



RELIGIONS PRIMER

HINDUISM

The oldest faith in India, known as Hinduism is based on ancient scriptures called the Vedas. Believing that all creation is one and is sacred, Hindus were the first to establish the core philosophy of reverence for all life.

The Indic civilization is the oldest continuously existing civilization on earth of which we know, dating back to 7,000 B.C. The Vedic society was shaped by the spiritual traditions as realized by the great sages, who left society to dwell in Himalayan caves, and sought to realize the great mysteries of life. Why are we here? What happens when we die?

These great sages came up with the concepts of karma, the law of cause and affect, and of reincarnation. Hinduism recognizes the divine in all beings. Yet they have developed a caste system, a strict social hierarchy. Some of the higher castes have used their position to commit acts of violence against those of lower status. Prejudice due to the caste system was outlawed fifty years ago.

BUDDHISM

Buddha, born 2,500 years ago, taught the virtues of non-violence. A Hindu prince, he was dissatisfied with his life and walked away from his world of privilege to seek enlightenment beneath the bodhi tree. Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths – life is suffering; suffering comes from our attachment; there is a cessation to suffering; and the path to overcoming suffering.

Buddhism relies on the individual to seek his own spiritual enlightenment by attaining nirvana through his own efforts. Compassion is a very important practice, and the development of altruism is dedicated for the sake of all sentient beings.

JAINISM

In Jainism, the commitment to non-violence is even more extreme than in Hinduism and Buddhism. Ahimsa means non-violence. Jains won't even harm people in their thoughts. In Jainism, life is considered so sacred, animals are particularly beloved by them. They cover their nose and mouth with a cloth, so that while breathing, they don't kill insects.

The founder of Jainism, Mahavir, taught non-violence around the same time as the Buddha. He was so ascetic that he walked for thirty years, and ultimately fasted to death, in his quest to transcend the physical and merge with the divine. There are twenty-four Mahavirs, Masters in Jainism.

ISLAM

The Koran was a revelation from God to the prophet Mohammed. It is the essence of life for a Muslim. Religious edicts are explained in the Koran, and if you really follow it in the true sense, it's a complete life guide.

Mass conversions took place in India during centuries of invasions by Muslim conquerors. This was due to forced conversions, but also due to the caste system. Many Untouchables and lower caste people saw Islam, since there is no caste system, as a way out of a downtrodden situation.

In Islam, every person must pray five times a day and make a pilgrimage once in their life to Mecca, known as the Haj. The month of Ramadan is a time of fasting and purification observed each year for one month according to the lunar calendar.

In Islam, God is seen as so perfect, that He is never represented in an image. Therefore, the art of Islam is beautifully developed with great intricacy, yet usually has an imperfection put into the design, since anything made by man is seen to be imperfect.

SIKHISM

The youngest religion in India is Sikhism. It was founded by Guru Nanak about 500 years ago. He was a social reformer, he abolished the caste system and taught that women are equal. The teachings of Hindu, Islamic and Sikh masters are synthesized into the Sikh's holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib. God is seen as omnipotent and formless. In a Gurdwara, a Sikh temple, the holy book is in on a platform in the center, there is no image of God.

All Sikhs will fight when needed to prevent injustice. To protect life, the Sikhs carry swords. Sikhs never cut their hair, this and their turbans indicate that they are warriors, which is the Hindu caste they mostly came from.

ZOROASTRIANISM

A very ancient religion that came from Persia, Zoroastrianism, is known for worshipping fire as the symbol of God. It was founded by Zarathustra. They practice good thoughts, good deeds, and good words.

When Zoroastrians die, they put their bodies in structures, called towers of silence, so that they will be eaten by vultures, thereby nourishing life even in death. Today, Zoroastrians are becoming extinct, since they will not marry outside of their own faith.

CHRISTIANITY

Jesus of Nazareth was born over 2,000 years ago and lived a remarkable saintly life, and taught a new path that became a new religion. Even as a child, He showed great understanding, and as a young man, performed miracles. His teachings, recounted in the New Testament of the Bible, are the basis for modern Christianity.

Christians believe that God loves us so much, He sent His Son to earth in human form, as Jesus Christ, to redeem us. We are born with original sin. Christ died on the cross - to take on our sins. Through dedicating one's life to Christ and following the Ten Commandments, one can attain salvation upon death, going to heaven to be with the almighty Father.

JUDAISM

The Jewish people believe that God revealed a set of Commandments and laws, known as the Torah, to Moses on top of Mount Sinai. These edicts were to be followed by the chosen people - the children of Israel, who are the descendents of a dozen tribes. One of the oldest monotheistic faiths, Judaism is over 3,000 years old.

The sacred texts, the Torah, are invested with authority on legal and theological matters. The texts are interpreted by the scholars and Rabbis of Judaism. Although settled all over the world, many Jews live in Israel and in the United States. Some congregations are reformed, while others are orthodox.