

## Buddhism

Buddhism is a tradition of thought and practice originating in India c.2500 years ago, and now a world religion, deriving from the teaching of Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama), who is regarded as one of a continuing series of enlightened beings. The teaching of Buddha is summarized in the Four Noble Truths, the last of which affirms the existence of a path leading to deliverance from the universal human experience of suffering.

A central tenet is the law of karma, by which good and evil deeds result in appropriate reward or punishment in this life or in a succession of rebirths. Through a proper understanding of this condition, and by obedience to the right path, human beings can break the chain of karma. The Buddha's path to deliverance is through morality (sila), meditation (samadhi), and wisdom (panna), as set out in the Eightfold Path. The goal is Nirvana, which means 'the blowing out' of the fires of all desires, and the absorption of the self into the infinite. All Buddhas are greatly revered, and a place of special importance is accorded to Gautama.

There are two main traditions within Buddhism, dating from its earliest history. Theravada Buddhism adheres to the strict and narrow teachings of the early Buddhist writings: salvation is possible for only the few who accept the severe discipline and effort necessary to achieve it. Mahayana Buddhism is more liberal, and makes concessions to popular piety: it teaches that salvation is possible for everyone, and introduced the doctrine of the bodhisattva (or personal saviour).

As Buddhism spread, other schools grew up, among which are Ch'an or Zen, Lamaism, Tendai, Nichiren, and Soka Gakkai. Recently Buddhism has attracted growing interest in the West. The only complete canon of Buddhist scripture is called the Pali canon, after the language in which it is written. It forms the basic teaching for traditional Theravada Buddhism, but other schools have essentially the same canon written in Sanskrit. Mahayana Buddhists acknowledge many more texts as authoritative.

Underlying the diversity of Buddhist belief and practice is a controlling purpose. The aim is to create the conditions favourable to spiritual development, leading to liberation or deliverance from bondage to suffering. This is generally seen as involving meditation, personal discipline, and spiritual exercises of various sorts.

This common purpose has made organization, ceremony, and pattern of belief to different social and cultural situations. Reliable figures are unobtainable, but there were over 320 million Buddhists estimated in 1997, and over 1000 million people live in lands where Buddhism is a significant religious influence.

## Buddha

The enlightened one; circa 563 - 483 BC

Buddha is the title of Prince Gautama Siddhartha, the founder of Buddhism, born the son of the rajah of the Sakya tribe ruling in Kapilavastu, Nepal. When about 30 years old he left the luxuries of the court, his beautiful wife, and all earthly ambitions for the life of an ascetic; after six years of austerity and mortification he saw in the contemplative life the perfect way to self-enlightenment.

According to tradition, he achieved enlightenment when sitting beneath a banyan tree near Buddh Gaya, Bihar. For the next 40 years he taught, gaining many disciples and followers, and died at the age of about 80 in Kusinagara, Oudh. His teaching is summarized in the Four Noble Truths, the last of which affirms the existence of a path leading to deliverance from the universal human experience of suffering. The goal is Nirvana, which means 'the blowing out' of the fires of all desires, and the absorption of the self into the infinite.

## Christianity

Christianity is a world religion (with over 1900 million adherents in 1997) centred on the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth in Israel, and developing out of Judaism. The earliest followers were Jews who, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, believed him to be the Messiah or Christ, promised by the prophets in the Old Testament, and in unique relation to God, whose Son or 'Word' (Logos) he was declared to be.

During his life he chose 12 men as disciples, who formed the nucleus of the Church as a society or communion of believers, called together to worship God through Jesus Christ, Lord of history, who would come again to inaugurate the 'Kingdom of God'. The Gospel ('Good News') of Jesus was proclaimed first by word- of-mouth, but by the end of the 1st-c it was reduced to writing and accepted as authoritative scriptures of the New Testament, understood as the fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures, or Old Testament.

Through the witness of the 12 earliest leaders (Apostles) and their successors, the Christian faith or 'Way', despite sporadic persecution, quickly spread through the Greek and Roman world, and in 315 was declared by Emperor Constantine to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. It survived the break-up of the Empire and the 'Dark Ages' through the life and witness of groups of monks in monasteries, and formed the basis of civilization in the Middle Ages in Europe.

Major divisions, separated as a result of differences in doctrine and practice, are the Eastern or Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, acknowledging the Bishop of Rome as head (the Pope), and the Protestant Churches stemming from the split with the Roman Church in the 16th-c Reformation. All Christians recognize the authority of the Bible, read at public worship, which takes place at least every Sunday, the first day of the week, to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Most Churches recognize at least two sacraments (Baptism, and the Eucharist, Mass, or Lord's Supper) as essential. The impetus to spread Christianity to the non-Christian world in missionary movements, especially in the 19th-c and 20th-c, resulted in the creation of numerically very strong Churches in the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and South America. A powerful ecumenical movement in the 20th-c, promoted by, among others, the World Council of Churches, has sought to recover unity among divided Christians

## Hinduism

The Western term for a religious tradition developed over several thousand years and intertwined with the history and social system of India. Hinduism does not trace its origins to a particular founder, has no prophets, no set creed, and no particular institutional structure. It emphasizes the right way of living (dharma) rather than a set of doctrines, and thus embraces diverse religious beliefs and practices.

There are significant variations between different regions of India, and even from village to village. There are differences in the deities worshipped, the scriptures used, and the festivals observed. Hindus may be theists or non-theists, revere one or more gods or goddesses, or no god at all, and represent the ultimate in personal (eg Brahma) or impersonal (eg Brahman) terms.

Common to most forms of Hinduism is the idea of reincarnation or transmigration. The term samsara refers to the process of birth and rebirth continuing for life after life. The particular form and condition (pleasant or unpleasant) of rebirth are the result of karma, the law by which the consequences of actions within one life are carried over into the next and influence its character. The ultimate spiritual goal of Hindus is mohsha, or release from the cycle of samsara.

There is a rich and varied religious literature, and no specific text is regarded as uniquely authoritative. The earliest extant writings come from the Vedic period (c.1200-500 BC), and are known collectively as the Veda. Later (c.500 BC-AD 500) came the religious law books (dharma sutras and dharma shastras) which codified the classes of society (varna) and the four stages of life (ashrama), and were the bases of the Indian caste system. To this were added the great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The latter includes one of the most influential Hindu scriptures, the Bhagavadgita.

There have been many developments in Hindu religious thought. In particular, Shankara (9th-c) formulated the Advaita (non-dual) position that the human soul and God are of the same substance. Ramanuja (12th-c) established the system of Vishishtadvaita (differentiated non-duality) which, while accepting that the human soul and God are of the same essence, holds that the soul retains its self-consciousness and, therefore, remains in an eternal relationship with God. This provided the impetus for the later theistic schools of Hindu thought.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the chief gods of Hinduism, and together form a triad (the Trimurti). There are numerous lesser deities, including the goddesses Maya and Lakshmi. Hinduism is concerned with the realization of religious values in every part of life, yet there is a great emphasis upon the performance of complex and demanding rituals under the supervision of Brahman priests and teachers.

There are three categories of worship: temple, domestic, and congregational. Pilgrimage to local and regional sites is common, and there is an annual cycle of local, regional and all-Indian festivals. The cow is considered a sacred animal, and killing it is forbidden. There were nearly 800 million Hindus in 1997

## Islam

The Arabic word for 'submission' to the will of God (Allah), Islam is the name of the religion originating in Arabia during the 7th-c through the Prophet Mohammed. Followers of Islam are known as Muslims, or Moslems, and their religion embraces every aspect of life. They believe that individuals, societies, and governments should all be obedient to the will of God as it is set forth in the Koran, which they regard as the Word of God revealed to his Messenger, Mohammed.

The Koran teaches that God is one and has no partners. He is the Creator of all things, and holds absolute power over them. All persons should commit themselves to lives of grateful and praise- giving obedience to God, for on the Day of Resurrection they will be judged.

Those who have obeyed God's commandments will dwell for ever in paradise, but those who have sinned against God and not repented will be condemned eternally to the fires of hell. Since the beginning of creation God has sent prophets, including Moses and Jesus, to provide the guidance necessary for the attainment of eternal reward, a succession culminating in the revelation to Mohammed of the perfect word of God.

There are five essential religious duties known as the Pillars of Islam.

- (1) The shahada (profession of faith) is the sincere recitation of the twofold creed: 'There is no god but God' and 'Mohammed is the Messenger of God'.
- (2) The salat (formal prayer) must be performed at five points in the day (varying with time of sunrise and sunset) while facing towards the holy city of Mecca.
- (3) Alms-giving through the payment of zakat ('purification') is the duty of sharing one's wealth out of gratitude for God's favour, according to the uses laid down in the Koran.
- (4) There is a duty to fast (saum) during the month of Ramadan.
- (5) The Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca is to be performed if at all possible at least once during one's lifetime. Sharia is the sacred law of Islam, and applies to all aspects of life, not just religious practices. It describes the Islamic way of life, and prescribes the way for a Muslim to fulfil the commands of God and reach heaven.

There is an annual cycle of festivals, including the Feast of the Sacrifice (Id al-Adha), commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, which comes at the end of the Hajj pilgrimage, and the Id al-Fitr, marking the end of the month of fasting in Ramadan. There is no organized priesthood, but great respect is accorded to descendants of Mohammed, and other publicly acknowledged holy men, scholars, and teachers, such as mullahs and ayatollahs.

There are two basic groups within Islam. Sunni Muslims are in the majority, and they believe that correct religious guidance derives from the practice or sunna of the Prophet. They recognize the first four caliphs as Mohammed's legitimate successors. The Shiites comprise the largest minority group, and they believe that correct religious guidance obtains from members of the family of the Prophet, on which basis they recognize only the line of Ali, the fourth caliph and nephew and son-in-law of Mohammed as the Prophet's legitimate successors.

While the Sunnis have through history believed that just government could be established on the basis of correct Islamic practice, the Shiites believe government to be inherently unjust, particularly since the last recognized member of the line of Ali, the Twelfth Imam, became hidden from view in AD 873. There are a number of sub- sects of Islam, and in 1995 there were over 1000 million Muslims throughout the world

## Judaism

The religion of the Jews, central to which is the belief in one God, the transcendent creator of the world who delivered the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt, revealed his law (Torah) to them, and chose them to be a light to all humankind. The Hebrew Bible is the primary source of Judaism.

Next in importance is the Talmud, which consists of the Mishnah (the codification of the oral Torah) and a collection of extensive early rabbinical commentary. Various later commentaries and the standard code of Jewish law and ritual (Halakhah) produced in the late Middle Ages have been important in shaping Jewish practice and thought.

However varied their communities, all Jews see themselves as members of a community whose origins lie in the patriarchal period. This past lives on in its rituals, and there is a marked preference for expressing beliefs and attitudes more through ritual than through abstract doctrine. The family is the basic unit of Jewish ritual, though the synagogue has come to play an increasingly important role.

The Sabbath, which begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday, is the central religious observance. The synagogue is the centre for community worship and study. Its main feature is the 'ark' (a cupboard) containing the hand-written scrolls of the Pentateuch. The rabbi is primarily a teacher and spiritual guide.

There is an annual cycle of religious festivals and days of fasting. The first of these is Rosh Hashanah, New Year's Day; the holiest day in the Jewish year is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Other annual festivals include Hanukkah and Pesach, the family festival of Passover.

Modern Judaism is rooted in rabbinic Judaism, and its historical development has been diverse. Today most Jews are the descendants of either the Ashkenazim or the Sephardim, each with their marked cultural differences. There are also several religious branches of Judaism. Orthodox Judaism (19th-c) seeks to preserve traditional Judaism.

Reform Judaism (19th-c) represents an attempt to interpret Judaism in the light of modern scholarship and knowledge - a process carried further by Liberal Judaism. Conservative Judaism attempts to modify orthodoxy through an emphasis on the positive historical elements of Jewish tradition.

Anti-Semitic prejudice and periods of persecution have been a feature of the Christian culture of Europe, and increased with the rise of European nationalism, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust. Its effect has been incalculable, giving urgency to the Zionist movement for the creation of a Jewish homeland, and is pivotal in all relations between Jews and non-Jews today. There are now over 14 million Jews

## Sikhism

The enlightened one  
circa 563 - 483 BC

A religion founded by the Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in the Punjab area of N India. Under his leadership and that of his nine successors Sikhism prospered. It combines aspects of Hinduism and Islam, and is called a religion of the gurus, seeking union with God through worship and service.

God is the true Guru, and his divine word has come to humanity through the 10 historical gurus. The line ended in 1708, since when the Sikh community is called guru. The Adi Granth, their sacred scripture, is also called a guru. The Sikh understanding of life is closely related to Punjab identity. There were over 20 million Sikhs in 1997.

## History of Taoism:

Tao (pronounced "Dow") can be roughly translated into English as *path*, or *the way*. It is basically indefinable. It has to be experienced. It "*refers to a power which envelops, surrounds and flows through all things, living and non-living. The Tao regulates natural processes and nourishes balance in the Universe. It embodies the harmony of opposites (i.e. there would be no love without hate, no light without dark, no male without female.)*" <sup>2</sup>

The founder of Taoism is believed by many to be Lao-Tse (604-531 BCE), a contemporary of Confucius. (Alternate spellings: Lao Tze, Lao Tsu, Lao Tzu, Laozi, Laotze, etc.). He was searching for a way that would avoid the constant feudal warfare and other conflicts that disrupted society during his lifetime. The result was his book: *Tao-te-Ching (a.k.a. Daodejing)*. Others believe that he is a mythical character.

Taoism started as a combination of psychology and philosophy but evolved into a religious faith in 440 CE when it was adopted as a state religion. At that time Lao-Tse became popularly venerated as a deity. Taoism, along with Buddhism and Confucianism, became one of the three great religions of China. With the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty in 1911, state support for Taoism ended. Much of the Taoist heritage was destroyed during the next period of warlordism. After the Communist victory in 1949, religious freedom was severely restricted. "*The new government put monks to manual labour, confiscated temples, and plundered treasures. Several million monks were reduced to fewer than 50,000*" by 1960. <sup>3</sup> During the cultural revolution in China from 1966 to 1976, much of the remaining Taoist heritage was destroyed. Some religious tolerance has been restored under Deng Xiao-ping from 1982 to the present time.

Taoism currently has about 20 million followers, and is primarily centred in Taiwan. About 30,000 Taoists live in North America; 1,720 in Canada (1991 census). Taoism has had a significant impact on North American culture in areas of "*acupuncture, herbalism, holistic medicine, meditation and martial arts...*" <sup>3</sup>

## Taoist Beliefs and Practices:

- Taoism has provided an alternative to the [Confucian](#) tradition in China. The two traditions have coexisted in the country, region and generally within the same individual.
- Tao is the first-cause of the universe. It is a force that flows through all life.
- "*The Tao surrounds everyone and therefore everyone must listen to find enlightenment.*" <sup>4</sup>
- Each believer's goal is to become one with the Tao.
- The priesthood views the many gods as manifestations of the one Dao, "*which could not be represented as an image or a particular thing.*" The concept of a personified deity is foreign to them, as is the concept of the creation of the universe. Thus, they do not pray as Christians do; there is no God to hear the prayers or to act upon them. They seek answers to life's problems through inner meditation and outer observation.
- In contrast with the beliefs and practices of the priesthood, most of the laity have "*believed that spirits pervaded nature... The gods in heaven acted like and were treated like the officials in the world of men; worshipping the gods was a kind of rehearsal of attitudes toward secular authorities. On the other hand, the demons and ghosts of hell acted like and were treated like the bullies, outlaws, and threatening strangers in the real world; they were bribed by the people and were ritually arrested by the martial forces of the spirit officials.*" <sup>3</sup>

- Time is cyclical, not linear as in Western thinking.
- Taoists generally have an interest in promoting health and vitality.
- Five main organs and orifices of the body correspond to the **five parts of the sky**: water, fire, wood, metal and earth.
- Each person must nurture the **Ch'i** (air, breath) that has been given to them.
- Development of virtue is one's chief task. **The Three Jewels** to be sought are compassion, moderation and humility.
- Taoists follow the art of "**wu wei**," which is to let nature take its course. For example, one should allow a river to flow towards the sea unimpeded; do not erect a dam which would interfere with its natural flow.
- One should plan in advance and consider carefully each action before making it.
- A Taoists is kind to other individuals, largely because such an action tends to be reciprocated.
- Taoists believe that "*people are compassionate by nature...left to their own devices [they] will show this compassion without expecting a reward.*" 5

	Judaism	Christianity	Islam	Hinduism
Deity [God]				
Main Prophet				
Name				
Started				
Number of Worshippers				
Book				
Place of Worship				
'Preacher'				