

## Introduction

This booklet **“Messages of Oneness: Visions and Visionaries”** has been compiled with the objective of propagating the message of Oneness among all the religious groups in India and the world.

This is the second booklet in the PAP (Peace Alliance Partner) series, and will serve as an informative guide to know more about different religions vis-à-vis promoting peace and communal harmony. This also enunciates the optimism for a more humane populace.

The information in this booklet has been collated from various important studies and websites. The sources of the data are acknowledged at the respective places. We hope that the information compiled in this booklet would enable social activists, advocacy organizations, development workers, trainers and the general public in arriving at rational understanding of different religions of the world. Further, we hope this would also shatter the myths about some religious communities and would assist in facilitating communal harmony. We invite the reader for constructive criticism, and suggestions to improve the booklet.

This is our subsequent attempt after publishing the much-acclaimed first booklet in the series under Peace Alliance Partners (PAP) Project. We hope this booklet will also receive similar accolades as the first one.

**Mazher Hussain**  
**Mohammed Irfan**

## Religion

Religion teaches us how to see ourselves in light of the universe and gives purpose and meaning to life. It helps us to transmit our values from one generation to another, and influence the way we interact with the natural environment. Although there are numerous religions, each different from the other, they all serve the same purpose.

With our plural society, it is likely that in our lifetime we meet people from different religions. Understanding the religious beliefs of these people is one of the many steps that we must take in order to prosper together in peace. This booklet is intended to serve as an introduction, to whet the reader's appetite for further study and to help understand those around us better.

The information provided in this booklet is intended to provide a short introduction to the major world religions and the founders, as defined classically. Each description has been kept very short so that it is easy to read straight through all of them and get a general impression of the diversity of spiritual paths humanity takes to live the kind of life God wants. The term Religion has been defined in different ways by different institutions and personalities. Here we offer some of the definitions, which are immensely acceptable to a large number of people.

The word Religion is defined from Latin 'religare'<sup>1</sup>, (to bind back), implying obligation; In theosophy, individual religion of conduct means faith in his own essential divinity as a source of wisdom and an unerring and infallible guide in conduct; an ever-growing realization of that truth, and an ever-growing consciousness of one's spiritual identity with the divine in nature.

Religion is sometimes used interchangeably with faith or belief system. In its broadest sense some have defined it<sup>2</sup> as the sum total of answers given to explain humankind's relationship with the universe. In the course of the development of religion, it has taken a large number of forms in various cultures and individuals.

Before we discuss about the different religions in brief, we will see the list of founders and the names of the respective religions.

## List of founders / proponents of major religions

The following figures<sup>3</sup> are believed to have founded major religions or to have been the first codifiers or best-known proponents of older traditions.

Abraham - claimed as a founder by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – (ca. 2166 BCE and 1991 BCE)

Moses - *Judaism* dates unknown, estimates range from ca. 1600 BCE to 1100 BCE.

Zoroaster - *Zoroastrianism*, ca. 1000 BCE or earlier

Numa Pompilius - Roman king who codified and organized *Roman religion*, ca. 717 BCE-673 BCE

Siddhartha Gautama - *Buddhism*, ca. 563 BCE-483 BCE, or (trad.) 1029 BCE-949 BCE.

Mahavira - *Jainism*, 599 BCE-527 BCE

Confucius - *Confucianism*, ca. 551 BCE-479 BCE (trad.)

Laozi - *Taoism*, ca. 500 BCE

Mozi - *Mohism*, ca. 470 BCE-390 BCE

Jesus - , ca. 4 BCE-ca. 30 CE

Mani - *Manichaeism*, ca. 210 CE-276 CE

Muhammad (pbuh) - prophet of *Islam*, ca. 570 CE-632 CE

Nanak - *Sikhism*, 1469 CE -1539 CE

Nakayama Miki - *Tenrikyo*, 1798CE -1887CE

Joseph Smith - *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 1805CE-1844CE

Bahá'u'lláh - *Bahá'í Faith*, 1817CE -1892CE

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad - *Ahmadiyya* 1835CE-1908CE

Ngo Van Chieu(first disciple)- Cao Dai 1878CE-1926CE?

L. Ron Hubbard - *Scientology*, 1911CE-1986CE

Sun Myung Moon - *Unification Church*, 1920CE

### Note:

- 1) The absence of any religion from this list does not imply that a religion is not major one.
- 2) There are some religions, which have no single founder. For example, Hinduism and Shinto.
- 3) The years are given in BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era). These years correspond to the same dates in BC and AD but by defining the current period as the “Common Era” the nomenclature attempts to treat all religions and beliefs as equal.

## Major Religions<sup>4</sup> of the world and their following

1. Christianity: 2.1 billion (Including Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal, Anglican, Monophysite, AICs, Latter-day Evangelical, SDAs, Jehovah's witnesses, Quakers, AOGs, Nominal, etc.) saints,
2. Islam: 1.3 billion (Sunni, Shia, etc.)
3. Secular/Nonreligious/Agnostic/Atheist: 1.1 billion
4. Hinduism: 900 million
5. Chinese traditional religion: 394 million
6. Buddhism: 376 million
7. primal-indigenous: 300 million
8. African Traditional & Diasporic: 100 million
9. Sikhism: 23 million
10. Juche: 19 million
11. Spiritism: 15 million
12. Judaism: 14 million
13. Baha'i: 7 million
14. Jainism: 4.2 million
15. Shinto: 4 million
16. Cao Dai: 4 million
17. Zoroastrianism: 2.6 million
18. Tenrikyo: 2 million
19. Neo-Paganism: 1 million
20. Unitarian-Universalism: 800 thousand
21. Rastafarianism: 600 thousand
22. Scientology: 500 thousand.

(Sizes shown are approximate estimates, and are here mainly for the purpose of ordering the groups, not providing a definitive number)

**The religions presented below are discussed in Alphabetical order.**

### **Abrahamic Montheism:**

-His original name was **Abram**<sup>5</sup> (“High/Exalted father/leader”, Standard Hebrew **Avram**), is the patriarch of Judaism, recognized by Christianity, and a very important prophet in Islam. The story of his life is told in the Book of Genesis and in the Quran

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are sometimes referred to as the “Abrahamic religions”, because of the role Abraham plays in their holy books and beliefs. In the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’an, Abraham is described as a patriarch blessed by God (the Jewish people called him “Father Abraham”), and promised great things, father of the People of Israel through his son Isaac; the Qur’an further claims Ishmael as the father of the Arabs. In Islam, Abraham is considered to be one of the most important of the many prophets sent by God. In Christian belief, Abraham is a model of faith, and his intention to obey God by offering up Isaac is seen as a foreshadowing of God’s offering of his son, Jesus.

According to the Qur’an, Abraham reached the conclusion that anything subject to disappearance could not be worthy of worship, and thus became a monotheist (Quran 6: 76-83). As in Jewish belief, Abraham’s father (named Azar in Islam) was an idol-maker, and Abraham broke his idols, calling on his community to worship God instead. They then cast him into a fire, which miraculously failed to burn him (Quran 37: 83-98). The well-known but wholly non-canonical Qisas al-Anbiya (Ibn Kathir) records considerably more detail about his life, which are commonly referred to in Islamic accounts of his life.

Abraham (called Ibrahim in Islam) is commonly termed Khalil Ullah, Friend of God. (Islam regards most of the Old Testament “patriarchs” as prophets of God, and hence as Muslims.) Muslims also believe that Abraham, along with his son Ismael, rebuilt the Kaaba in Mecca (Quran 2: 125), the direction in which Muslims face when praying. There are numerous references to Abraham in the Qur’an. According to Quran, Abraham is the spiritual father of all the believers.

Sarah (Jewish Sarai, Abraham’s wife), in accordance with custom, gave to Abraham her Egyptian handmaid Hagar, who, when she found she was with child, presumed upon her position to the extent that Sarah, unable to endure the reproach of barrenness (cf. the story of Hannah, 1 Samuel 1:6), dealt harshly with her and forced her to flee (16:1-14). Hagar is promised that her descendants will be too numerous to count, and she returns. Her son Ishmael thus was Abram’s firstborn (and Islamic doctrine holds that he was the rightful heir). Hagar and Ishmael were eventually driven permanently away from Abram by Sarah (chapter 21).

### Ahmadiyya –1889 CE.

The Ahmadiyya movement<sup>6</sup> was founded in 1889. The founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmed, in a manifesto dated November 4, 1900, explained that the name referred to Ahmad, the alternative name of the prophet Mohammed (pbuh). ‘Ahmad’ stands for the beauty of his sermons, and for the peace that he was destined to establish in the world through his teachings. These names thus refer to two aspects of Islam, and Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad says that in later times it was the latter aspect that commanded greater attention. In keeping with this, his object was to establish peace in the world through the spiritual teachings of Islam, which, he believed, offered the only means of restoring peace to the mind of man, and, thus, of helping him to live at peace with others and with God.

The message of the Ahmadiyya Movement is thus indicated by its name. It is a message for Muslims, telling them that they can conquer the world through the two great spiritual forces given to them: the Quran and the prophet Muhammed(pbuh). At the same time, it is a message for the non-Islamic world, and especially for the Western world, which, according to Ahmad, has descended into materialism due to the growth of civilization. For Westerners the message is that it is only through the spiritual strength of Islam that man can reach peace.

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (February 13, 1835–May 26, 1908) Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya religious movement, was born in Qadian, Punjab in India. This sect is considered by most Muslims to have broken away from Islam. Ahmad remains a controversial figure to this day because of his claims to be the promised Messiah and Mahdi, and because of the movement he established. Most (but not all) of his followers consider him to be a prophet, raising even more controversy among mainstream Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

When Ahmad was forty years old, his father died. At this time Ahmad claimed that God had begun communicating with him, often through direct revelation (the prophet of Islam, Muhammad (pbuh), also received his first revelation at forty years of age). Initially, Ahmad’s writings from

this time were intended to counter what he perceived to be anti-Islamic writings originating from various Christian missionary groups. He also focused on countering the effects of various groups such as the Brahmo Samaj.

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claim is based on his Revelation, personal interpretation of various verses of the Qur'ân based on divine guidance, Hadith, prophecies of past Saints and astronomical signs of eclipses. Islam, he said, was a living faith, by following which man could establish contact with his Creator and enter into communion with Him. The teachings contained in the Holy Quran and the Law promulgated by Islam were designed to raise man to moral, intellectual and spiritual perfection. He announced that God had appointed him the Messiah as mentioned in the prophecies of the Bible and the Qur'ân . In 1889 he began to accept initiation into his Community, which is now established in one hundred and eighty one countries. His eighty books were written mostly in Urdu, but some were in Arabic and Persian.

### **Bahá'í –1863 CE**

The Baha'i Faith upholds the unity of God, recognizes the unity of His Prophets, and inculcates the principle of the oneness and wholeness of the entire human race. It proclaims the necessity and the inevitability of the unification of mankind, asserts that it is gradually approaching, and claims that nothing short of the transmuting spirit of God, working through His chosen Mouthpiece in this day, can ultimately succeed in bringing it about. It, moreover, enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth, condemns all manner of prejudice and superstition, declares the purpose of religion to be the promotion of amity and concord, proclaims its essential harmony with science, and recognizes it as the foremost agency for the pacification and the orderly progress of human society. It unequivocally maintains the principle of equal rights, opportunities and privileges for men and women, insists on compulsory education, eliminates extremes of poverty and wealth, abolishes the institution of priesthood, prohibits slavery, asceticism,

mendicancy and monasticism, prescribes monogamy, discourages divorce, emphasizes the necessity of strict obedience to one's government, exalts

any work performed in the spirit of service to the level of worship, urges either the creation or the selection of an auxiliary international language, and delineates the outlines of those institutions that must establish and perpetuate the general peace of mankind.

The Baha'i faith revolves around three central figures, the first of whom was a youth, a native of Shiraz, named Mirza 'All Muhammad, known as the Bab (Gate), who in May 1844, at the age of twenty-five, advanced the claim of being the Herald who according to the sacred Scriptures of previous dispensations, must needs announce and prepare the way for the advent of One greater than Himself, whose mission would be, according to those same Scriptures, to inaugurate an era of righteousness and peace, an era that would be hailed as the consummation of all previous Dispensations, and initiate a new cycle in the religious history of mankind. Swift and severe persecution, launched by the organized forces of Church and State in his native land, precipitated successively his arrest, his exile to the mountains of Adhirbayjan, his imprisonment in the fortresses of Mah-Ku and Chihriq, and his execution, in July 1850, by a firing squad in the public square of Tabriz ...

Mirza Husayn-'Alī, surnamed Baha'ullah (the Glory of God), a native of Mazindaran, Whose advent the Bab [Herald and Forerunner of Baha'u'llah] had foretold, ... was imprisoned in Tehran, was banished, in 1852, from His native land to Baghdad, and thence to Constantinople and Adrianople, and finally to the prison city of Akka, where he remained incarcerated for no less than twenty-four years, and in whose neighborhood he passed away in 1892. In the course of his banishment, and particularly in Adrianople and Akka, he formulated the laws and ordinances of his Dispensation, expounded, in over a hundred volumes, the principles of his Faith, proclaimed his Message to the kings and rulers of both the East and the West, both Christian and Muslim, addressed the Pope, the caliph of Islam, the Chief Magistrates of the Republics of the American continent, the entire Christian sacerdotal order, the leaders of Shi'ih and Sunni Islam, and the high priests of the Zoroastrian religion. In these writings he proclaimed his revelation, summoned those whom

He addressed to heed His call and espouse His Faith, warned them of the consequences of their refusal, and denounced, in some cases, their arrogance and tyranny. This Administrative Order, unlike the systems evolved after the death of the founders of the various religions, is divine in origin, rests securely on the laws, the precepts, the ordinances and institutions which the Founder of the faith has himself specifically laid down and unequivocally established, and functions in strict accordance with the interpretations of the authorized Interpreters of its holy scriptures.

The faith which this order serves, safeguards and promotes is, it should be noted in this connection, essentially supernatural, supranational, entirely non-political, non-partisan, and diametrically opposed to any policy or school of thought that seeks to exalt any particular race, class or nation. It is free from any form of ecclesiasticism, has neither priesthood nor rituals, and is supported exclusively by voluntary contributions made by its avowed adherents. Though loyal to their respective governments, though imbued with the love of their own country, and anxious to promote at all times, its best interests, the followers of the Baha'i faith, nevertheless, viewing

mankind as one entity, and profoundly attached to its vital interests, will not hesitate to subordinate every particular interest, be it personal, regional or national, to the over-riding interests of the generality of mankind, knowing full well that in a world of interdependent peoples and nations the advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole, and that no lasting result can be achieved by any of the component parts if the general interests of the entity itself are neglected.

***Top 20 Largest National Baha'i Populations<sup>9</sup>***

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of Baha'is</b>	<b>Percent of Country's Pop.</b>
India	1,716,148	0.17%
USA	753,423	0.27%
Iran	463,151	0.69%
Viet Nam	356,133	0.45%
Kenya	308,292	1.02%
Bolivia	269,246	3.25%
South Africa	255,775	0.59%
Philippines	229,522	0.29%
Congo (Zaire)	224,596	0.43%
Zambia	162,443	1.70%
Thailand	144,243	0.23%
Venezuela	141,072	0.58%
Tanzania	140,593	0.40%
Malaysia	97,078	0.42%
Chad	80,683	1.01%
Myanmar	79,044	0.16%
Pakistan	78,658	0.05%
Uganda	66,546	0.29%
Colombia	64,758	0.16%
Cameroon	64,286	0.42%

### **Buddhism 560 to 490 BCE**

Buddhism<sup>10</sup> developed out of the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama who, in 590 BC, reached enlightenment and assumed the title Buddha. He promoted ‘The Middle Way’ as the path to enlightenment rather than the extremes of mortification of the flesh or hedonism. Long after his death the Buddha’s teachings were written down. This collection is called the Tripitaka. Buddhists believe in reincarnation and that one must go through cycles of birth, life, and death. After many such cycles, if a person releases his attachment to desire and the self, he can attain Nirvana. In general, Buddhists do not believe in any type of God, the need for a savior, prayer, or eternal life after death. However, since the time of the Buddha, Buddhism has integrated many regional religious rituals, beliefs and customs into it as it has spread throughout Asia, so that this generalization is no longer true for all Buddhists. This has occurred with little conflict due to the philosophical nature of Buddhism.

**Buddha** (Sanskrit, Pali, others: literally **Awakened One** or **Enlightened One**, from the root: *vbudh*, “to awaken”) is a title used in Buddhism for anyone who has discovered enlightenment (*bodhi*), although it is commonly used to refer to *Siddhartha Gautama*, the historical founder of Buddhism.

**Gautama Buddha:** He was born around 623 BC. His birthplace is said to be Lumbini in the Shâkya state, one of a small group of old oligarchic republics in Nepal. His father was the Shâkya king Úuddhodana, and Buddha lived in luxury, being spared all hardship. The legends say that a seer predicted shortly after his birth that Siddhârtha would become either a great king or a great holy man; because of this, the king tried to make sure that Siddhartha never had any cause for dissatisfaction with his life, as that might drive him toward a spiritual path. Nevertheless, at the age of 29, he came across what has become known as the Four Passing Sights:

an old crippled man, a sick man, a corpse, and finally a wandering holy man. These four sights led him to the realization that birth, old age, sickness and death come to everyone, not only once but repeated for life after life in succession since time immemorial. He decided to abandon his worldly life, leaving behind his wife, child and rank, etc. to take up the life of a wandering holy man in search of the answer to the problem of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

After six years of ascetism, and nearly starving himself to death with no success, Siddhârtha began to reconsider his path. Then he remembered a moment in childhood in which he had been watching his father start the season's plowing, and he had fallen into a naturally concentrated and focused state in which time seemed to stand still, and which was blissful and refreshing. Taking a little buttermilk from a passing goat herd, he found a large tree (now called the Bodhi tree) and set to meditation. He developed a new way of meditating, which began to bear fruit. His mind became concentrated and pure, and then, after six years since he began his quest in search of a solution to an end of Suffering, he attained Enlightenment, and became a Buddha. This place (Buddhagaya) is in the state of Bihar in India.

Generally, Buddhists do not consider Siddhartha Gautama—who lived from about 623 BC to 543 BC and attained enlightenment around 588 BC—to have been the first or the last Buddha. According to the Tripitaka, for instance, Gautama Buddha was the 28th Buddha. His immediate predecessor was Dipankara Buddha, and his successor will be named Maitreya.

### ***Principles of Buddhism***

Buddhists seek refuge in what are often referred to as the *Three Jewels, Triple Gem* or *Triple Jewel*. These are the Buddha, the Dharma (or Dhamma), and the “noble” (Sanskrit: *arya*) Sangha or community of monks and nuns (sometimes all other buddhists are included). The Buddha taught that life was dissatisfactory because of craving, but that this condition was curable by following the Eightfold Path. This teaching is called the Four Noble Truths:

1. *Dukkha*: All worldly life is unsatisfactory, disjointed, containing suffering.

2. *Samudaya*: There is a cause of suffering, which is attachment or desire (*tanha*) rooted in ignorance.

3. *Nirodha*: There is an end of suffering, which is Nirvana.
4. *Maggo*: There is a path that leads out of suffering, known as the Noble Eightfold Path.

In order to fully understand the noble truths and investigate whether they were in fact true, Buddha recommended that a certain lifestyle or path be followed which consists of:

1. *Right Understanding*
2. *Right Thought*
3. *Right Speech*
4. *Right Action*
5. *Right Livelihood*
6. *Right Effort*
7. *Right Mindfulness*
8. *Right Concentration*

The Eightfold Path essentially consists of morality, meditation, and wisdom.

Buddhists undertake certain precepts as self imposed discipline by the self and to the self as aids on the path to coming into contact with ultimate reality. Hence, they are also known as Training rules.

The five precepts are:

1. To refrain from harming living creatures (killing).
2. To refrain from taking that which is not given (stealing).
3. To refrain from sexual misconduct.
4. To refrain from incorrect speech (lying, harsh language, slander, idle chit-chat).
5. To refrain from intoxicants which lead to loss of mindfulness.

Buddhists then undertake meditation to calm and concentrate the mind and finally develop wisdom by looking into the reality as it is and not as it seems to be. Thus

Buddha the Guide to Humanity

Showed noble Eightfold path to experience reality

He said not to be obsessed with materiality

But to practice the path of spirituality

This path He said is path of Wisdom, Meditation and Morality.

### **Top 10 Countries with the Highest Proportion of Buddhists**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Thailand	95
Cambodia	90
Myanmar	88
Bhutan	75
Sri Lanka	70
Tibet	65
Laos	60
Vietnam	55
Japan	50
Macau	45
Taiwan	43

### **Confucianism - 500 BCE**

The principles of Confucianism gained wide acceptance primarily because of their basis in common Chinese opinion. The Confucian theory of ethics is based on three important concepts: that of sacrificing to the gods, social and political institutions, and daily behavior.

Although Confucianism is often followed in a religious manner by the Chinese, argument continues over whether to refer to it as a religion because it makes little reference to theological or spiritual matters (God(s), the afterlife, etc.).

**K'ung Fu Tzu (Confucius)**<sup>11</sup> (551 BCE–479 BCE) was a famous thinker and social philosopher of China, whose teachings have deeply influenced East Asia for centuries. As a young man he was a minor administrative manager in the State of Lu and rose to the position of Justice Minister. After several years, disapproving of the politics of his Prince, he resigned. At about age fifty, seeing no way to improve the government, he gave up his political career in Lu, and began a twelve-year journey around China, seeking the “Way” and trying unsuccessfully to convince many different rulers of his political beliefs and to push them into reality. When he was about sixty, he returned home and spent the last years of his life teaching an increasing number of disciples, trying to share his experiences with

them and transmit the old wisdom via a set of books called the Five Classics. His teachings and writings dealt with individual morality and ethics, and the proper exercise of political power. He championed strong familial loyalty, ancestor worship, and respect of elders by their children and of husbands by their wives, and used the family as a basis for an ideal government. He expressed the well-known principle, “Do not to others what you do not want done to yourself” (the Golden Rule).

He stressed the following values:

- Li: ritual, propriety, etiquette, etc.
- Hsiao: love among family members
- Yi: righteousness
- Xin: honesty and trustworthiness
- Jen: benevolence towards others; the highest Confucian virtue
- Chung: loyalty to the state, etc

Chinese people see him as the Greatest Master. Far from trying to build a systematic theory of life and society, he wanted his disciples to think deeply for themselves and relentlessly study the outside world, mostly through the old scriptures relating past political events (like the *Annals*) or past feelings of common people (like the Book of Odes). In these times of division, chaos, and endless wars between feudal states, he wanted to restore the Mandate of Heaven that could unify the “world” (i.e., China) and bestow peace and prosperity on the people. Therefore, Confucius is often considered a great proponent of conservatism, but a closer look at what he proposes often shows that he used (and maybe twisted) past institutions and rites to push a new political agenda of his own: for example, he wanted rulers to be chosen on their merits, not their parentage. He wanted rulers who were devoted to their people. And he wanted the ruler to reach perfection himself, thus spreading his own virtues to the people instead of imposing proper behavior with laws and rules.

One of the deepest teachings of Confucius, and one of the hardest to understand from a Western point of view, may have been the superiority of exemplification over explicit rules of behavior. His ethics may be considered one of the greatest virtues. This kind of “indirect” way to achieve a goal is used widely in his teachings, where allusions, innuendo, and even tautology are common ways of expressing himself.

Confucius also heavily emphasized what he calls “rites and music,” referring to these social conventions as two poles to balance order and harmony. While rites, in short, show off social hierarchies, music unifies hearts in

shared enjoyment. He added that rites are not only the way to arrange sacrificial tools, and music is not only the sound of stick on bell. Both are mutual communication between someone's humanity and his social context, both feed social relationships, like the five prototypes: between father and son, husband and wife, prince and subject, elder and youngster, and between friends. Duties are always balanced and if a subject must obey his ruler, he also has to tell him when he is wrong. Confucius' teachings have been turned later into a *corps de doctrine* by his numerous disciples and followers. In the centuries after his death, Mencius and Xun Zi both wrote a prominent book on these, and with time a philosophy has been elaborated, which is known in the West as Confucianism.

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### **Christianity - 30+ CE**

**Christianity** is a monotheistic<sup>12</sup> religion centered on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as recounted in the New Testament. As of the early 21st century, it has approximately 2.1 billion adherents, more than any other religion, and representing about a quarter of the world's population. Its followers, known as Christians, believe Jesus to be the Son of God and the Messiah (or Christ) prophesied in the Old Testament, the part of their scriptures they have in common with Judaism. To Christians, Jesus Christ is not merely a teacher and the model of a pious life but the revealer of God, the mediator of salvation and the saviour who suffered, died and was resurrected in order to bring about salvation from sin for all. Christians maintain that Jesus ascended into heaven and most denominations teach that Jesus will judge the living and the dead, granting everlasting life to his followers. The "good news" of Jesus' ministry is called the Gospel.

The Trinity is often regarded as an essential doctrine of mainstream Christianity. It is a complex topic and there are varying interpretations. The most common understanding of the Holy Trinity, as espoused in the Nicene Creed, is one God that exists as three Persons – Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" represents both the immanence and transcendence of God. God is believed to be infinite and God's presence may be perceived through the actions of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Christianity<sup>13</sup> started out as a breakaway sect of Judaism nearly 2000 years

ago. Jesus, the son of the Virgin Mary and her husband Joseph, but conceived through the Holy Spirit, was bothered by some of the practices within his native Jewish faith and began preaching a different message of God and religion. During his travels he was joined by twelve disciples who followed him in his journeys and learned from him. He performed many miracles during this time and related many of his teachings in the form of parables. Among his best known sayings are to “love thy neighbor” and “turn the other cheek.” At one point he revealed that he was the Son of God sent to Earth to save humanity from their sins. This he did by being crucified on the cross for his teachings. He then rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples and told them to go forth and spread his message.

Since Christianity and Judaism share the same history<sup>14</sup> up to the time of Jesus Christ, they are very similar in many of their core beliefs. There are two primary differences. One is that Christians believe in original sin and that Jesus died in our place to save us from that sin. The other is that Jesus was fully human and fully God and as the Son of God is part of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Spirit. All Christians believe in heaven and that those who sincerely repent their sins before God will be saved and join Him in heaven. Belief in hell and Satan varies among groups and individuals. There are a multitude of forms of Christianity, which have developed either because of disagreements on dogma, adaptation to different cultures, or simply personal taste. For this reason there can be a great difference between the various forms of Christianity they may seem like different religions to some people.

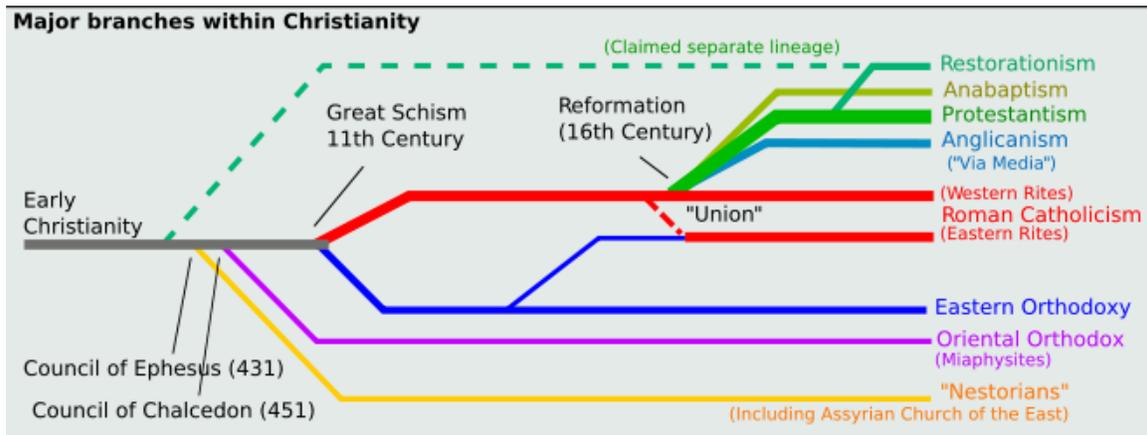
**Jesus**<sup>15</sup>, also known as **Jesus of Nazareth** or **Jesus Christ**, is the central figure of Christianity, most of whose adherents worship him as the messiah, or Christ (“the Anointed One”), as the son of God, and as God incarnate, Immanuel. The most commonly used sources regarding the life and teachings of Jesus are the four canonical gospel accounts from the New Testament.

The exact dates of Jesus’ birth and death are not known. The Anno Domini system of reckoning years was originally based on setting year 1 as the first full year of Jesus’ life; but more-recent estimates place his birth as early as

8 BCE, and as late as 4 BCE. Based on the mentioning of Pilate, his death is now estimated to have likely taken place between 26 CE and 36 CE. Drawing primarily on the gospel accounts, most critical historians portray Jesus as (among other things) a Galilean preacher and healer often at odds with Jewish religious authorities, who was crucified outside of Jerusalem during the rule of the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate. Beyond that, the gospels make various additional claims about Jesus, for instance that he was the messiah prophesied in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible); that he was God, and the “son of God” (formal Trinitarian language would arise later); that his mother Mary was a virgin; and that after his crucifixion he rose from the dead, then ascended into heaven. Numerous miracles and other supernatural events are attested. The precise nature of Jesus’s teachings vary subtly as presented among the four gospels, which attribute to him moral exhortations (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount), parables, the Lord’s Prayer, apocalyptic and mystical teachings, interpretations of Jewish law, and most crucially, the revelation of his own divine nature and identity. For Christians, Jesus is a historical person who became the world’s “savior”; the mediator between man and God. His life and teachings are celebrated by most Christians through the various parts of a church service, as well as through the cycle of holidays in the Christian liturgical calendar (such as Christmas and Easter).

Christians<sup>16</sup> are those who believe in and follow what they believe to be the teachings of Jesus. However, Christianity quite naturally has a more specific and involved meaning, as most Christians hold similar beliefs regarding Jesus and his life that are largely rejected by non-Christians. Generally speaking, most Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God, part of a trinity of three persons of God, and the Messiah, who came to earth to save mankind from sin and death through a sacrifice. Most believe Jesus lived a perfect life and that is why his death on a cross, called the crucifixion, counts as a sacrifice for all mankind. According to tradition the disobeying of God’s command by the first man Adam caused all mankind would die, but because of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, all mankind may have eternal life who believe in Jesus. Most believe that after Jesus’ death he rose from the grave on the third day and forty days after that ascended to Heaven. There are many differing views within Christian groups as to whether or not Jesus ever claimed divinity. The majority of Christian

lay people, theologians, and clergy hold that the Bible shows Jesus both as divine, and claiming divinity; most believe that Jesus' resurrection is proof that he is God. Others, however, who claim to be Christian, believe that Jesus never claimed divinity, and stated plainly that he was not equal with God.



### Largest<sup>17</sup> Christian Populations in the World

Rank	Country	Christian Population
1	United States	189,983,000
2	Brazil	170,405,000
3	Mexico	96,614,000
4	China	86,801,000
5	Philippines	72,225,000
6	Germany	60,712,000
7	Nigeria	54,012,000
8	Italy	47,704,000
9	France	45,505,000
10	Congo	42,283,000

## Hinduism - 4000 BCE to 2500 BCE

**Hinduism**<sup>18</sup> also known as *Sanâtana Dharma*, and *Vaidika-Dharma* - is a worldwide religious tradition that is based on the revealed knowledge of the Vedas and is the direct descendent of the Vedic Indo-Iranian religion. It encompasses many religious traditions that widely vary in practice, as well as many diverse sects and philosophies. The term 'Hindu' is said to be derived from the name of the Sindhu (ie, Indus) river, which is known as Hindu in Persian. In the Iranian linguistic branch, the 's' of the Indic branch is cognate with the 'h' sound of Iranian. The origins of Hinduism can be traced to the Indus Valley civilization sometime between 4000 and 2500 BCE. (The modern estimates of Hinduism's origin vary from 3102 BCE to 1300 BCE). Though believed by many to be a polytheistic religion, the basis of Hinduism is the belief in the unity of everything. This totality is called Brahman. The purpose of life is to realize that we are part of God and by doing so we can leave this plane of existence and rejoin with God. This enlightenment can only be achieved by going through cycles of birth, life and death known as samsara. One's progress towards enlightenment is measured by his karma. This is the accumulation of all one's good and bad deeds and this determines the person's next reincarnation. Selfless acts and thoughts as well as devotion to God help one to be reborn at a higher level. Bad acts and thoughts will cause one to be born at a lower level, as a person or even an animal.

“Sanâtana Dharma” (*The Eternal Values*), Hinduism's traditional name, speaks to the idea that certain spiritual principles hold eternally true, transcending man-made constructs, representing a pure science of consciousness. This consciousness is not merely that of the body or mind and intellect, but of a transcendental state that exists within *and* beyond our existence, the unsullied Soul of all. Religion to the Hindu is the eternal search for the divine Brahman, the Supreme immanent and transcendent Reality or the Cosmic Spirit.

### **Basic beliefs**

What can be said to be common to all Hindus is the belief in Dharma (Duties and obligations), Punarjanma (Reincarnation or rebirth), Karma

“actions”, leading to a cause and effect relationship), and Moksha (salvation) of every soul through a variety of paths, such as *Bhakti* (devotion), *Karma* (action) and *Jnana* (knowledge).

### **Practice (Yoga Dharma)**

Hinduism includes a variety of practices, primarily spiritual devotion (*Bhakti Yoga*), selfless service (*Karma Yoga*), knowledge and meditation (*Jnana* or *Raja Yoga*). These are described in the two principal texts of Hindu Yoga: The *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras*. The *Upanishads* are also important as a philosophical foundation for these practices. The *yogas* provide a sort of alternate paths (or faiths) that links together various hindu beliefs and can also be used to categorize non-hindu beliefs that are seen as paths to moksha, or nirvana.

### **The four goals of life**

Another major aspect of Hindu dharma that is common to practically all Hindus is that of *purushartha*, the “four objectives of life”. They are *kama*, *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha*. It is said that all humans seek *kama* (pleasure, physical or emotional) and *artha* (material wealth), but soon, with maturity, learn to govern these legitimate desires within a higher, framework of *dharma*, in all. Of course, the only goal that is truly ultimate, whose attainment results in ultimate happiness, is *moksha* (salvation), (also known as *Mukti* (spiritual liberation), *Samadhi*, Nirvana, etc.) from *Samsara* (cycle of birth and death).

### **The four stages of life**

Ideally, the human life is divided into four *Ashramas* (“phases” or “stages”). They are *Brahmacharya*, *Grihastha*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*. The first quarter of one’s life, *Brahmacharya* (“meditation in Brahma”) is spent in celibate, controlled, sober and pure contemplation under a Guru, building up the mind for the realization of truth. *Grihastya* is the householder’s stage, alternatively known as *samsara*, in which one marries and satisfies *kama* and *artha* within a married life and professional career. *Vanaprastha* is gradual detachment from the material world, ostensibly giving over duties to one’s children, spending more time in contemplation of the Divine, and making holy pilgrimages. Finally, in *sanyasa*, the individual goes into seclusion, often envisioned as the renunciation, to find God through detachment from worldly life and peacefully shed the body for the next life. Though leading such may not be feasible for most of the today’s lay Hindus, it still embodies the ideal way of life.

Contemporary Hinduism is now divided into four major divisions, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, and Smartism. Just as Jews, Christians, and Muslims all believe in one God but differ in their conceptions of Him, Hindus all believe in one God but differ in their conceptions. The two primary forms of differences are between the sects of Vaishnavism which conceives God as Vishnu, and Shaivism which conceives God as Shiva. Shaktism worships the Goddess Devi or alternatively (where it is viewed as a subsect of Shaivism) as the energy of Shiva. Smartism, in contrast, believes in all paths being the same and leading to one God or source, whatever one chooses to call the Ultimate Reality.

### **Shruti**

The Vedas ( literally, “Knowledge”) are considered as Shruti (revealed) by Hindus. They are said to have been revealed by the Supreme Being Brahman to the sages / seers (rishis) while the latter were in deep meditation. While the overwhelming majority of Hindus may never read the Vedas, there prevails in them a reverence for this transcendental notion of Eternal Knowledge. The four Vedas (the Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva Vedas) are various *shakhas* or branches of knowledge. Depending on the branch, different commentaries and instructions are associated with each Veda. The Vedas, apart from the hymn (mantra) or the **Samhitâ** portion, also have three layers of commentaries integrally incorporated within them. They are the **BrâhmaNas** ( not to be confused with Brahman) containing prose commentaries on the rituals, the **Âranyakas** containing the esoteric and mystical explanations of the mantras, and the Upanishads containing highly philosophical and metaphysical writings about the nature of, and the relationship between the soul (Atman and the Supreme Spirit Brahman. Each Veda also has various law books and ritual manuals associated with like, like the Dharmashastras, Grihyasutras, etc but most people do not consider them as an integral part of the Shruti or Vedic literature.

### **Bhagavad Gita**

A core sacred text of Hinduism and its philosophy, the Bhagavad Gita, often referred to as the Gita, is a summation of the Vedic, Yogic, Vedantic and Tantric philosophies. The Bhagavad Gita, meaning “song of the Lord”, refers to itself as a ‘Yoga Upanishad’ and is sometimes called *Gîtopani<sup>o</sup>ad*. It expounds on Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Jnana Yoga. It is an integral part of the epic Mahabharata.

## **Smriti**

The post- Vedic Hindu texts form the latter category, the most notable of which are the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, major epics considered sacred by all followers of Sanatana Dharma. Other texts considered important by today's Hindus include the Devi Mahatmya, an ode to Devi, the Divine Mother, and the Yoga Sutras, a key meditative yoga text of Shri Patanjali. There are also a number of revered Hindu Tantras, the Manusmriti, the 18 Puranas which vividly describe Later Hinduism's deities and mythology, and Sutras that command the respect of various Hindu sects of different persuasion, some including the Mahanirvana Tantra, Tirumantiram and Shiva Sutras.

## ***Hindu philosophy: the six Vedic schools of thought***

The six Astika or orthodox (accepting the authority of the Vedas) schools of Hindu philosophy are Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purva Mimamsa (also called just 'Mimamsa'), and Uttara Mimamsa (also called 'Vedanta'). The non-Vedic schools are called Nastika, or heterodox, and refer to Buddhism, Jainism and Lokayata.

### ***Top 10 Countries with the Highest Proportion of Hindus***

<b>Country</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Number</b>
Nepal	89	19,000,000
India	79	780,000,000
Mauritius	52	600,000
Guyana	40	300,000
Fiji	38	300,000
Suriname	30	116,000
Bhutan	25	400,000
Trinidad and Tobago	24	300,000
Sri Lanka	15	2,800,000
Bangladesh	11	12,000,000

### Top 10 Largest National Hindu Populations

Country	Percent	Number
India	79	751,000,000
Nepal	89	17,380,000
Bangladesh	11	12,630,000
Indonesia	2.5	4,000,000
Sri Lanka	15	2,800,000
Pakistan	1.5	2,120,000
Malaysia	6	1,400,000
USA	0.2	910,000
Mauritius	52	570,000
South Africa	1.5	420,000
United Kingdom	1	410,000

Source: [Adherents.com](http://Adherents.com). (Figures are approximate).

### Islam - 610 CE

Islam<sup>19</sup>, the last of the three greatest Monotheistic religions was brought into being in 610 CE by Muhammad (pbuh) the Prophet, in Makkah (also spelled Mecca). Though it is the youngest of the world's great religions, Muslims do not view it as a new religion. They believe that it is the same faith taught by the prophets, Abraham, Noah, David, Moses and Jesus. The role of Muhammad (pbuh) as the last prophet was to formalize and clarify the faith and purify it by removing ideas, which were added in error. The two sacred texts of Islam are the Qur'an, which is the words of Allah 'the One True God' as given to Muhammad (pbuh), and the Hadith, which is a collection of Muhammad's sayings. The duties of all Muslims are known as the Five Pillars of Islam and are:

1. Recite the shahadah (God is one, and Muhammad (pbuh) is the last prophet) at least once.
2. Perform the salat (prayer) 5 times a day while facing towards the Kaaba (which is in Makkah in Saudi Arabia.)

3. Donate annually 2.5% of the accumulated wealth to charity via the zakat, (alms-giving).
4. Fast during the month of Ramadan (9<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic calendar), the month that Muhammad received the First revelation of the Qur'an from Allah.
5. Make pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in life, if economically and physically possible.

Muslims follow a strict monotheism with one creator who is just, omnipotent and merciful. They also believe in Satan who drives people to sin, and that all unbelievers and sinners will spend eternity in Hell. Muslims who sincerely repent and submit to God will return to a state of sinlessness and go to Paradise after death. Alcohol, drugs, and gambling should be avoided and they reject racism. They respect the earlier prophets, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, but regard the concept of the divinity of Jesus as blasphemous and do not believe that he is the son of god.

**Muhammad** (Pbuh) (570-632 CE) (also **Mohammad**, **Mohammed**, **Muhammed**, and sometimes **Mahomet** (Latin **Mahometus**), following the Latin or Turkish), is believed by Muslims to be God's final prophet sent to guide mankind with the message of Islam. Non-Muslims generally consider him to be the founder of Islam. According to traditional Muslim biographers, he was born into a well-to-do family settled in the northern Arabian town of Mecca. Some calculate his birthdate as April 20, 570 (Shia Muslims believe it to be April 26), and some as 571; Muhammad's father, Abdullah, had died before he was born and the young boy was brought up by his paternal grandfather Abd al-Muttalib, of the tribe of Quraysh. At the age of six, Muhammad (pbuh) lost his mother Amina, and at the age of eight his grandfather Abd al-Muttalib. Muhammad (pbuh) now came under care of his uncle Abu Talib, the new leader of the Hashim clan of the Quraysh tribe, the most powerful in Mecca.

He is said to have been a merchant who travelled widely. Muslims believe that in 610, at about the age of forty, while praying in a cave called "Hira" near Mecca, he experienced a vision. Later, he described the experience (to those close to him) as a visit from the Angel Gabriel, who commanded him to memorize and recite the verses sent by God, which were later collected as the Qur'an. Gabriel told him that God (Allah) had chosen him as the last of the prophets to mankind. He eventually expanded his mission as a prophet, publicly preaching a strict monotheism and predicting a Day

of Judgment for sinners and idol-worshippers — such as his tribesmen and neighbors in Mecca. he said that he had been sent by God in order to complete and perfect their teachings. Many of his neighbors resented his preaching, and persecuted Muhammad (Pbuh) and his followers. In 622, he was forced to migrate from Mecca and settle in Yathrib (now known as Medina) with his followers, where he was the leader of the first avowedly Muslim community. War between Mecca and Medina followed, in which Muhammad(Pbuh) and his followers were eventually victorious. The military organization honed in this struggle was then set to conquering the other tribes of Arabia. By the time of his death, he had unified Arabia, spread Islam throughout the Arab Peninsula, and launched expeditions to the north, towards Syria and Palestine. His immediate successors expanded the Islamic empire into Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain. Later conquests, commercial contact between Muslims and non-Muslims, and missionary activity spread Islam over much of the globe.

The sources available to us for information about the prophet are the *Qur'an*, the *sira* biographies, and the *hadith* collections. While the Qur'an is not a biography, it does provide some information about his life. The third source, the hadith collections, like the Qur'an, is not a biography *per se*. In both the Sunni and Shia belief, they are the accounts of the words and actions of the prophet Muhammad (Pbuh).

Muhammad (Pbuh) had a reflective turn of mind and routinely spent nights in a cave (Hira) near Mecca in meditation and thought. Muslims believe that around the year 610, while meditating, he had a vision of the Angel Gabriel and heard a voice saying to him. “Read in the name of your Lord the Creator. He created man from something which clings. Read and your Lord is the Most Honored. He taught man with the pen; taught him all that he knew not.” (See *surat Al-Alaq* for a fuller account.). The first vision of Gabriel disturbed the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), but his wife hazrat Khadijah (RA) reassured him that it was a true vision and became his first follower. She was soon followed by his ten-year-old cousin Hazrat Ali ibn Abi Talib(RA), and Hazrat Abu Bakr (RA), whom Sunnis assert to have been Muhammad's(pbuh) closest friend. Until his death, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) reportedly received frequent revelations. Around 613, he began to spread his message amongst the people. Most of those who heard his message ignored it. A few mocked him. Some, however, believed and joined his small group.

As the ranks of the prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) followers swelled, he became a threat to the local tribes and the rulers of the city. Their wealth, after all, rested on the Ka'aba, a sacred house of idols and the focal point of Meccan religious, social and economic life. If they threw out their idols, as Muhammad (pbuh) preached, there would be no more pilgrims, no more trade, and no more wealth. Muhammad's (pbuh) denunciation of polytheism was especially offensive to his own tribe, the Quraysh, as they were the custodians of the Ka'aba. He and his followers were persecuted. Some of them fled to Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and founded a small colony there. In 619, both his wife Hazrat Khadijah (RA) and his uncle Hazrat Abu Talib died; it was known as "the year of mourning." His own clan withdrew their protection of him. Muslims patiently endured hunger and persecution.

By 622 CE, life in the small Muslim community of Mecca was becoming not only difficult, but also dangerous. Muslim traditions say that there were several attempts to assassinate Muhammad (pbuh). Muhammad (pbuh) then resolved to emigrate to Medina, then known as Yathrib, a large agricultural oasis where there were a number of Muslim converts. By breaking the link with his own tribe, he demonstrated that tribal and family loyalties were insignificant compared to the bonds of Islam, a revolutionary idea in the tribal society of Arabia. This *Hijra* or emigration (traditionally translated into English as "flight") marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. The Muslim calendar counts dates from the Hijra, which is why Muslim dates have the suffix AH (After Hijra).

By 628 CE, the Muslim position was strong enough that Muhammad decided to return to Mecca, this time as a pilgrim. In March of that year, he set out for Mecca, followed by 1,600 men. After some negotiation, a treaty was signed at the border town of al-Hudaybiyah. While Muhammad would not be allowed to finish his pilgrimage that year, hostilities would cease and the Muslims would have permission to make a pilgrimage to Mecca in the following year. The agreement lasted only two years, however, as war broke out again in 630. He marched on Mecca with an enormous force, said to number 10,000 men. Eager to placate the powerful Muslims and anxious to regain their lucrative tribal alliances, the Meccans submitted without a fight. Muhammad in turn promised a general amnesty. Most Meccans converted to Islam and Muhammad destroyed the idols in the Kaaba.

For most of the sixty-three years of his life, Muhammad was a merchant, then a prophet. He took up the sword late in his life. He was a warrior for only ten years. He fought only to defend his community against the Meccans, and that he insisted on humane rules of warfare. Muhammad died around noon on Monday 8 June 632(CE), in the city of Medina at the age of sixty-three. The leaders of the community conferred and freely chose Hazrat Abu Bakr (RA) as the first caliph, because he was pre-eminent among the followers of Muhammad(pbuh). With unity restored in Arabia, the Muslims looked outward and commenced the conquests that would eventually unite the Middle East under the caliphs.

#### **Distribution of Muslims in the world:**

##### **Name of the countries where Muslims are in majority:**

Afghanistan (99%), Albania (70%), Algeria (99%), Azarbaijan (94%), Bahrain (100%), Bangladesh (85%), Bosnia(40%), Brunei (70%), Burkino Faso(50%), Chad (51%), Chechnia(95%), Comoros (98%), Cote D'Ivory (earlier Ivory Coast) (40%), Djibouti(94%), Egypt (94%), Eriteria (30%), Ethiopia (50%), Gambia (90%), Guinea (91%), Guinea Bissau (45%), Indonesia (90%), Iran (99%), Iraq(97%), Jordan (92%), Khazakistan (47%), Kirgistan (75%), Kuwait (100%), Lebanon (70%), Libya(97%), Malaysia, Maldives (100%), Mali (90%), Mauritania (100%), Morocco (99%), Niger (80%), Nigeria (50%), Oman (95%), Pakistan (95%), Palestine (90%), Qatar (96%), Saudi Arabia (100%), Sahrawi Arab republic (100%), Senegal (95%), Seirra Leone (60%), Somalia (100%), Sudan (75%), Syria (90%), Tajikistan (100%), Tanzania (36%), Tunisia (98%), Turkey (99.8%), Turkmenistan (90%), U.A.E (96%), Uzbekistan(90%), and Yemen (98%).

##### **Name of the countries where Muslims are considerable in number and forms a conspicuous minority:**

Benin (20%), Cameroon (20%), Central African Republic (15%), China (10%), Congo D.R. (10%), Cyprus (20%), France (9%), Georgia (11%), Ghana (16%), Guyana (10%), India (14%), Israel (15%), Kenya (47%), Liberia (20%), Macedonia (30%), Malawi (20%), Mozambique (20%), Serbia and Montenegro (20%), Suriname (20%), Swaziland (10%), Togo (20%), Uganda (17%) and Zambia (20%).

\*\* The percentages given in the brackets are approximations.

### Jainism - 420 BCE<sup>20</sup>

The founder of the Jain community was Vardhamana, the last Jina in a series of 24 who lived in East India. He attained enlightenment after 13 years of deprivation and committed the act of salekhana, fasting to death, in 420 BCE. Jainism has many similarities to Hinduism and Buddhism which developed in the same part of the world. They believe in karma and reincarnation as do Hindus but they believe that enlightenment and liberation from this cycle can only be achieved through asceticism. Jains follow fruititarianism. This is the practice of only eating that which will not kill the plant or animal from which it is taken. They also practice ahimsa, non-violence, because any act of violence against a living thing creates negative karma, which will adversely affect one's next life.

**Vardhamana Mahavira** or **Mahavir** (the “**Great Hero**” — Also, **Niggantha Nathaputta** — 599 BCE-527 BCE, though possibly 549 BCE-477 BCE) was the 24<sup>th</sup>, and last, Jainist Tirthankara. Mahavira established what are today considered to be the central tenets of Jainism and was a contemporary of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha.

Mahavira was born in the ancient republic of Vaishali, now a district in Bihar. According to the Gregorian calendar, Mahavira was born in April. His birthday is celebrated as Mahavir Jayanti. He died at Pawapuri. He was known as “Vardhamana” (increasing) because it is said that his family's wealth grew after his conception. Being the son of King Siddhartha and Queen Trisala, he lived the life of a prince; but at the age of thirty, he left his family, gave up his worldly possessions, and spent twelve years as an ascetic. At one point, it is said that Mahavira had more than 400,000 followers. He died in 527 BCE at the age of 72. Jains signify Dipavali, the last day of the Hindu and Jain calendars, as the anniversary of his death and, accordingly, the day he attained Moksha.

After he renounced his prince hood, he spent the next twelve and half years in deep silence and meditation and took on the discipline of conquering his desires, feelings, and attachments. He carefully avoided harming or annoying other living beings including animals, birds, and plants. He also

went without food for long periods. His enduring calm and peaceful character against all unbearable hardships gave him the title, Mahavir (meaning very brave and courageous). During this period, Jains believe that he attained *keval-jnana*, or perfect enlightenment, in which spiritual powers fully become developed and perfect perception, knowledge, power, and bliss are realized.

Mahavira spent the next thirty years travelling bare foot around India preaching to the people the eternal truth he realized. The ultimate objective of his teaching is how one can attain total freedom from the cycle of birth, life, pain, misery, and death, and achieve the permanent blissful state of one's self, or Moksha, Sanskrit for "liberation". Mahavira preached that from eternity, every living being (soul) is in bondage of karmic atoms that are accumulated by good or bad deeds. Under the influence of *karma*, the soul is habituated to seek pleasures in materialistic belongings and possessions, which are the deep-rooted causes of self-centered violent thoughts, deeds, anger, hatred, greed, and such other vices. These result in further accumulation of *karmas*.

To liberate one's self, Mahavira taught the necessity of right faith (*samyak-darshana*), right knowledge (*samyak-jnana*), and right conduct (*samyak-charitra*). At the heart of right conduct for Jains lie the five great vows:

- Nonviolence (*Ahimsa*)- not to cause harm to any living beings
- Truthfulness (*Satya*)- to speak the harmless truth only
- Non-stealing (*Asteya*)- not to take anything not properly given
- Chastity (*Brahmacharya*)- not to indulge in sensual pleasure
- Non-possession/Non-attachment (*Aparigraha*)- complete detachment from people, places, and material things.
- 

As taught by Mahavira, Jains believe that these vows can not be fully implemented without the acceptance of a philosophy of non-absolutism (*Anekantvada*) and the theory of relativity (*Syadvada*, also translated "qualified prediction"). Monks and nuns are held to follow these vows strictly and totally, while the common people may follow the vows as far as their life styles will permit.

In the matters of spiritual advancement, as envisioned by Mahavira, both men and women are on an equal footing and were taught by Mahavira that they may equally renounced the world in search of ultimate happiness.

Mahavira attracted people from all walks of life, rich and poor, kings and commoners, men and women, princes and priests, touchable and untouchable. He organized his followers into a four fold order, namely

monk (*Sadhu*), nun (*Sadhvi*), layman (*Sbravak*), and laywoman (*Sbravika*). This order is known as *Chaturvidh Jain Sangh*.

Lord Mahavira's sermons were orally compiled by his immediate disciples in the *Agam Sutras*. These Agam Sutras were orally passed on to future generations. In the course of time, many of the *Agam Sutras* have been lost, destroyed, or modified. About one thousand years later the *Agam Sutras* were recorded on *Tadpatris* (leafy paper that was used in those days to preserve records for future references). Svetambar Jains have accepted these *sutras* as authentic version of His teachings while Digambar Jains use them as a reference.

Jainism existed before Mahavira, and his teachings were based on those of his predecessors. Thus, Mahavira was more of a reformer and propagator of an existing religious order than the founder of a new faith. He followed the well established creed of his predecessor Tirthankar Parshvanath. However, Mahavira did reorganize the philosophical tenets of Jainism to correspond to his times.

A few centuries after Mahavira's death, the Jain religious order (*Sangha*) grew more and more complex. There were schisms on some minor points, although they did not affect the original doctrines as preached by Mahavira. Later generations saw the introduction of ritualistic complexities that some have criticized with almost placing Mahavira and other *Tirthankars* on the thrones of Hindu deities.

**Geographic distribution:** Jains live primarily in India. Their percentage to the total population in India is 0.4%. Their proportion is considerable in Maharashtra (1.3%), Rajasthan (1.2%), Delhi (1.1%), Gujarat (1.0%), Madhya Pradesh (0.9%), and Karnataka (0.8%). Some Jains have immigrated to other countries, such as the United States and Canada. There are more Jain temples and groups in the United States than in any other country outside India.

### **Judaism 2000 BCE**

Judaism<sup>21</sup>, Christianity and Islam originated with a divine covenant between the God of the ancient Israelites and Abraham around 2000 BCE. The next leader of the Israelites, Moses, led his people out of captivity in Egypt and received the Law from God. Joshua later led them into the promised land where Samuel established the Israelite kingdom

with Saul as its first king. King David established Jerusalem and King Solomon built the first temple there. In 70 CE the temple was destroyed and the Jews were scattered throughout the world until 1948 when the state of Israel was formed.

Jews<sup>22</sup> believe in one creator who alone is to be worshipped as absolute ruler of the universe. He monitors peoples activities and rewards good deeds and punishes evil. The Torah was revealed to Moses by God and can not be changed though God does communicate with the Jewish people through prophets. Jews believe in the inherent goodness of the world and its inhabitants as creations of God and do not require a savior to save them from original sin. They believe they are God's chosen people and that the Messiah will arrive in the future, gather them into Israel, there will be a general resurrection of the dead, and the Jerusalem Temple destroyed in 70 CE will be rebuilt.

**Moses** or **Móshe** ( Standard Hebrew **Móše**, Arabic **Musa**), son of Amram (*Imran* in Arabic).He is a legendary Hebrew liberator, leader, lawgiver, prophet, and historian.According to the Hebrew Bible and Quran, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, and received the Torah of Judaism from God on Mount Sinai. He presented societal and religious laws, which form the foundation of many contemporary legal, religious, and governmental systems. Moses promoted the doctrine of monotheism, which was not widely accepted at the time. He is revered as a prophet in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The birth of Moses occurred at a time when the current Egyptian monarch ( believed to be Ramses II) had commanded that all male children born to Hebrew captives should be killed by drowning in the Nile River. Jochebed, the wife of the Levite Amram, bore a son, and kept him concealed for three months. When she could keep him hidden no longer, rather than deliver him to be killed she set him adrift on the Nile river in a small craft of bulrushes coated in pitch. The daughter of Pharaoh discovered the baby and adopted him as her son, and named him "Moses" (Which means "to draw out"). By Biblical account, Moses' sister Miriam observed the progress of the tiny boat. Miriam then asked Pharaoh's daughter if she would like a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby. Thereafter, Jochebed was employed as the child's nurse, and he grew and was brought to Pharaoh's daughter and became her son.

Moses escapes to the Sinai Peninsula when he discovers that Pharaoh knew the reality of Moses and was likely to put him to death. He married Zipporah, daughter of Jethro, priest of Midian. There he sojourned forty years, following the occupation of a shepherd, during which time his son Gershom was born.

According to the Book of Exodus, one day, as Moses led his flock to Mount Horeb, he saw a burning bush, which was not consumed. When he turned aside to look more closely at the marvel, God spoke to him from the bush, revealing His name to Moses. He also felt commissioned by God to go to Egypt and deliver his Hebrew brethren from their bondage. He then returned to Egypt. Moses was met on his arrival in Egypt by his elder brother, Aaron, and gained a hearing with his oppressed brethren. It was a more difficult matter, however, to persuade Pharaoh to let the Hebrews depart. This was not accomplished until God sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians. These plagues culminated in the slaying of the Egyptian first-borns, whereupon such terror seized the Egyptians that they ordered the Hebrews to leave. Meanwhile, Pharaoh had a change of heart and was in pursuit of them with a large army. Shut in between this army and the Red Sea, the Israelites despaired, but as they felt instructed by their God to walk across it, the waters of the sea miraculously divided so that they passed safely across on dry ground. When the Egyptians attempted to follow, God permitted the waters to return upon them and drown them.

***Top 10 Largest National Jewish Populations:***

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Nation</b>	<b>Number</b>
1	USA	5,602,000
2	Israel	4,390,000
3	Russia	1,450,000
4	France	640,000
5	Canada	350,000
6	United Kingdom	320,000

## Shinto- 500+ BCE

Shinto<sup>23</sup> is an ancient Japanese religion, closely tied to nature, which recognizes the existence of various “Kami”, nature deities. The first two deities, Izanagi and Izanami, gave birth to the Japanese islands and their children became the deities of the various Japanese clans. One of their daughters, Amaterasu (Sun Goddess), is the ancestress of the Imperial Family and is regarded as the chief deity. All the Kami are benign and serve only to sustain and protect. They are not seen as separate from humanity due to sin, because humanity is “Kami’s Child.” Followers of Shinto desire peace and believe all human life is sacred. They revere “musuhi”, the Kami’s creative and harmonizing powers, and aspire to have “makoto”, sincerity or true heart. Morality is based upon that which is of benefit to the group. There are “Four Affirmations” in Shinto:

1. Tradition and family: the family is the main mechanism by which traditions are preserved.
2. Love of nature: nature is sacred and natural objects are to be worshipped as sacred spirits.
3. Physical cleanliness: they must take baths, wash their hands, and rinse their mouth often.
4. “Matsuri”: festival, which honors the spirits.

After World War II, Shinto lost its status of state religion; some Shinto practices and teachings, once given a great deal of prominence during the war, are no longer taught nor practiced today, and some remain largely as everyday activities without religious connotations like omikuji (a form of drawing lots).

The introductions of writing in the 5th century CE and Buddhism in the 6th century CE had a profound impact on the development of a unified system of Shinto beliefs. Within a brief period of time, in the early Nara period, the *Kojiki* (The Record of Ancient Things, 712 CE) and the *Nihonshoki* (The Chronicles of Japan, 720 CE) were written by compiling existing myths and legends into a unified account (*see: Japanese mythology*). These accounts were written with two purposes in mind. First, the sophistication of the narratives and the introduction of Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist themes into the narratives were meant to impress the Chinese with the sophistication of the Japanese. The Japanese felt intimidated by

the clearly advanced culture of the Chinese and so hoped to produce a work rivaling it. Second, the narratives were meant to shore up support for the legitimacy of the Imperial house, based on its lineage from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu.

Buddhism and Shinto coexisted and were amalgamated in the Shinbutsu Shugo and Kukai's syncretic view held wide sway up until the end of the Edo period. At that time, there was a renewed interest in "Japanese studies" (kokugaku). It is as a result of the closed country policy. In the 18th century, various Japanese scholars, in particular Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), tried to tease apart the "real" Shinto from various foreign influences. The attempt was largely unsuccessful; since as early as the *Nihonshoki*, parts of the mythology were explicitly borrowed from Chinese doctrines. (For example, the co-creator deities Izanami and Izanagi are explicitly compared to yin and yang.) However, the attempt did set the stage for the arrival of state Shinto, following the Meiji Restoration, when Shinto and Buddhism were separated.

### **Types of Shinto**

In order to distinguish between these different focuses of emphasis within Shinto, many feel it is important to separate Shinto into four related types of Shinto expression.

△ **Shrine Shinto** is the oldest and most prevalent of the Shinto types. It has always been a part of Japan's history and constitutes the main current of Shinto tradition.

△ **Sect Shinto** is comprised of thirteen groups formed during the 19th century. They do not have shrines, but conduct religious activities in meeting halls. Shinto sects include the mountain-worship sects, who focus on worshipping mountains like Mt. Fuji, faith-healing sects, purification sects, Confucian sects, and Revival Shinto sects.

△ **Folk Shinto** includes the numerous but fragmented folk beliefs in deities and spirits. Practices include divination, spirit possession, and shamanic healing. Some of their practices come from Taoism, Buddhism, or Confucianism, but some come from ancient local traditions.

△ **State Shinto** was the result of the Meiji dynasty's restoration and the downfall of the shogunate. The Meiji attempted to purify Shinto by abolishing many Buddhist and Confucian ideals; also, the emperor was once again considered divine. After Japan's defeat in World War II, State Shinto was abolished and the emperor was forced to renounce his divine right.

The principal worship of kami is done at public shrines, although home worship at small private shrines (sometimes only a high shelf with a few ritual objects) is also common. It is also possible to worship objects or people while they exist. While a few of the public shrines are elaborate structures, most are small buildings in the characteristic Japanese architectural style. Though Shinto is popular for these occasions, when it comes to funerals, most Japanese turn to Buddhist ceremonies. Almost all festivals (*matsuri*) in Japan are hosted by local Shinto shrines and these festivals are open to all those that wish to attend. While these could be said to be religious events, Japanese do not regard these events as religious since everyone can attend, regardless of personal beliefs. Shinto has co-existed with Buddhism for well over a millennium, it is very difficult to disentangle Shinto and Buddhist beliefs about the world. One might say that where Buddhism emphasizes the afterlife and ending the cycle of rebirths, Shinto emphasizes this life and finding happiness within it. Though Buddhism and Shinto have very different perspectives on the world, most Japanese do not see any need to reconcile these two very different religions, and practice both.

### ***Cultural effects of Shinto***<sup>24</sup>

Shinto has been called “the religion of Japaneseness”, and the customs and values of Shinto are inseparable from those of Japanese culture prior to the influx of Chinese religious ideas that occurred in the mid 6th century. Many famously Japanese practices have origins either directly or indirectly rooted in Shinto. For example, it is clear that the Shinto ideal of harmony with nature underlies such typically Japanese arts as flower-arranging (*ikebana*) and traditional Japanese architecture and garden design. A more explicit link to Shinto is seen in sumo wrestling, where, even in the modern version of the sport, many Shinto-inspired ceremonies must be performed before a bout, such as purifying the wrestling arena by sprinkling it with salt. It is still very common for Japanese to say, “*Itadakimasu*” (I humbly partake) before eating, and the Japanese emphasis on proper greetings can be seen as a continuation of the ancient Shinto belief in *kotodama* (words with a magical effect on the world). Many Japanese cultural customs, like using wooden chopsticks and removing shoes before entering a building, have their origin in Shinto beliefs and practices. Also, a number of other Japanese religions, including Tenrikyo, have originated from or been influenced by Shinto.

**Geographic distribution:** The adherents count for this religion is problematic and often misunderstood. It is because, Shinto is simply the indigenous ethnic practice in Japan and its importance is almost entirely historical and cultural, not contemporary. The number of adherents of Shinto are often reported as being around 100 million, or around 75% to 90% of the Japanese population. These figures come from the *Shukyo Nenkan* (Religions Yearbook), put out by the Ministry of Education & Bureau of Statistics, and they obtain their figures by asking religious bodies for statistics.

### Sikhism - 1500 CE

The Sikh<sup>25</sup> faith was founded by Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji. He began preaching the way to enlightenment and God after receiving a vision. After his death a series of nine Gurus led the movement until 1708. At this time these functions passed to the Panth (community) and the holy text. The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, compiled this text, the Shri Guru Granth Sahib. It consists of hymns and writings of the first 5 Gurus and 30 others which include Muslims, Hindus and so-called untouchable saints of different parts of India in their original multilingual spoken languages but in Gurumukhi script. The tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh added the compositions of ninth Guru in 1705 and completed and bestowed Guruship. The holy text is considered the 11th and final Guru.

Sikhs believe in a single formless God with many names, who can be known through meditation. Sikhs pray many times each day and are prohibited from worshipping idols or icons. They believe in samsara, karma, but reject the caste system. They believe that everyone has equal status in the eyes of God. During the 18th century, there were a number of attempts to prepare a unified portrayal of Sikh customs. Sikh scholars and theologians started in 1931 to prepare the Reht Maryada — the Sikh code of conduct and conventions. This has successfully achieved a high level of uniformity in the religious and social practices of Sikhism throughout the world. It contains 27 articles. Article 1 defines who is a Sikh:

“Any human being who faithfully believes in:

- One Immortal Being,
- Ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh,
- The Guru Granth Sahib,
- The utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus and
- The baptism bequeathed by the tenth Guru, and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion, is a Sikh.”

**Guru Nanak**<sup>26</sup> (1469-1539) by Nanak was born in village Talavandi near Lahore (now in Pakistan named after him as Nankana Sahib) in undivided Punjab to Khatri (Kshatriya) parents. They were farmers and Nanak's father Kalu was the village officer. Mother's name was Tripta. Nanak attended the village school and learnt his native language Punjabi, Hindi, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian and three 'R's. He started composing verses at a very young age. Nanak's strange ways as a child (deep meditation, other worldliness, love of solitude) disturbed his father who first tried to make him a farmer than a trader. Nanak<sup>27</sup> was found unsuccessful in both the vocations. Finally he took the charge of Nawab's store. He earned the goodwill of the ruler due to honesty and religious temperament. Here he required a lifelong companion and disciple Mardana who played Rabab (folk instrument) as Nanak composed and sang verses. Both spent their spare time in singing Bhajans.

The call of the *other world* was getting strong. Nanak had his family (wife and two children) and set on a spiritual quest, accompanied by Mardana. He wandered throughout the country and abroad visiting holy places and meeting saints of different faiths. Those were times of religious awakening in the North as well as in the South. It is said that Nanak visited Mecca and had discussion with Muslim divines of Arab countries as well. Tradition ascribes fifty years of wandering. Babur had invaded India by then. Tradition records that he met Babur the Moghul emperor, and influenced him to treat his prisoners kindly.

He believed in non-anthropomorphic God and called him by several names. He wrote a long poem Japji which every religious Sikh, recites in the morning. People of all faiths were drawn to his ascetic ways of

compassion, his group prayers, and his service to the poor. Many offerings came aswell, which were spent in distribution to the poor. He gave great importance to purity of heart than learning of scriptures, condemned the caste system and stressed simple life like taught by Kabir.

“God is one!” exclaimed Nanak. “His name is Truth. He is the creator. He is without birth or death. Self-incarnate.” Nanak composed verses and sang about glories of God accompanied by Mardana on Rabab. Nanak lived and died as a saint worshipped by all communities. But soon after his death his followers under guru Angad called themselves Sikhs (“Shishya” in Sanskrit) later paving way to Sikhism, a new sect, apart from Hinduism.

**Geographic distribution:** The highest estimate we had for the number of Sikhs in the world was 24 million, from [www.sikhs.org](http://www.sikhs.org). Most estimates were between 22 and 24 million. About 80% of the world’s Sikhs live in the province of Punjab, in India.

***Places with the Highest Percentage of Sikhs<sup>28</sup>***

<b>Place</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Number</b>
Punjab, <i>India</i>	61.00%	11,000,000
Haryana, <i>India</i>	5.81	956,836
British Columbia, <i>Canada</i>	2.30	100,000
French Guiana	2.00	1,200
Rajasthan, <i>India</i>	1.48	649,174
Himachal Pradesh, <i>India</i>	1.01	400,000
United Kingdom	1.00	500,000
Alberta, <i>Canada</i>	0.54	13,600
Ontario, <i>Canada</i>	0.50	50,100
Fiji	0.50	4,000
Uttar Pradesh, <i>India</i>	0.49	675,775
Manitoba, <i>Canada</i>	0.32	3,500

Tao, roughly translated as *path*, is a force which flows through all life and is the first cause of everything. The goal of everyone is to become one with the Tao. Tai Chi, a technique of exercise using slow deliberate movements, is used to balance the flow of energy or “chi” within the body. People should develop virtue and seek compassion, moderation and humility. One should plan any action in advance and achieve it through minimal action. Yin (dark side) and Yang (light side) symbolize pairs of opposites, which are seen through the universe, such as good and evil, light and dark, male and female. The impact of human civilization upsets the balance of Yin and Yang. Taoists believe that people are by nature, good, and that one should be kind to others simply because such treatment will probably be reciprocated.

**Laozi** (also spelled *Lao Tzu*) is a major figure in Chinese philosophy whose historical existence is debated. Chinese tradition states that he lived in the 6th century BC. Many modern scholars state that he may have lived in approximately the 4th century BCE, during the Hundred Schools of Thought and Warring States Periods. Laozi is credited with writing the seminal Taoist work, the *Tao Te Ching*, and became a popular deity in the Taoist religion’s pantheon. Little is known about Laozi’s life. Tradition says he was born in Ku Prefecture, which today is Lùyì County of Henan province, in the later years of Spring and Autumn Period. Some legends say he was born with white hair, having spent eight or more years in seclusion. His writings are characterized by appropriation of ancient sayings, repetition, symmetry, rhyme, and rhythm. The writings attributed to him are poetical, dense and often obscure. They served as a starting point for cosmological or introspective meditations. Many of the aesthetic theories of Chinese art are widely grounded in his ideas and those of his most famous follower : Zhuang Zi.

Although Laozi does not have as deep an influence as Confucius does in China, he is still widely respected by the Chinese and his thoughts are studied in many places all around the world. Laozi's most famous follower, Zhuang Zi, wrote a book that had a great deal of influence on Chinese Literati, through the ideas of individualism, freedom, carefreeness, and, even if the author never speaks about it, art, which may well be the cornerstone of Chinese aesthetic.

### **Tenrikyo-1838CE:**

Tenrikyo<sup>33</sup> is, arguably, the largest current religion to have a woman founder. The religion is essentially monotheistic.

**Nakayama Miki** (1798-1887) is a Japanese woman noted for founding Tenrikyo. The official Tenrikyo biography essentially states she was a holy woman born to a wealthy farming family in what is now Nara prefecture. She was said to be very devout who wished to be a nun, but was forced into a basically difficult marriage which she bore with what they deem admirable patience and virtue. In 1838, at the age of 40, the Tenrikyo believe she became a medium for God, the religion is essentially monotheist, as a result of a traditional ceremony. This being told her "I am the general of heaven. I am the true and original God. - I have descended from heaven to save all human beings, and I want Miki to be the shrine of God." She stated its name was Tenri-O-no-Mikoto, essentially "God the Parent."(this is what they sometimes call it in English[1], but "Lord of Divine Wisdom" might be a more direct translation. However "God the Parent" will be used in this article to highlight certain aspects of her thinking.) After the death of her husband she was claimed to have miraculous healing and prophetic powers, which served their mission. This led her to choose a life of poverty giving away what she could to the less fortunate and founding her own religion. From 1866-1882 she wrote what she deemed the revelations of "God the Parent" and believed herself to be its mouthpiece and shrine. "God the Parent" was apparently deemed to be "in her", but she was apparently seen as separate from it. She was therefore maybe more claiming to have a special communion with "God the Parent" rather than of being *God the Parent*. She encouraged a life of charity and designed various spiritual dances.

Information on her from non-Tenri sources seems to be slightly difficult to find. Her early life being sketchy is perhaps not unusual for an early nineteenth century Japanese farmer's daughter. Still some of these details seem more or less accurate. Although some feel that rather than have any divine inspiration she took inspiration from an amalgam of Buddhism, Shinto, and Japanese shamanism to create a religion that could satisfy the emotional needs of a forty year old Japanese woman in a troubled marriage. Hence she stated God had the ungendered name "God the Parent", pronounced gender equality, and celebrated childbirth. Also that some of her lifestyle was simply like that of the Buddhist nun she had once wanted to become. Tenrikyo insists that her beliefs were totally original and her thinking uniquely inspired.

In a sense it seems they both might be correct. Japan had not yet opened to the West in 1838 yet her religion emphasized monotheism and women's rights. At the same time it does have enough similarity to previous religions that it was deemed a sect of Shintoism in 1908. Therefore her ideas are kind of a mixture of old and unique. That uniqueness requiring a divine inspiration would perhaps be the main disagreement.

**Geographic distribution:** Although located primarily in Japan, Tenrikyo has a definite evangelical missionary ethic and has achieved considerable geographic spread, with members organized in about 40 countries. Their population in the world is thought to be between two and three million. It is by far the most active non-Buddhist Japanese religion today. Its membership constitutes a distinctive religious culture in which the religion plays an active part in members' lives. In 1999 in the eleven countries with the most Tenrikyo locations, the total number of Tenrikyo churches, missions, etc. increased in the United States, South Korea and Thailand; decreased in Japan, Brazil, Taiwan and Mexico; and remained the same in Canada, Argentina, Australia and France.

## The Persian Religions

The beliefs and practices of the culturally and linguistically related group of ancient peoples who inhabited the Iranian Plateau and its borderlands, as well as areas of Central Asia from the Black Sea to Khotan (modern Ho-t'ien, China), form **Persian mythology**.

The best collection of old Persian mythology appears in the Shahnama of Ferdowsi, written over a thousand years ago. Much of the information about Persian (old-Iranian) gods can be found in the religious texts from Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) such as the Avesta, and in later sources such as the Bundahishn and the Denkard. The original Avesta dates back to 1400 - 1200 BCE, and was kept in Istakhr until Alexander of Macedon destroyed it. The current version dates from the 13th or 14th century, and contains only a fragment of the original text.

Unlike many other mythologies, Persian mythology has only 2 main gods: Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. Ahura Mazda was the god of light, construction, and fertility. In contrast, Angra Mainyu was the god of darkness, destruction, sterility, and death. The pair was always in constant conflict. Evil people followed Angra Mainyu, while good people followed Ahura Mazda.

There are many demons or *daeva* (Persian *div*) in the Persian mythology. The root is the Indo-European word *deiva* meaning "celestial, bright". As among the Aryan Indians, the pre-Zoroastrian Iranians considered the demons as holy and sacred beings; but Zarathustra rejected Daeva and called him evil. Even then the Persians living south of the Caspian Sea continued to worship the demon and resisted pressure to accept Zoroastrianism. The legend of White Demon (Div-e Sepid) of Mazandaran lingers on to this day. The Zoroastrian god of Evil, Ahriman or the Avestan Angra Mainyu (i.e. Evil Thought) has lost its original identity and is sometimes pictured as a Div. Post-Islamic religious paintings show the div as a giant of a man with spotted body and two horns.

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## **Zoroastrianism - 1000 BCE**

Zoroastrianism<sup>34</sup> was founded by Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) in Persia, which followed an aboriginal polytheistic religion at the time. He preached what may have been the first monotheism with a single supreme god, Ahura Mazda. Zoroastrians believe in the dualism of good and evil as either a cosmic one between Ahura Mazda and an evil spirit of violence and death, Angra Mainyu, or as an ethical dualism within the human consciousness. The Zoroastrian holy book is called the Avesta which includes the teachings of Zarathushtra written in a series of five hymns called the Gathas. They are abstract sacred poetry directed towards the worship of the One God, understanding of righteousness and cosmic order, promotion of social justice, and individual choice between good and evil. The rest of the Avesta was written at a later date and deals with rituals, practice of worship, and other traditions of the faith.

Zoroastrians worship through prayers and symbolic ceremonies that are conducted before a sacred fire, which symbolize their God. They dedicate their lives to a three-fold path represented by their motto: “Good thoughts, good words, good deeds.” The faith does not generally accept converts but this is disputed by some members.

**Zarathushtra** (*Zarathuštra*), The name *zaraē-uštra* is a compound in the Avestan language, of *zarəta-* “feeble, old” and *uštra* “camel”, translating to “having old camels, the one who owns old camels”. Usually known in English as **Zoroaster**, was a Persian (Iranian) prophet and the founder of Zoroastrianism, which was the national religion of Persia from the time of the Achaemenidae to the close of the Sassanid period(640 AD). Zoroaster was probably born in the northeastern part of Persia (Iran), though there is also a tradition that he came from Balkh in modern day Afghanistan. Zoroaster is generally accepted as a historical figure, but efforts to date Zoroaster vary widely. Scholarly estimates are usually roughly

ranging from 10000 BC to 1000 BC. Others, however, give earlier estimates, making him a candidate as the founder of the earliest religion based on revealed scripture, while still others place him in the 6th century BC. We can know about the life of Zoroaster from the Avesta, the Gâthâs, the Greek texts, the biographies in the seventh book of the Dēnkard (9th century) and the Dabnâma are mythic.

It is fair to say that Zoroaster lived in the northeastern area of ancient Persian territory. The Greeks refer to him as a Bactrian (coming from present-day Afghanistan), a Median or a Persian about 3-5,000 years ago. He had three daughters and three sons. His illumination from Ahura Mazda came at age 30. His first converts were his wife and children, and a cousin.

The Greek writers recount a few points regarding the childhood of Zoroaster and his hermitic life-style. According to tradition, and *Pliny's Natural History*, Zoroaster laughed on the day of his birth, and lived in the wilderness. Here, he is a mortal, empowered by trust in his God, and the protection of his allies. He faces outward opposition, and unbelief and inward doubt. These human qualities support a historical Zoroaster, despite a lack of historical detail. It is important to note the differences between the Zoroaster of the later Avesta and the "Zoroaster" of the Gâthâs. In the later Avesta, he is depicted wrestling with the *Daeva* or "evil immortals" (Pahlavi *Dēvân*), and, in a story that may have inspired a remarkably similar account of Jesus in the New Testament, is tempted by Ahriman to renounce his faith. (*Yasht*, 17,19).

The teachings of Zoroaster are presented in seventeen liturgical, texts, or "hymns", the yasna, which is divided into groups called Gâthâs. The Gâthâs are poetic admonitions and prophecies, cast in the form of dialogues with God and the "Immortals". However, they seem to contain allusions to personal events, over-coming obstacles in life imposed by competing priests, and the ruling class. He had difficulty spreading his teachings, and was even treated with ill will in his mother's hometown (an exceptional insult in his culture and time). The historical Zoroaster, however, eludes categorization as a legendary character. The Gâthâs within the Avesta make claim to be the *ipsissima verba* of the prophet. The *Vendidad* also gives accounts of the dialogues between Ahura Mazda and Zoroaster. They are the last-surviving account of his doctrinal discourses, presented at the

court of King Vištaspa. in the *Dabnâma*, he is said to have been murdered at the altar by the Turanians in the storming of Balkh.

If basic precepts of Zoroastrianism are to be distilled into a single maxim, the maxim is *Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta* (Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds). A cosmic struggle between *Aša* “The Truth” (Pahlavi *Ahlâyîb*) and *Druj* “The Lie” (Pahlavi *Druz*) is presented as the foundation of our existence. This is often related to a struggle between *good* and *evil* in a Western paradigm. This may also be conceptualized as a battle between Darkness and Light. The two opposing forces in this battle are Ahura Mazdâ (Ohrmazd) (God) and Ahriman (The Devil). In the *yasnas*, Zoroaster refers to these forces as “*the Better and the Bad.*”

**Geographic distribution:** The exact number of Zoroastrians is not known. But they live as minority community in India and in the Middle- east countries.