked contrast with the religions of both South and East Asia, where time is more typically pictured as circular. I'm thinking of the Hindu and Buddhist ideas of reincarnation, but in East Asia too the fundamental perception of things is somehow more rounded and cyclical, as we noticed (for example) in the regular and rhythmic flow of the *Tao*. Very different is the western perception. Rather than thinking in terms of circularity and repetition, the Jew, the Christian, and the Muslim share instead the idea that time is best pictured as a straight line, along which the world is being guided toward a divinely willed end, and that the movement of time—the movement of history—is ever forward, from past to present to future, with no return to what's happened before. This means that for the Abrahamic family of religions, not only the concrete things of space (like koala bears) but the discrete events of time (like the Exodus, or the crucifixion of Jesus, or the coming of the first revelation to the Prophet Muhammad) are each accorded a very particular value. For each is conceived as an expression of the ultimate purpose and power of God. In any case, all this is involved when I say that the traditions of the West are especially interested in the “natural” world.

But enough of these general comments. In the remaining part of this lecture, I'd like to narrow the focus to just one of these Abrahamic religions—the oldest one—namely, Judaism. We're going to be spending the bulk of our time in this module, starting with our next session, on Islam, which is the youngest of the Semitic religions. But today, as a prelude to that discussion, I want to give you a short overview of the first and oldest of the western paths to God. As I said at the start of the course, my guiding assumption, based upon past experience, is that most students taking this class are Christians or are from Christian backgrounds, and this is why I'm not setting aside time to talk about that religion in particular. Of course I'll continue to highlight points of comparison between Christian beliefs and practices and those of other religions, in this case Christianity's western sister traditions.

The first thing you need to know is that Judaism, like Hinduism, has always been primarily the religion of a particular race or ethnic group rather than being a mission-oriented tradition like

Buddhism or Christianity. Just as being a Hindu means being born into one of the castes, so being a member of the Jewish religion means being born to parents who are descended from a particular people. The Jews trace their ancestral lineage back through Judah (whence the term “Jew”), who was the fourth of the sons of Jacob (later renamed Israel), and in turn through Jacob’s father Isaac to the already mentioned patriarch Abraham. Judaism is also like Hinduism in not having any one particular historical founder; in other words there’s no one comparable to what Siddhartha Gautama is for Buddhism or what Jesus of Nazareth is for Christianity. There are certainly key figures in the history of Judaism: I’ve mentioned Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah, and we’d certainly have to add to that list the name of Moses, whom Jews regard as the greatest of their prophets. Nevertheless, as Jews see it, the foundations of their religion are to be found in God Himself and in God’s revelation, which came not to or through any single person, but rather to and through their entire people, a people whose roots go back (in the final analysis) not just to Abraham but to Adam and Eve, the very first human beings. God—they would say—is the only true “founder” of their religion, and this foundation consists in the way He has dealt with their ancestors, His “chosen people”, throughout the course of their history.

Remembering, as always, that your professor is obliged to reduce much more complicated topics to their barest essentials (!), I would like to focus our discussion of Judaism on four main points: God’s Unity, God’s Gifts, God’s Demands, and God’s Patience. Jewish students and others of you in the class who have carefully studied the Jewish scriptures will already be familiar with much of what I’ll be saying—and you’ll see very clearly how many corners I’m cutting! But in the interest of giving those who may be unacquainted with this tradition as helpful an introduction as possible in a rather short space, I think these categories can be useful.

1. *God’s Unity*. I’ve actually touched on this first point already in dealing generically with the western religions as a whole, but it’s well worth repeating. The most important of all Jewish doctrines, the most important thing for us to know, is that there is a God—but not just *any* God. Like Christians and Muslims, Jews are monotheists, and this means they believe in only one God, who is the creator and ruler of everything. If there’s one verse of the Jewish scriptures that can be said to summarize the entire religion, it’s doubtless Deuteronomy 6:4—“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is *one*.”

Now the unity of God for the Jew has at least two distinct (though related) meanings. First, to say that God is one means that there is no other equivalent deity, that the true God is unique. I

have to use the word “equivalent” here because the earliest Jews may have acknowledged the existence of other, lesser gods. This seems to be implied in the first of the Ten Commandments. (For those of you from other traditions, or with no religious background, this is a list of fundamental laws or precepts which are believed to have been given by God to Moses sometime in the 1200s B.C. and which lie at the very heart of both Jewish and Christian ethics, summing up the essential duties of man.) The first commandment says: “Thou shall have no other gods beside Me” (Exodus 20:3). When we discussed the various conceptions of the Divine several sessions ago, I mentioned in passing that the oldest form of theological thinking in Judaism would perhaps be more accurately labeled by the term *henotheism*. Nevertheless, even if there are other small “g” gods, for the Jews—whether ancient or modern—no other deity is on the same level as the one, true, capital-“G” God. Only that God is truly good, only He is truly wise, only He is truly powerful. In these and all other respects He’s supreme.

Then there’s a second meaning of unity. To say that God is one implies that He is not composite or complex. As Judaism sees it, the divine Reality is simple and undifferentiated, having no parts or aspects or any other inward plurality. For this reason the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—the teaching that God exists in three distinct Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all of them equally divine—is for the Jew a huge mistake and a dangerous compromise to a proper understanding of God. When Moses asks God what His name is, God replies, “I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14), a response which shows us very clearly, say the Jews, that God must be radically simple. In grammatical terms, He is His own predicate: He simply *is* what He *is*, without qualification or elaboration.

2. *God’s Gifts*. Once again we’ve already glanced at this idea, but allow me to develop it further. The Jew believes in a giving God, a God who freely and voluntarily gives of Himself to His creatures. His first gift is the creation itself: God’s act of making the universe was voluntary, not necessary. It was the result of God’s free choice, not something He was forced or compelled to do. Furthermore the creation took place under God’s own immediate supervision and by means of His own direct agency. He cared too much about the process and its results to delegate responsibility to anyone or anything else. This important doctrine, shared by both Christians and Muslims, is in stark contrast with a competing idea found in certain other ancient philosophies and cultures where it was taught instead that the supreme Divinity, rather than bothering with the messy

business of world-making, assigned the task to a sort of cosmic foreman, called by Plato (for example) the “demiurge”.

To go off on a bit of tangent for just a moment, you might be interested to learn that according to Judaism the creation of the world took place at a particular moment in time; this at least is the teaching of Orthodox Judaism, the most traditional branch of the faith. According to Orthodox Jewish reckoning, the world was created on Monday, 7 October 3761 B.C.—to express it in terms of the Christian calendar, though of course for the Jew it would simply be the year 1. This is a date whose calculation depends in part on adding up the number of generations since Adam that are mentioned in the scriptures. Please note how very different this perspective is from that of Hinduism, where the universe we happen to live in is but one in an on-going series of universes having no beginning—different too from Taoism, where the origin of things in the *Tao* is entirely outside time as we know it. Judaism’s strong insistence on the uniqueness of our world, even to the point of being able to pinpoint its chronological origin, is characteristic of what I meant when I said that the western religions tend to take the natural world more seriously than do the Asian traditions.

But to continue with gifts. God’s second major gift to His creatures is His providential care for them. Not only does He bring them into being; He also looks after them. This is clearly no deist religion (see again Lecture 4) where the Divinity is conceived as aloof and cut off from the world it created. For the Jew, on the contrary, God sustains and nurtures His creatures, and His care is at once universal and particular. On the one hand God has a definite plan for all history: whatever happens is part of an overall purpose, and all things are being guided toward their proper fulfillment. This is closely linked with the western idea, which I’ve already mentioned, that time is linear. As creatures of an all-seeing God, we’re to picture ourselves as passengers on a sort of train, headed toward some final destination, where everything will be shown to have made perfect sense. On the other hand God also has a very particular concern for each and every individual creature. Jesus was speaking very much as a Jew to Jews when He said, in the Sermon on the Mount, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matthew 6:26). In the case of His human creatures, this God is all the more caring, watching over each person and knowing his innermost thoughts and desires. To quote Jesus again: “The very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear” (Matthew 10:20).

According to Judaism, divine compassion and care have meant that God sometimes goes so far as to enter into the course of history itself, interrupting the order of the nature He made, in order to alter the flow of time and adjust the structure of matter when corrections are called for. Since God is the Creator and Ruler of nature, He's also the author of its laws, and He's therefore perfectly within His rights in *suspending* those laws if and when it suits His purpose. The result is what we call a miracle. As far as the Jews are concerned, the most significant and far-reaching of all miracles took place when God entered history in a memorable rescue operation called the exodus, which liberated the Jewish people from their bondage in Egypt. The story of this miraculous rescue is told in the Old Testament book of Exodus. Numerous supernatural phenomena are associated with God's liberation of the Jews, including especially the famous story of the parting of the Red Sea, when by God's power the waters were divided long enough for the Jewish people to cross the sea, only to come crashing back together when the Egyptians tried to pursue them. This and other such Biblical stories help to demonstrate how generous and giving and caring God is, especially toward those who are faithful to Him. This last phrase—toward those who are *faithful*—leads naturally to my next point.

3. *God's Demands.* According to Judaism, the relationship between the Creator and the creation isn't all one-sided. For in the case of human beings at least, God expects something in return for His gifts, and it's for this reason and on this basis that He has entered into a "covenant" with man. The idea of a covenant or contract, a kind of bargain between God and man, is a crucial and distinctive feature of Jewish faith. The first and most important thing this covenant requires is man's worship. This was already touched on when I mentioned the first of the Ten Commandments, the prohibition against having other gods. But the next three of these famous commandments all make the same basic point. The first commandment requires that Jews focus their worship exclusively on the supreme Creator God, the One who enjoined Moses: "You shall have no other gods except Me" (Exodus 20:3). The second is a prohibition against idolatry: "You shall not make for yourself any graven image [of God]" (Exodus 20:4). In the third commandment the Jew is forbidden to abuse the name of God: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7). This injunction is sometimes misunderstood; it's not referring to the use of vile language, but rather to the importance of honoring the holiness of God. Like some other traditions, Judaism identifies God with His revealed Name, and out of respect for the awesome power and holiness of their Creator, Jews are required by their religion to keep this Name sacred,

refusing even to pronounce it aloud. Hence “not taking the name of the Lord in vain” is actually a rule concerning proper worship and honor toward God. And so also is the fourth commandment, which has to do with reserving a particular day of the week for that worship: “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8).

The second thing God requires, according to Judaism, is virtue or righteousness, that is, moral rectitude or purity in one’s interpersonal relationships. Whereas the first four of the Ten Commandments all concern man’s relation with God, the second six are concerned with man’s relationship with his neighbor: we are to honor our parents (the fifth commandment); we are to avoid committing murder (the sixth), adultery (the seventh), theft (the eighth), and perjury (the ninth), and we are not to “covet” our neighbor’s property (the tenth) (Exodus 20:12-17). As you can see, commandments 6, 7, 8, and 9 correspond to four of the five Buddhist precepts, while number 5 is closely related to the Confucian *Li*.

The Ten Commandments are certainly the best known of God’s laws, especially among Christians. But according to Judaism, they’re only one small portion of God’s requirements. If we want to understand those requirements in full, says the traditional Jew, we need to engage in a careful, prayerful study of God’s entire revealed Law. This Law is known in Hebrew as the *Torah*, and it’s believed that this *Torah*, given by God to Moses, was written down in the Pentateuch, that is, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. According to Jewish tradition, this immutable and unsurpassable Law contains 613 individual precepts or commandments, 248 of which are positive (*do this, do that*) and 365 of which are negative (*don’t do this, don’t do that*). One ancient interpretation speculates that these numbers correspond to the 248 bones and the 365 muscles of the human body. Whether or not our bodies contain precisely this number of parts, the symbolic point is what’s important: for the Jew the Law of God is meant to be all-encompassing, and it therefore demands the complete and total involvement of the whole human being.

This completeness or totality comes through even more forcefully when one realizes that the specific laws written down in the Pentateuch are actually just the foundation for an even larger, more detailed superstructure of precepts and injunctions called the *Talmud*, which is a huge body of oral tradition consisting of elaborate commentary on the *Torah*. To give you just one example of how detailed the *Talmud* can be, it includes a special prayer the Orthodox Jew is taught to recite upon leaving the bathroom: “Blessed is He who has formed man in wisdom and created in him

many orifices and many cavities. It is obvious and known before Thy throne of glory, O Lord, that if any one of them were to be ruptured or any one of them blocked, it would be impossible for a man to survive and stand before Thee. Blessed art Thou who heals all flesh and does wonders.” You can see very clearly from this prayer what I was saying earlier about the Abrahamic valuation of nature, and matter, and the whole physical world: our bodies, together with all their parts and functions, were created by God Himself, and this means that each of them must be a “very good” thing and worthy of our most serious and sensitive attention. In any event, however many commandments there are and whatever the degree of detail one accepts, the point is that the whole of a person’s life should be consecrated to God. Total faithfulness and obedience to God are essential in order that man might fulfill his part of the covenant by properly expressing his thankfulness for all of God’s gifts.

Let me add one other very important corollary to this matter of “demands”: God’s commandments have consequences. We are called by God’s Law to strict obedience, says the Jew. This is man’s part of the bargain, and if he obeys, God will reward him with continuing gifts and blessings. On the other hand, if he *doesn’t* obey, he will be punished by a God whose justice is often expressed in the Jewish Bible in terms of fierceness, and even wrath. According to the literal text of the *Torah*, divine rewards take the form of material prosperity, whether that prosperity comes in the form of a large family and a long line of descendents, or in physical wealth, or in the attainment of the “promised land”, and these rewards seem to have been understood by many ancient Jews in collective or national terms and as applying to the whole “people of Israel”. Beginning in the early Christian era, however, it became more common for Jews to interpret the promises of the Bible in a spiritual and symbolic way—as the Old Testament Book of Job, among other writings, suggests that they should be—and the consequences of how a person lives her life were seen as relating to her own personal afterlife.

4. *God’s Patience*. If I were to stop at this point, I would be guilty of a gross misrepresentation of the religion of Judaism. I might leave you thinking that in the Jewish understanding God is strictly a legalist, a being who is willing to give only to those from whom He will get something back, operating on a *quid pro quo* basis. But this in fact is very far very from the truth, although Christians sometimes make this mistake about their parent religion. A more careful and attentive reading of the Jewish scriptures discloses instead the consistent picture of a God who has the patience, resilience, persistence, and even (if I dare say this) the wry sense

of humor of a skilled diplomat or negotiator, a God whose concern for His people is so great that He's willing to continue helping them again and again despite the fact that they keep messing things up and turning their backs on Him. As some of you doubtless know, the entire Old Testament is basically one long story of God's continual efforts to help a stubborn, foolish, and rebellious people finally get things right. There are three important points that come into play here.

In the first place God's patience is closely connected to His respect for the dignity of the individual. According to Judaism—Christianity and Islam share the same idea—God created human beings “in His image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26). As we've already seen, the God of the Jews is a God who takes a special, personal interest in the welfare of all His creatures, but in the case of man this interest is even more immediate and intense. For man is the most like His creator. He's like Him especially in having freedom of choice, and this being so God deliberately stands back (as it were) so as to give His human creatures plenty of space in which to make their own decisions. In fact God's respect for man's freedom extends even to the point of permitting His human creatures to challenge Him and dispute His authority. The classic instance of this can be found in the Book of Job, which I just mentioned. To sum it up very briefly, the story of Job is the story of an innocent man who is severely tested by tremendous misfortune and who is thus led to question the very goodness of God. By the end of the book, Job has been reprimanded for his audacity and made to realize the full scope of God's wisdom and power. Nonetheless, one comes away realizing that Job's *chutzpah* (to use a good Jewish word, meaning “audacity” or even “impudence”) was a laudable thing in God's eyes, and the tradition of standing one's ground in controversies with the Almighty remains a recurring theme in Jewish thought. As I'm sure you can see, we're worlds apart here—at least exoterically—from the traditional East Asian idea that the individual is insignificant or even non-existent.

God's patience and His willingness to negotiate can be seen secondly, with special clarity and poignancy, in the Jewish prophets. According to Judaism, God has periodically raised up certain people to serve as His messengers to the rest of mankind, particular individuals who've been chosen by God as His representatives or spokesmen. The word “prophet” is based on two Greek roots: *pro*, which means “on behalf of”, and *phasis*, which has to do with “speech” or “speaking”. A prophet is thus a person who speaks on another's behalf, the “other” in this case being God. When we use the word “prophet” today, we often have in mind the powers of prognostication and prediction. In Biblical usage, however, while inspired visions of the future are

sometimes involved, the main point of prophecy is that it comes from a more-than-human source. Prophets instruct, warn, denounce, and offer hope, all at God's direction and as His representatives. Of all the world's religions, the western traditions—especially Judaism and Islam—are distinctive in the stress they place on prophets. All of them agree that God is able to speak to some men through other men by means of human language. You'll see how important this idea can be when we turn next time to Islam.

For the moment, I would simply add that there's an important sense in which Judaism not only believes in particular prophets but also regards the Jewish people in general as serving a kind of prophetic role with regard to the rest of mankind. I used the phrase "chosen people" earlier, and it's an idea that deserves to be stressed. A distinctive tenet of this religion, which can be seen throughout the Old Testament, is that Jews have been especially selected by God to serve as an example and light for other peoples of the world. The idea of being chosen can easily mislead, however. At first it may sound like a pompous claim, as if the Jews believed themselves to be better than anyone else. But it's not a question, they would say, of being superior people. On the contrary, as their own scriptures prove, they've by no means always been the best people for the job. In fact, they've often rather miserably failed. And yet in spite of these failures—in fact in some cases *because* of their failures—they have continued to play a prophetic role, witnessing to the importance of purity and righteousness before God even in the midst of their sins and sufferings.

I've called your attention to several of the outward or exoteric differences between the Western and the Asian traditions, and here you can see one more rather remarkable contrast. The idea that suffering could somehow be instructive or redemptive is something you clearly wouldn't encounter in Buddhism, where *dukkha* is the basic problem of life, something to be escaped from. It's therefore of interest to note that in Judaism—and later in Christianity—suffering actually becomes a part of the problem's solution.

A third and final aspect of God's patience—though we could also categorize it among God's many gifts—is His "Messianic promise", the promise of a coming Messiah. This is for traditional Jews the greatest of God's covenantal promises and the most important evidence of His longsuffering willingness to provide a kind of "back-up" plan for creation. The Hebrew word *Messiah* means the "anointed one". It's connected to the traditional practice of consecrating a king at his coronation by anointing his head with holy oil. In the Jewish tradition, the Messiah is

understood to be a very particular king, who will appear at the end of history, specially chosen and prepared by God to save His people. He will be a descendant of the Jewish King David, and when he arrives on the scene, he'll have the role of liberating the Jewish people from foreign domination, gathering them back together again in the "promised land" of Israel, restoring the ancient Davidic dynasty, and rebuilding their Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

As many of you know, I'm sure, this is where Christianity picks up the story, though with two extremely important differences: in Christian doctrine, the promised savior of Israel is said to be the divine Son of God; and Christians believe this Messiah has already come, the prophetic promise having been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. (Christians call Jesus the "Christ", from the word *christos*, the Greek equivalent of Messiah.) Jews by contrast do *not* think Jesus was the promised Messiah, nor do they believe that when the Messiah *does* finally arrive on the scene, at the end of history, he will himself be divine. He will simply be a man like Abraham or Moses, a human being whom God has empowered to give help to His people. The difference in this case is that the help will be permanent, for the coming of the Messiah will demonstrate conclusively to the whole world the saving truth of the *Torah* that the Jews have always been seeking to live by, ushering in a final age of universal peace, harmony, and justice.