

# A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS

(Prepared by the Ecumenical and Multifaith Unit, Diocese of New Westminster)

## ***BAHA'Í FAITH***

The Bahá'í Faith arose from Islam in the 1800s based on the teachings of Baha'u'llah and is now a distinct worldwide faith. The faith's followers believe that God has sent nine great prophets to mankind through whom the Holy Spirit has revealed the "Word of God." This has given rise to the major world religions. Although these religions arose from the teachings of the prophets of one God, Bahá'ís do not believe they are all the same. The differences in the teachings of each prophet are due to the needs of the society they came to help and what mankind was ready to have revealed to it. Bahá'í beliefs promote gender and race equality, freedom of expression and assembly, world peace and world government. They believe that a single world government led by Bahá'ís will be established at some point in the future. The faith does not attempt to preserve the past but does embrace the findings of science. Bahá'ís believe that every person has an immortal soul which can not die but is freed to travel through the spirit world after death.

Sacred Writings:       The Katab-I-Aqdas, The Katab-I-Iqan

## ***BUDDHISM***

Buddhism developed out of the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama who, in 535 BCE, 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 their attachment to desire and the self, they 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.

## ***CHRISTIANITY***

Christianity is a monotheistic religion centered on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as presented in the New Testament.

Its followers, known as Christians, believe that Jesus is 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 a teacher, the model of a virtuous life, the revealer of God, and most importantly the saviour of humanity who suffered, died, and was resurrected in order to bring about salvation from sin. Christians maintain that Jesus ascended into heaven, and most denominations teach that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, granting everlasting life to his followers. Christians describe the New Testament account of Jesus' ministry as the Gospel, or "good news".

Like Judaism and Islam, Christianity is classified as an Abrahamic religion. It began as a Jewish sect in the eastern Mediterranean. The disciples were first called *Christians* (Greek *Χριστιανός*) by or about 44 AD,[9], meaning "followers of Christ", in Antioch. Ignatius of Antioch was the first Christian to use the label in self-reference. The earliest recorded use of the term *Christianity* (Greek *Χριστιανισμός*) was also by Ignatius of Antioch, around 100 AD. By the 4th century, Christianity had become the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. During the Middle Ages, most of the remainder of Europe was christianized, with Christians also being a (sometimes large) religious minority in the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of India. Following the Age of Discovery, through missionary work and colonisation, Christianity spread to the Americas and the rest of the world.

As of the early 21st century, Christianity has between 1.5 billion and 2.1 billion adherents, representing about a quarter to a third of the world's population. It is the state religion of at least fifteen countries.

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.

Sacred Writings:       The Bible

## ***HINDUISM***

The origins of Hinduism can be traced to the Indus Valley civilization sometime between 4000 and 2500 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.

Hindus follow a strict caste system which determines the standing of each person. The caste one is born into is the result of the karma from their previous life. Only members of the highest caste, the brahmins, may perform the Hindu religious rituals and hold positions of authority within the temples.

Sacred Writings:       The Vedas, The Upanishads, The Mahabharata, The Ramayana

## ***ISLAM***

Islam was founded in 622 CE by Muhammad 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, David, Moses and Jesus. The role of Muhammad 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 are the words of Allah 'the One True God' as given to Muhammad, 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:

- Recite the shahadah at least once.
- Perform the salat (prayer) 5 times a day while facing the Kaaba in Makkah
- Donate regularly to charity via the zakat, a 2.5% charity tax, and through additional donations to the needy.
- Fast during the month of Ramadan, the month that Muhammad received the Qur'an from Allah.
- 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 was executed on the cross.

Sacred Writings: The Qur'an, The Hadith

## **JAINISM**

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.

Sacred writings: The Jaina Sutras

## **JUDAISM**

Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Baha'i faith all 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 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.

Sacred Writings: The Law and The Prophets, The Psalms, The Talmud

## **NATIVE AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY**

Aboriginal peoples see themselves in continuity with the natural world, and the timings of their celebrations reflect their harmony with a wider spectrum of rhythms in nature than just the cycles of the sun and moon. For many aboriginal peoples, the key concept of time is the season. Every season is a time of thanksgiving to the Creator, the Supreme Spirit and Provider. Each season is sacred - a part of the continuing circle of creation in which all beings share.

## **SHINTO**

Shinto 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.

Sacred Writings: The Kojiki, The Nihongi

## **SIKHISM**

The Sikh faith was founded by Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji in the Punjab area, now Pakistan. He began preaching the way to enlightenment and God after receiving a vision. After his death a series of nine Gurus (regarded as reincarnations of Guru Nanak) led the movement until 1708. At this time these functions passed to the Panth and the holy text. This text, the Shri Guru Granth Sahib, was compiled by the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. It consists of hymns and writings of the first 10 Gurus, along with texts from different Muslim and Hindu saints. 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, and reincarnation as Hindus do 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 an accurate 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.

Sacred Writings: Shri Guru Granth Sahib

## **TAOISM**

Taoism was founded by Lao-Tse, a contemporary of Confucius in China. Taoism began as a combination of psychology and philosophy which Lao-Tse hoped would help end the constant feudal warfare and other conflicts of his time. His writings, the Tao-te-Ching, describe the nature of life, the way to peace and how a ruler should lead his life. Taoism became a religion in 440 CE when it was adopted as a state religion.

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.

Sacred Writings: Tao-te-Ching

## **ZOROASTRIANISM**

Zoroastrianism 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 belief 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 symbolizes 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.

Sacred Writings: The Zend Avesta, Pahlavi Texts