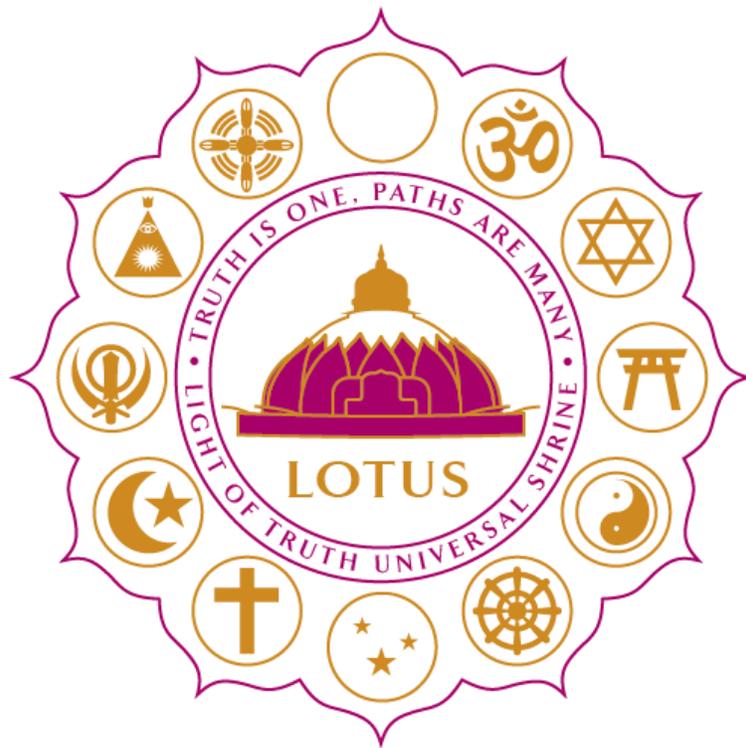


SUMMARIES OF WORLD FAITHS



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HINDUISM:

**“In the effulgent Lotus of the heart dwells Brahman, the Light of Lights.” –
*Upanishads***

Founded: Hinduism, the world’s oldest religion, predates recorded history.

Founder: Hinduism has no human founder.

Major Scriptures: The *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Agamas*, the *Smritis*, etc.

Adherents: Over 950 million worldwide, mostly in South and Southeast Asia about 14% of the world’s population.

Sects: Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaisnavism as well as non-sectarian forms.

Places of Worship: Hindu Temples and in the home

Synopsis: Hinduism is a vast, self-evolved and profound religion. The roots of Hinduism, known as *Sanatana Dharma*, or the eternal religion, can be traced to the *Rig Veda*, perhaps humanity’s earliest spiritual text. Ancient rishis (seers) “discovered” the four *Vedas* in deep meditation: no individual can be called the author of these ideas. The *Vedas* refer to the One Supreme Reality, Formless and Changeless: *Brahman*. *Vishnu* is the sustaining, preserving and protecting aspect of the One Reality and *Shiva* represents the aspect of dissolution. Each has a consort representing aspects of the sacred feminine. Saraswati or Vidya, the goddess of wisdom, music and learning, is the consort of Brahma. Lakshmi, the goddess of abundance, both spiritual and material wealth, success and prosperity is the consort of Vishnu. Parvati, also known as Kali or Durga is the consort of Shiva, helping to conquer ignorance through purification, awakening compassion, and truth. The simple praise and wonder of the *Vedas* flowered into the philosophy of Vedanta found in the scriptures called the *Upanishads*. These truths were expressed in the epic poems, the *Ramayana* and *Srimad Mahabharata*. The portion of the *Mahabharata* known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, is a symbolic dialogue between man and God: it beautifully describes the human condition and the path to salvation. After many objections and rationalizations, Arjuna, representing mankind,

surrenders to God in the form of Lord Krishna. By grace, Arjuna is then blessed with a vision of the Absolute.

Hinduism acknowledges one Supreme Reality (called by many Names) and teaches that all souls ultimately realize Truth. The Light of the Spirit, is *Atman* which is never born and never dies. *Atma Vidya* is the science of the self. There is no eternal hell nor damnation. Hinduism is a mystical religion, leading the devotee to personally experience the Truth within, finally reaching the pinnacle of consciousness, oneness with God. It accepts all genuine spiritual paths –from pure monism (“God alone exists”) to theistic dualism (“When shall I know His Grace?”). Hinduism teaches that the soul reincarnates until all karmas are resolved and God-Realization is attained. Human attachment to earthly things and physical forms creates karma and necessitates reincarnation. The goal is to become free of the cycles of rebirth (Moksha). The Hindu concept of karma, the law of action and reaction, is described in the following passage from the *Upanishads*: *“As is a person’s desire, so is his will; and as his will, so is his deed; and whatever deeds he does, that will he reap.”* The magnificent holy temples, the peaceful piety of the Hindu home, subtle metaphysics and the science of yoga all play their part.

Hindu Beliefs:

1. A one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and unmanifest Reality. One Life permeates the entire Universe and all Creation.
2. The Universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution.
3. All souls are evolving toward union with God and will ultimately find Moksha, spiritual knowledge and liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Not a single soul will be deprived of this destiny.
4. Karma, the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words and deeds.
5. The soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved.
6. Divine beings exist in unseen inner worlds. Temple worship, rituals, sacred chanting, and personal devotionals, create a communion with these devas and gods.

7. A spiritually awakened Master or Sat Guru is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, self-inquiry and meditation.
8. All life is sacred to be loved and revered in the practice of ahimsa or non-violence.
9. No one religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine spiritual paths are facets of God's Pure Love and Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

Golden Rule: *This is the sum of all duties: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.* Mahabharata, 5:1517

Path of Attainment: Hinduism does not have a central religious authority: each soul is free to find its own way, whether by devotion, self-inquiry, self-purification, meditation (yoga) or selfless service. Temple worship, scripture study and the Guru/disciple tradition guide spiritual progress. Sacred festivals, pilgrimage, sacred chanting, repetition of the divine name or mantra, and puja (worship in the temple or home) are dynamic practices. Love, non-violence, selfless service, good conduct and the law of dharma characterize the Hindu path. Many Hindus also follow the ancient teachings of Yoga. Yoga is the Sanskrit word for "yoke" or "union:" a successful yogi is in a state of union with the Divine. The primary text of Raja Yoga, the science of the mind, is the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, believed to be several thousand years' old. It defines yogic methods for people of active, introspective, intellectual, or devotional natures, as well as a system of physical postures and meditation practices to promote mental and physical health. These Yoga practices are based on a moral code called *Yama* (abstinence) and *Niyama* (observance). Through these practices, liberation can be obtained.

Goal: Moksha (Liberation), Oneness with God.

Major Holy Days and Festivals: Makar Sankranti (Honoring the Sun-God - January); Shivaratri (Honoring Lord Shiva - February/March); Sri Ramanavmi (Birthday of Lord Rama - March/April); Guru Purnima (Honoring Gurus - July/August); Janmashtami (Birth of Lord Krishna - August/September); Deepavali (Festival of Light - October-November); Ganesh Chaturthi (Birth of Lord Ganesh – August/September); Durga Puja or Navaratri (Honoring the Divine Mother, 9 Nights - September/October)

JUDAISM

“The Lord is my Light; whom shall I fear?” –Psalm 27

Founded: Judaism began with the covenant between God and *Avraham*, around 1900 BC in the Sinai Desert, and later the revelation to Moshe (Moses) at Mount Sinai. In addition to Moshe, there are the patriarchs: *Avraham*, *Yitzchak* & *Yaakov* (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and the matriarchs Sarah Rachel and Leah. Most important among them is the great holy *Eliyahu* (Elijah). There are also many great saints, sages and scholars most notably: The Holy *Baal-Shem-Tov* – founder of the Hasidic movement, philosophers – Baruch Spinoza, Rabbi *Moshe ben Maimon* (Maimonides), Kabbalists – *Shimon bar Yochai*, *Avraham Abulafia*, *Yitzchak Luria*, *Moses de Leon*, etc.

Founder: *Moshe* (Moses c.1393 to 1273 BCE) is considered the greatest prophet of Judaism.

Major Scriptures: The *Torah* (*Chamesh Chumshe Torah* or in simpler terms *Chumash* i.e. the five books of Moses); the *Talmud* (*Mishnah* and *Gemara*, Rabbinic teachings, traditions, discussions and commentaries); *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Splendor or radiance) *Sefer Yitzirah* (Book of Formation or Creation ascribed to Avraham. One of the most important texts after the Torah); central texts of the *Kabbalah*, mystical aspect of Judaism.

Adherents: About 14 million worldwide, the vast majority in the United States and Israel.

Sects: Hasidism (ultra-orthodox, originating in Eastern Europe in the late 18th century, consisting of many sub sects), Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionism, Renewal, Karaite, with other regional and ethnic divisions. The Ashkenazic branch of Judaism has origins in Central and Eastern Europe. The Sephardic branch has origins in Spain, Turkey, and the Middle East including Israel, Jordan and, Yemen: it has a different version of the Talmud and different liturgy, rituals and manners of celebrating the holidays. There are also very old communities in the Kerala state of India and Shanghai, China. Other communities of Jews are in Uganda (Abuyudaya) and Ethiopia (Falasha).

Places of Worship: Synagogues (containing a Holy Ark facing Jerusalem in which the scrolls of the Torah in Hebrew are kept; along with the *Ner Tamid* – Eternal Light, lamp which hangs from the ceiling in front of the Holy Ark.). The home is also an important place of worship.

Synopsis: Judaism is the oldest of the world's three great monotheistic religions and is the parent of both Christianity and Islam. The religion of the Jews is inseparable from its history. Judaism evolved thousands of years ago in the desert areas of the Middle East. This nomadic people settled in the land of Canaan, which they called *Yisrael* (Israel). How the people evolved, became enslaved, and finally were delivered by God into the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering is told in *Genesis* and *Exodus*. The Torah was revealed by God to Moses, the foremost of the Hebrew prophets. Moses is the law-giver, receiving the *Ten Commandments* by divine revelation on Mount Sinai. Much of the Torah traces the lineage of Abraham through Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and finally to Moses, and the Jewish people are considered the descendants of Abraham.

The Jewish people believe in one God, Jehovah or Yahweh, from whom all creation flows. Jehovah is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and eternal. Jews believe they are a chosen people by virtue of their covenant with Yahweh: God reveals himself to his people. Emphasis is placed on the sacredness of daily existence, family, worship in the synagogue, prayer and study of the Holy Scriptures.

The Shema is the central prayer and affirmation of the Jewish faith, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) Using the family unit as a base for religious worship, Judaism does not create a great division between the sacred and secular worlds; it asserts that any and all parts of life can, and should, be made holy. Each day, morning and evening, every devout Jew affirms his faith by repeating Moses' prayer: *"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."*

Judaic Beliefs:

1. One God and Creator who is transcendent and beyond the limitation of form, yet who cares for the world and its creatures.
2. The Prophets, of whom Moses was God's greatest, and the Commandments revealed to him by God on Mount Sinai are man's highest law.

3. Elijah is among the most holy and greatest of prophets his name being invoked at the end of every Sabbath and at the Passover Seder, is said to have ascended to heaven in a, "Chariot of Fire."
4. The *Torah* as God's word and scripture God's immutable law.
5. *Mashiach* (The Anointed One, The Messiah) will be a descendent of King David who will come to bring peace and gather the Jewish people altogether in one place and build the third Temple in Israel.
6. God should not be represented in any form (idolatry), nor should any object or being be worshipped other than the One God, *Yahweh*.
7. Man's spiritualization through adherence to the Law, justice, charity and honesty.
8. God has established a unique spiritual covenant with the Hebrew people to uphold for mankind the highest standards of monotheism and piety.
9. The duty of the family to make the home a House of God through devotions and ritual, prayers, sacred festivals and observation of the Sabbath.

Golden Rule: *What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah: all the rest is commentary.* –Rabbi Hillel, *Talmud, Shabbat 31a*

Path of Attainment: It is the highest morality, possible through obedience to the Torah, which pleases God. One must follow justice, charity, ethics and honesty, being true to the one true God, *Yahweh*.

Goal: The goal of Judaism centers around living a moral and ethical life, and in the strict obedience to the Torah, which can alleviate the plight of the individual and of society, bringing rewards to the future life when the Messiah will come to overthrow evil and reward the righteous in God's kingdom on the earth. The soul thereafter will enjoy God's presence and love.

Major Holy Days and Festivals: *Shabbat* (Sabbath – they have rest for worship, reading of Torah, and gathering of family); *Rosh Hashana* (New Year); *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement); *Chanukkah* (Festival of Lights); *Pesach* (Passover) (Deliverance from enslavement in Egypt); *Shavuot* (Torah received by Moshe); *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles harvest festival); *Tishah B'Av* (Remembrance of the Destruction of the Temple in AD 70 by the Romans); *Simchat Torah* (rejoicing in the Torah – commemorating the end of the cycle of reading of the Torah).

SHINTO

“The light of Divine Amaterasu shines forever.” –Kurozumi Munetada

Founded: Shinto began around 2,500-3,000 years ago.

Founder: Each of the 13 ancient sects has its own founder.

Major Scriptures: *Kokiji* (Records of the Ancients), *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan), and a later work, *Yengishiki* (Hymns and Prayers), are the primary works on Shinto rituals and practices, but are not regarded as revealed scripture.

Adherents: Estimated at 4 million, mostly in Japan; 86% are also Buddhists.

Sects: There are 13 ancient sects, all very similar, and a later tradition known as State Shinto, finding its highest expression in the worship of the Emperor and loyalty to the State and family. Since World War II, worship of the Emperor has ceased.

Places of Worship: Shrines, in the home, and in Nature.

Synopsis: Shinto, “the *Kami* Way,” is the indigenous faith of the Japanese people. Its name comes from the Chinese characters *Shin* and *Tao*, signifying the Way of the Spirits and is called *Kami-no-michi* in its native Japan. The essence of life energy in natural phenomena is deified and worshiped as *Kami*, the many gods or nature spirits. Deeply connected with Nature, a Shinto follower finds a healing and purifying power in mountains, streams, wind, and trees. There are over 100,000 Shinto Shrines in Japan. In the shrines no images are worshipped, rather it is believed that the *kami* themselves are present. Offerings of fresh foods, water, incense, etc. are brought daily to the altar. There is an inward belief in the sacredness of the whole of the universe and that all can be in tune with this sacredness. Shinto emphasizes truthfulness and purification through which one may remove the “dust” which conceals one’s inherently divine nature. In this manner, a Shinto follower receives the guidance and blessings of *kami*.

Shinto mythology describes the formation of the Japanese Islands as a result of the union of Izanagi, the male creator, and Izanami, the female creator. Their daughter, the sun goddess Amaterasu, is the central figure of many Japanese

shrines, including the Grand Shrine of Ise. Of the 100,000 Shinto shrines gracing the Japanese landscape, Ise is unique. This majestic shrine is dedicated to the highest expression of respect for the Imperial family and all that is best in the culture, history, and racial consciousness of the Japanese people. Like other Shinto shrines, Ise has a *torii* gate, which separates the mundane world from the purified atmosphere of the temple. Shinto coexists peacefully with Buddhism in Japan.

Purification is central to Shinto. The ceremony of bathing for purification is called *Misogi*. It is ideally practiced in a calm ocean facing the sun. This harmony with water, the life of Nature, removes the heavy, impure *kegare* vibrations. This invisible dross collects as a result of negative thoughts and emotions and must be removed by the Shintoist to realize his or her own *Kami* nature. The mirror also has an important role in the Shinto path. The goddess Amaterasu told humans to worship the mirror, which reflects their own image, as if they were worshipping Her presence. The mirror is the symbol of Amaterasu's spirit.

"The mirror hides nothing. It shines without a selfish mind. Everything good and bad, right and wrong, is reflected without fail. The mirror is the source of honesty because it has the virtue of responding to the shape of object. It points out the fairness and impartiality of the divine will." –Jinno Shotoki

Shinto Beliefs:

1. The "Way of the Gods" *Kami-no-Michi*, asserts nature's sacredness and uniquely reveals the supernatural.
2. There is not a single Supreme Being, but myriad gods, superior beings, among all the wonders of the universe which is not inanimate but filled everywhere with sentient life.
3. The scriptural authority of the great books known as the Records of Ancient Matters, Chronicles of Japan, Institutes of the Period of Yenji, and Collection of 10,000 Leaves.
4. The sanctity of the cleanliness and purity – of body and spirit – and that impurity is a religious transgression.
5. The moral and spiritual uprightness as the cornerstone of religious ethics and in the supreme value of loyalty, particularly to one's family and ancestors.

6. The supernatural reveals itself through all that is natural and beautiful: these are valued above philosophical or theological doctrine.
7. All that is, is divine Spirit. All are capable of deep affinity with the Divine.
8. The practical use of ceremony and ritual.
9. The worship of the deities that animate nature, including the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, Star God and Storm God.

Path of Attainment: Salvation is achieved in Shinto through observance of all tabus and the avoidance of persons and objects which might cause impurity or pollution. Prayers are made and offerings brought to the shrines of the gods and goddesses. A Shintoist has no Supreme God to obey, but needs only know how to adjust to *kami* in its various manifestations. A person's *kami* nature survives death, and naturally desires to be worthy of being remembered with approbation by one's descendents. Therefore, fulfillment of duty is an important aspect of Shinto.

Golden Rule: *Be charitable to all beings, love is the representative of God.*—Ko-ji-ki

Goal: The primary goal of Shinto is to achieve immortality among the ancestral beings, the *kami*. *Kami* is understood by the Shinto follower as a supernatural, holy power living in or connected to the world of the spirit. All living things possess a *kami* nature, with human beings possessing the most *kami*. Salvation is living in the spirit world with these divine beings, the *kami*.

Major Holy Days and Festivals: Matsuri- any occasion offering thanks and praise to a deity at a shrine. There are many seasonal festivals: snow festival, ice festival, cherry blossom festivals, rice harvest festival, etc. Oshogatsu is the New Year festival during which the Japanese visit Shinto shrines.

TAOISM

“Following the Light, the sage takes care of all.” –Lao Tzu

Founded: Taoism predates recorded history.

Founder: Taoism has no specific founder.

Scriptures: *I Ching* (Book of Changes); *Tao-te-Ching* (Book of Reason and Virtue).

Adherents: Estimated at 12-20 million, mostly in China and other parts of Asia, although over 100-200 million practice some Taoist-defined folk faith in China.

Sects: Taoism is a contemplative, mystical tradition, with many sects and interpretations.

Places of Worship: Shrines, in which offerings are made, including incense, food and drink.

Synopsis: The Tao, or Way, is discovered within by the spiritual seeker. Lao Tzu wrote, *“The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao.”* Confucius described Lao Tzu as a “dragon riding the winds and clouds.” Taoism is concerned with man’s spiritual level of being. In the *Tao-te-Ching* the awakened man is compared to bamboo: upright, simple and useful outside – and hollow inside. Effulgent emptiness is the spirit of Tao, but no words will capture its spontaneity, its eternal newness. Taoists are taught to see the Tao everywhere, in all beings and in all things. A uniquely Taoist concept is *wu-wei*, non-action, that is, not exceeding spontaneous action that accords with needs as they naturally arise; not indulging in calculated action; and not acting so as to exceed the very minimum required for effective results. By becoming still and listening to the inner promptings of the Tao, we can act effortlessly, efficiently, without involvement of the thought.

The Chinese concept of Tao means the unmanifest God from which all things spring. It is also the path to union with the divine. The constant change created by the interplay of the Yin and Yang, or the negative and positive forces of creation, form the central focus of Taoism. A Taoist seeks oneness with nature. By being in tune with change, the individual becomes a quiet spot in the storm of

existence. Changes flow through the Taoist as a ripple in water or wind through leaves. The best known Taoist master was Lao Tzu. His philosophy scented *Wu-Wei*, or non-action. *“Do nothing and everything is done.”* Rather than forcing the will on a situation, a Taoist practicing *Wu-Wei* lets actions come from the unconscious. Lao Tzu codified the ancient teachings of Taoism in the *Tao Te Ching*. In this slim volume of only 5,000 characters, Lao Tzu presents the paradoxes of life. The *Tao Te Ching* is predated by the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*. The *I Ching* presents an interconnected system of relationships affecting every aspect of life, showing the balance of Yin and Yang in each. It has been used throughout the ages to isolate the moment and to predict the future. The works of Confucius, the *I Ching*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and the works of Chuang Tzu (Zhuang Zhou) - "Inner Chapters" & "Outer Chapters" are the backbone of Chinese philosophy. The pure Taoism of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu is based upon reason, virtue, and following the way of nature. Devoid of dogma and ceremony, pure Taoism was practiced by mystic hermits and wandering monks. Its random nature was the balance of the orderliness of Confucianism, a highly-structured Chinese faith. The practical teachings of pure Taoism can be summarized in these lines from the *Tao Te Ching*: *“Reveal thy simple self. Embrace thy original nature. Check thy selfishness. Curtail thy desires.*

The best of people are like water; water benefits all things and does not compete with them. It dwells in the lowly places that all disdain—wherein it comes near the Tao.”

In addition to philosophical Taoism, there are religious sects of Taoism that focus on virtuous living and ritual, including chanting and the offering of incense, food, and drink to ancestors and Taoist deities. The offerings are made at Taoist shrines, homes of divine beings who bless and protect worshipers. Taoist ceremonies at the shrines are officiated by Taoist priests. In China the philosophy and religion of Taoism commonly exist together.

Taoist Beliefs:

1. The Eternal may be understood as the Tao or “Way,” which embraces: the moral and physical order of the universe; the path of virtue which Heaven itself follows; and the Absolute —yet so great is it that “The Tao that can be described is not the Eternal Tao.”
2. The unique greatness of the sage Lao Tzu and in his disciple Chuang Tzu.

3. The scriptural insights and final authority of the *Tao-te-Ching* and in the sacredness of Chuang Tzu's writing.
4. Man aligns himself with the Eternal when he observes humility, simplicity, gentle yielding, serenity and effortless action.
5. The goal and the path of life are essentially the same, and that the Tao can be known only to exalted beings who realize It themselves—reflections of the Beyond are of no avail.
6. The omniscient and impersonal Supreme is implacable, beyond concern for human woe, but that there exist lesser divinities, from the high gods who endure for eons to the nature spirits and demons.
7. All actions create their opposing forces, and the wise will seek inaction in action.
8. Humanity is among the Ten Thousand Things of manifestation, is finite and will pass; only Tao endures forever.
9. The oneness of all creation, in the spirituality of the material realms and in the unity of all peoples.

Golden Rule: *Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.* –Lao Tzu

Path of Attainment: One who follows the Tao follows the natural order of things, not seeking to improve upon nature or to legislate virtue to others. All things depend upon the Tao, all things return to it. Yet it lies hidden, transmitting its power and perfection to all things. The Taoist observes “we-wei” or non-doing, like water which without effort seeks and finds its proper level. Purification through stilling the appetites and the emotions, is accomplished in part through meditation, breath control, use of herbs, and other forms of inner discipline, generally under the guidance of a master. The foremost practice is goodness or naturalness, and detachment from the ten thousand things of the world. Religious Taoists make use of ceremony and virtuous living to attain the Tao.

Goal: Mystical intuition of the Tao, the Ultimate Reality, the natural way of all things, the nameless beginning of Heaven and Earth, and the Mother of all things. He who has realized the Tao, has arrived at pure consciousness and sees the inner truth of everything.

Major Holidays and Festivals: Lantern Festival, Tomb Sweeping Day, Dragon Boat Festival, Chinese New Year.

BUDDHISM

“The radiance of Buddha shines ceaselessly.” –Dhammapada

Founded: Buddhism began about 2,500 years ago in India.

Founder: Gautama Siddhartha or Buddha, “Enlightened One.” (between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE)

Major Scriptures: The *Tripitaka* (early Buddhist canon), *Taishō Tripiṭaka* (East Asian Buddhist canon), *Kangyur* (Tibetan Buddhist canon), *Tengyur* (commentaries and treatises), the *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification), the *Heart Sutra* (Perfection of Wisdom scripture), *Bardo Thodol* (Liberation Through Hearing In the Between), *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (The Way of the *Bodhisattva*), *Dhammapada* (collection of Buddha’s sayings)

Adherents: Approximately 500 million worldwide, mainly in South and East Asia.

Sects: *Theravada* (“School of Elders,” South/Southeast Asia); *Mahayana* (“Great Vehicle,” East Asia, including Japan’s *Zen* tradition), *Vajrayana* (“The Indestructible Way,” in Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia)

Places of Worship: Temples, monasteries and in the home.

Synopsis: The main goals are freedom from suffering, genuine happiness and helping others. The Buddha’s essential teachings are contained in the Four Noble Truths or (Four Facts):

1. The Truth of *Dukkha* (suffering): Life, things and experiences are not ultimately satisfying. Growing old, sickness and death bring pain (physical and mental). The essential nature of life is unsatisfactory because we habitually cling to things that are always changing.
2. The Causes of Pain are craving, aversion and delusion. Encountering what we dislike brings suffering, and clinging to what we like brings anxiety and fear of loss. The forces of desire and hatred lead to rebirth and perpetuate *Samsāra* (the cycle of life and death)
3. The way to stop this cycle of pain is to relinquish desire and detach from craving. The complete cessation of desires (*Nirvana*) will reveal unconditional

happiness and automatically end the cycle of pleasure and pain, the wheel of birth and rebirth.

4. The path that leads to *Nirvana* or liberation from suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path: Living, acting, speaking and thinking decently; cultivating discipline and correct understanding of reality; and practicing mindfulness and meditation.

The Buddha advocated a moderate way of life known as “the middle path.” He said, *“My doctrine makes no distinction between high and low, or between rich and poor. It is like the sky. It has room for all; and like the rain it washes all alike.”* The greatness of the Buddha’s teaching is demonstrated by his own life: a human being who attained enlightenment through his own effort, he embodies humanity perfected. What the Buddha attained is possible for all; the Buddha nature is inherent in everyone. *“Let the Dharma (teachings) and the discipline that I have taught you be your teacher. All individual things pass away. Strive on, untiringly.”* –Buddha

Buddhist Beliefs:

1. All beings have “Buddha Nature”: Our true nature is divine and eternal, and we all have the innate ability to Awaken.
2. Voidness (*Sunyata*): According to Buddhism a self, soul or thing does not ultimately exist independently from its causes and conditions. Everything is in a constant state of change: there is no inherent or fixed nature to any object or experience.
3. Karma: actions of body, speech or mind produce "seeds" in the mind that come to fruition either in this life or in a subsequent rebirth. Karma is the force of “cause and effect” that drives saṃsāra—the cycle of suffering and rebirth.
4. Rebirth: Rather than an unchanging self or eternal soul that reincarnates from life to life, rebirth is a continuous, dynamic process driven by karma, of dependent arising.
5. The Middle Path: living moderately and avoiding extremes of luxury and deprivation, also refers to avoiding the metaphysical extremes of permanence and nihilism
6. Buddha: A fully awakened being who has completely purified his mind of the three poisons of desire, aversion and ignorance. Siddhartha Gautama was not

the only Buddha. There have been many previous ones, and the next Buddha will be one named Maitreya

7. Refuge, or safe direction: the foundation of Buddhist practice; following a life direction that will protect one from true suffering and its causes.
8. The Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma (the teachings) and Sangha (the community). In our illness (unhappiness and suffering), a doctor (Buddha) diagnoses the cause of disease and prescribes the cure (Dharma), which is then administered by a nurse (Sangha).
9. Interconnectedness of humanity, represented by the *Bodhicitta* ideal: a mind focused so as to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Golden Rule: Treat not others in ways you yourself would find hurtful. –Buddha

Path of Attainment: The Dalai Lama has said: “From one viewpoint, Buddhism is a religion; from another it is a science of the mind. Buddhism can be a bridge between these two sides.” Buddhism takes its followers through progressive stages, termed “dhyana, samapatti and samadhi.” Dhyana is meditation which leads to moral and intellectual purification, and to detachment which leads to pure consciousness. The samapattis, or further dhyanas, lead to a state which is perfect solitude. This leads further to Samadhi, the attainment of supernatural consciousness and, finally, to Nirvana.

Goals: Nirvana, defined as the end of change, and literally meaning “to blow out” as one blows out a candle. The Theravada tradition describes the indescribable as “peace and tranquility,” while the Mahayana tradition views it as “emptiness and the unchanging essence of the Buddha and ultimate Reality.” It is synonymous with release from the bonds of desire, ego, suffering and rebirth.

Major Holy Days and Festivals: Vesak/Saga Dawa (celebrates Buddha’s Birth and Enlightenment); Birthdays of Boddhisattvas; Magha Puja Day (Four-fold Assembly Day); Asahla Puja (July or full moon day of 8th Lunar Month); Uposatha (Observance Day, Theravada); Kathina Ceremony (Robe Offering Day); Anapanasati Day (Mindfulness in Breathing); Ploughing Festival; Festival of the Tooth (Sri Lanka – Procession with Buddha’s Tooth); Ulambana (Ancestor Day) or Obon (Japan) – Reunion of Ancestors with the Living; Avalokitesvara or Kuan Yin’s (Goddess of Compassion) Birthday (March, Tibet and China); Chokor Duchon (Day of Buddha’s First Teaching), Monlam (New Year-first two weeks of the lunar calendar).

CHRISTIANITY

“I have come into the world as Light.” –Gospel of John, New Testament, Bible

Founded: Christianity began 2,000 years ago in Palestine.

Founder: Jesus of Nazareth (c. 2 BC to AD 30)

Major Scriptures: New Testament of the Bible

Adherents: Over 2 billion – 33% of the global population; largest of world religions. The U.S., Brazil and Mexico have the largest populations of Christians.

Sects: Christianity is divided into three main sects: Roman Catholic (1 billion), Eastern Orthodox (300 million) and Protestant (800 million). There have been hundreds of others in early, medieval and modern Christianity.

Places of Worship: Churches, Chapels, Cathedrals and other gathering places, formal and informal.

Synopsis: Jesus was a Jewish teacher and a Prophet. He was born in Bethlehem of Judea as the son of a carpenter in the town of Nazareth. He was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, the beginning of the baptism tradition in Christianity. Jesus’s ministry lasted approximately three years, during which he traveled throughout Palestine with his twelve disciples and many followers. He performed miracles, interpreted Scriptures and healed the sick. He associated with women and social classes considered “unclean,” often challenging traditional authority. He was crucified on the cross, under Roman law, as a criminal in Jerusalem during the Passover festival. Three days later, Jesus rose from the tomb, appeared to his followers, and ascended to heaven. His teachings and life were eventually recorded in the Gospels.

When asked what was the greatest the Commandments, Jesus replied, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and Prophets hang on these two*

commandments.” Jesus emphasized forgiveness, non-judgment, purity of heart and service to mankind. When an adulterous woman was brought to Jesus, Jewish authorities challenged him saying, “The Law of Moses commands us to stone such a woman.” Jesus replied, “*Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.*”

The early church was fraught with theological disputes: the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. produced the Nicene Creed, to unify Christian beliefs. It is based on the Apostles’ Creed which first appears in written form in the Fourth Century (circa 390 A.D.) but probably dates from as early as 180 A.D. as the baptismal affirmation of faith: “*I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.*”

The Great Schism began in the 11th century, eventually dividing the church into Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. In 1517, Martin Luther of Germany challenged the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, initiating the movements of Protestantism. Christianity, along with other faith traditions, has many different monastic orders, and educational institutions. Christian missionaries through the centuries helped spread churches and Christian missions worldwide.

Most Christians celebrate seven sacraments, based on a rite or ceremony, which convey “life” to the recipients. These include: Baptism (generally in infancy); Confirmation; Eucharist/Mass/Divine Liturgy/Holy Communion; Holy Orders (ordination); Reconciliation/Confession (forgiveness); Anointing of the Sick (known as “Extreme Unction” or “Last Rites” when celebrated near death); and Holy Marriage (which in some Protestant denominations is now celebrated for gay and lesbian relationships as well as heterosexual relationships.) Some Christian services follow set liturgies such as the Mass (i.e. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglicans), while others are less structured. Some are silent until moved by Spirit (i.e. Quakers).

Christian Beliefs:

1. There is only one God, omnipotent (all powerful), omnipresent (all present) and omniscient (all knowing).
2. God is Creator, eternal (outside of "time"), unchangeable and infinite.
3. Sin (in Greek, sin = missing the mark) separates humanity from God.
4. Jesus Christ is Savior, through whom believers may come to know forgiveness from sin and experience salvation, or a return to God. Through faith in Jesus, God's grace is realized. Salvation is a free gift from God through God's grace: it cannot be "earned."
5. Jesus Christ was born of Mary, a virgin, died on the cross, and was resurrected from the dead.
6. God is Three-in-One, the Holy Trinity of God who reveals the Divine Nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is "Love," "Relationship"
7. The soul is immortal, and accountable to God for all thoughts and action.
8. The Holy Bible is inspired by God or "God-breathed."
9. There will be a final judgment and God will create a new Heaven and a new Earth.

Golden Rule: *Love your neighbor as yourself.* –Jesus

Path of Attainment: Humanity's plight is caused by separation from God. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ, and following his teachings. In practice this includes prayer, worship, forgiveness, service to others, discernment of God's will, and in celebration of the sacraments, especially communion, celebrated at least weekly in most Christian places of worship.

Goal: The goal of Christianity is to love God with one's heart, soul and mind, and love one's neighbor as oneself. By doing this, the Christian will enjoy eternal life with God in heaven, a perfect existence in which God's glory and bliss are shared.

Major Holy Days and Festivals: Christmas (Birth of Jesus); Epiphany (Visit of Magi/Baptism of Jesus); Ash Wednesday (Beginning of Lent); Lent (Fasting, Recalling Christ's 40 Days' Fast in the Desert); Palm Sunday (Jesus Entry into Jerusalem, a Week Before Easter); Good Friday (Jesus's Death); Easter (Resurrection of Jesus); Pentecost (Descent of Holy Spirit on Disciples).

ISLAM

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth.” –Qur’an

Founded: Islam began 1,400 years ago in Arabia.

Founder: Prophet Mohammed (b. 570 Mecca – d. 632 A.D. Medina)

Major Scriptures: *Koran* or *Qur’an*; *Hadith* (sayings of Prophet Mohammed); *Sunnah* (accounts of Prophet Mohammed’s actions, his precedents and examples)

Adherents: Around 1.6 billion, 23% of global population. Located mainly in the Middle East and North Africa (20%); and the Asia-Pacific (60%); Europe 10% (Turkey, Russia); United States (1-2%).

Places of Worship: Mosques (Masjid); other gathering places (Musallah); and in the home.

Sects: There are two main divisions in Islam. The *Sunnis* are followers of the political successors of Prophet Mohammed. The *Shi’a* are followers of Prophet Mohammed’s family successors.

Synopsis: Islam, along with Judaism and Christianity is one of the three Abrahamic religions. Islam means “submission,” surrender to the Will of Allah. Those who submit are called Muslims. Islam is based upon five “pillars” or principle acts of faith to which Muslims adhere. These are:

1. Faith in Allah: There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His Prophet.
2. Praying five times daily, kneeling in the direction of Mecca, the holy city.
3. Giving of alms and charity to support the economically disadvantaged of the community.
4. Fasting: Throughout Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, the faithful fast from sunrise to sunset.
5. Pilgrimage: At least once in a lifetime, believers goes to the Holy City of Mecca.

Prophet Mohammed (b. 570 Mecca – d. 632 A.D. Medina) an orphan at age six, was raised by his uncle. He was always drawn to meditation, prayer, and fasting. While meditating in a cave near Mecca (age 40), he was blessed with a vision of the Angel Gabriel. The revelations he received over the next 23 years resulted in the holy book of Islam, the *Qur'an*. The message of “the one God” galvanized the entire Arab world. Prophet Mohammed’s wife, Khadijah, was considered his first follower. Prophet Mohammed had the first mosque of Islam built on the outskirts of Medina. Muslims follow an utterance of the name of Prophet Mohammed with the phrase, “*Peace and blessings be Upon Him.*”

The Hajj is a religious pilgrimage to Mecca performed once in a lifetime. One who has completed the *Hajj* is called a *Hajji*. During the *Hajj*, believers perform a series of rituals with thousands of others: walking seven times around the Ka’aba, running back and forth between the hills of Al-Safa and Al-Marwah, drinking from the Zamzam Well, performing a vigil on Mount Arafat, spending a night in the plain of Muzdalifa, and performing a symbolic stoning of the devil by throwing stones at three pillars. The pilgrims then shave their heads and celebrate the three-day global festival of Eid al-Adha. Today Islam is the world’s fastest growing religion.

The *Qur'an* covers all aspects of life, and the nature of God: His attributes, relation to humanity, and prophets. The influence that the *Qur'an* holds over the life of the practitioner is far-reaching.

In addition to the *Qur'an*, the other sacred books of Islam are the *Torah of Moses*, the *Psalms of David*, and the *Gospels of Jesus*. The mystical branch of Islam is known as Sufism. Called the religion of love, Sufism is based on the concept of the devotee as the lover and God as the Beloved. The Sufi mystic experiences cosmic vision by seeing the Beloved everywhere and in all objects. He or she seeks total unification with God, so that the lover and Beloved become one.

“One’s true wealth hereafter is the good one does in this world to his fellow man.”
- Prophet Mohammed

Islamic Beliefs:

1. Allah is the Supreme Creator and Sustainer, omniscient and transcendent. No form or idol can be worshipped in His Name.
2. Angels, Prophets and Messengers: Prophet Mohammed was the last and greatest of the messengers of God.

3. The Five Pillars of Faith.
4. The *Qur'an* as the Word of God, revealed through the Angel Gabriel to Prophet Mohammed.
5. Humans are the greatest creation of God, here for the purpose of worshipping and serving God. The sacredness of all human life, the taking of which is the greatest of sins.
6. Striving to live in a way that is pleasing to God, so that one may obtain Paradise. Reflecting peace and mercy in one's life, working for the good of society, avoiding sins (alcohol, usury, gambling).
7. The soul of man is immortal, and in the afterlife that follows the Day of Judgment, people will be held accountable for their actions according to their conduct and faith on earth.
8. Salvation is obtained through God's Grace, not man's efforts.
9. God is universally compassionate and individually merciful. His love for humanity and creation is manifest in daily life.

Golden Rule: *None of you truly believes, unless you wish for others what you wish for yourself.* –Prophet Mohammed

Path of Attainment: Total submission to Allah is the single path to salvation, and even that is no guarantee, for Allah may desire even a faithful soul to experience misery. The faithful Muslim surrenders all pride, the chief among sins, and follows explicitly the will of Allah as revealed in the *Qur'an*. This alone brings a full and meaningful life. He believes in the five doctrines and observes the five pillars. The virtues of truthfulness, temperance and humility before God are foremost for Islam, and the practices of fasting, pilgrimage, prayer and the charity to the Muslim community are most necessary to please Allah.

Goal: The primary goal of Islam is eternal life, both physical and spiritual, obtained by total submission to Allah.

Major Holy Days and Festivals: Ramadan (Month of Fasting); Eid Al-Fitr (End of Ramadan Fasting); Eid Al-Adha (Willingness of Abraham to Sacrifice his Son); First ten days of Islamic New Year; Ashura (Shi'a – Day of Mourning for Martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of Prophet Mohammed.)

SIKHISM

“God, being Truth, is the one Light of all.” –Granth Sahib

Founded: Sikhism began about 500 years ago in South Asia

Founder: Guru Nanak (b. 1469 Punjab, d. 1539, Kartarpur in South Asia)

Major Scriptures: The Adi Granth, which became the Guru Granth Sahib (Holy Book, a collection of scholarly writings, wisdom, poetic hymns, songs, verses and teachings, revered as the Guru)

Adherents: Estimated at 27 million, mostly in India (Punjab); 1 million in North America.

Places of Worship: Gurudwaras, Sikh Temples. Amritsar in Punjab, India, home of the Golden Temple, is the holiest city.

Sects: Besides the Khalsa, there are the Ram Raiyas in Uttar Pradesh and two groups that have living gurus – Mandharis and Nirankaris.

Synopsis: Guru Nanak was a religious innovator who had a visionary experience of the nature of God. He taught that spiritual growth was achieved through contemplation, meditation, and reflection on the divine presence in every creation. Humans can have direct access to God without rituals or priests and communities should be based on equality, fraternal love and virtue. Sikhism stresses the importance of devotion, intense faith in the Guru, the repetition of God’s Name as a means of salvation. Guru Nanak traveled for nearly 30 years through Asia and Arabia, teaching that God is Supreme, Universal and All-Powerful; Truthful, Formless, Fearless and without Hate; the Sole, Self-Existent, Incomprehensible and Everlasting Creator of all things; and the Eternal, Absolute Truth. Sikhism emphasizes the importance of selfless service, devotion, purification, and intense repetition of God’s name: *Sat Nam, Waheguru*. Sikh’s believe in earning a living through honest means and sharing the fruits of those labors with others. A Sikh believes that there is only one God and that all people are equal in His eyes. Sikhism has ten great Gurus who made important contributions to the Sikh faith. Guru Arjun, the fifth Guru, completed the Golden

Temple in Amritsar and began the *Guru Granth Sahib*, or sacred poems, and teachings of the four previous masters.

The last of the ten Gurus, Guru Gobind Singh, established the Khalsa Order, or "Brotherhood of the Pure Ones," using a baptism ceremony and five symbols, "the Five K's" The Five Ks are not just symbols, but articles of faith that collectively form the external identity and the Khalsa devotee's commitment to the *Sikh rehni* "Sikh way of life" (*kachera*- under shorts, *kirpan*- sword for bravery, *Kara* - an iron bracelet for morality, *kesh* - uncut hair and beard for renunciation, and *kangha* - a comb for cleanliness). Sikh men traditionally wear turbans, to cover their long hair, and as a sign of respect to God, and commitment to equality and justice. Sikh boys wear a top knot and cover their hair until their manhood ceremony.

Guru Gobind Singh finished the compilation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and declared that it was to be revered as the Guru from that point forward. These texts are recited daily by devout Sikhs and continually in the Golden Temple in three-hour shifts by Granthis; a complete reading of the text takes 48 hours. Sikhs observe the tradition of Langar, the fellowship meal, serving food to 100,000 daily in Amritsar, Punjab, India. Each Sikh is encouraged to find God in his or her own way, using the teachings of the Guru as a guide.

"Various are the manifestations of God and various His ways. Various are the guises He assumes, but He is ever One." –Guru Arjun

Sikh Beliefs:

1. There is One Universal God (Ek-Om-Kar). God is within and around us as the Sovereign One, the omnipotent, immortal and personal Creator, a Being beyond time, who is called Sat Nam for His Name is Truth.
2. Man grows spiritually by living truthfully, serving selflessly and by repetition of the Holy Name and Guru Nanak's Prayer, Japji.
3. The world is maya, a transitory illusion; only God is true. Salvation lies in understanding the Divine Truth and that man's surest path lies in faith, love, purity and devotion.
4. The scriptural and ethical authority of the Guru Grant Sahib as God's revelation.
5. To know God, the Guru is essential as the guide who, himself absorbed in love of the Real, is able to awaken the soul to its true, divine nature.

6. The line of 10 Sikh Gurus, associated with different qualities: Guru Nanak (humility); Guru Angad (obedience); Guru Amardas (equality); Guru Ram Das (service); Guru Arjan (self-sacrifice); Guru Har Gobind (justice); Guru Har Rai (mercy); Guru Har Krishan (purity); Guru Tegh Bahadur (tranquility); and Guru Gobind Singh (royal courage).
7. Adoption of the last name “Singh,” for men, meaning “Lion” and signifying courage. Women use the name “Kaur” after their surname, meaning goddess or princess.
8. Use of the five symbols of faith: 1. white dress with knee-length undergarment (purity); 2. sword (bravery); 3. steel bracelet (eternal reality); 4. uncut hair and beard (renunciation); and 5. comb (cleanliness).
9. Unity and equality of all humankind, selfless service, social justice, honesty.

Golden Rule: *I am a stranger to no one and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all.* –Guru Granth Sahib

Path of Attainment: To lead man to the goal of *moksha* (release into God’s love and union with God), Sikhism follows a path of japa and hymns. Through chanting of the Holy Names or Sat Nam the soul is cleansed of its impurity, the ego is conquered and the wandering mind is stilled, leading to superconscious stillness. From here one enters into the divine light and thus attains the state of divine bliss by God’s grace. Control of the ego is an essential step towards unity with God.

Goals: The aim of life is to be one with God, by following God’s will without qualification. At this stage of harmony God’s ends become your ends. Here “I” becomes part of “Thou” and thus there is no need for the protection of the concept of “I.” It is a stage of realization that being possessed by God is the ultimate harmony and thus there is no need for desires of possessions. This is a stage when man is not only in it, but of it.

Major Holy Days and Festivals: Maghi (January – Battle of Muktsar); Birth of Guru Gobind Singh the tenth Guru; Hoha Mohalla (March - mock battles); Vaisakhi (April - Birth of Khalsa Brotherhood); Martyrdom of Guru Arjan (June); Phalia Prakash Sri Guru Grant Sahib-Ji (September - Celebration of the Holy Book as Guru); Diwali (Release from Prison of Guru Har Gobind); Guru Nanak Birthday (November); Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (November) and many smaller festivals, including birthdays of the other Sikh Gurus.

NATIVE AFRICAN FAITHS

“God is the sun beaming light everywhere.” –Tribal African

Origins: Indigenous African faiths are traditionally handed down orally through elders and oral traditions. There is no other authority.

Major Scriptures: Oral traditions.

Adherents: Over 100 million in Sub-Saharan Africa (43 countries) and the African diaspora (i.e. Haiti)

Places of Worship: Sacred locations throughout Africa; Spirit Houses and Shrines; Gathering places and communal ceremonies.

Sects: Numerous variants by community and geography.

Synopsis: Most indigenous faiths of Africa, believe in a Supreme Creator God—at once mother and father of the universe. The Creator holds the web of relationship between man and the environment; the sacred is found everywhere. Practices, ceremonies and traditions vary by community, tradition, language and location. The emphasis in African spirituality is on close relationships with nature, the living, and the dead. These relationships are based upon love, respect, and reverence toward the ancestor spirits. Ancestors and secondary spirits serve as intermediaries between humans and God. There is no separation of spiritual life from other aspects of life. All things organic and inorganic are produced through various interactions of human beings and divine forces within the universe.

Ancestors, the guardians of the spirit, pass onto humans the energy of the Divine. This energy is made available to humans when they live in accordance with the laws of Nature. In this way, people can use this Divine energy to attract and heal those who have moved away from Nature’s laws. In African faiths, human beings are vital forces who operate in active, intimate rapport with the forces of Nature, influenced by them and influencing them. Since there is no distinction between daily life and spirituality, there are no specifically identifiable ancient teachers or

sacred texts. Dances and healing ceremonies preserve harmony in the community and keep evil away. Some use divination systems.

In traditional African life, spirituality is a matter of right living, the secrets of which have been orally passed on from generation to generation by the ancestors, high chiefs, and often royalty (who are believed to be descendants from God). The greater body of works that tell about African beliefs can be found in myths and legends transcribed by scholars. Myths emphasize human interactions and the unity between the living and the dead. The living beings are instructed to live harmonious lives through carefully guided traditional rituals and practices. If people are successful in their lives, they are given back to the spirit world as a reward for their conscientious living. In mythology, the dead reappear on earth through reincarnation as spirits or other beings. Premature death is sometimes attributed to a difficult spirit. Myths also explain African concepts of death, creation, evolution, and the relationship of humans to other living creatures and natural phenomena.

Libation in Africa is a ritual of heritage, a drink offering to honor and please the Creator, the lesser divinities, our sacred ancestors, humans present and not present, as well as the environment. The origins of libation are so old that the first records of the ritual can be found in the legends, myths, sacred literature and language of Kemet (ancient Egypt.) However, it is believed that this ritual existed even before then. Libation is found throughout the African world, on the continent as well as in the Americas, the Caribbean and other parts of the world where Africans dwell. The significance of this ritual transcends its distribution across the immense time/space correlation that is occupied by the African experience of life. Libation is an immensely important part of African cultural rituals and a marker of African identity. Its persistence across place and times, says much about the origin of all Africans, about their relation to each other and about cultural transmission in general.

“Father, O mighty force, that force which is in everything, come down between us, fill us, until we be like Thee, until we be like Thee.” –Susu from Guinea

Indigenous African Faiths - Beliefs:

1. A Creator God who holds the web of relationships.

2. Spirits and Ancestors who interact with human beings.
3. Sacredness of the Natural World.
4. The importance of the community and community harmony.
5. Rituals to maintain the normal and renew hope.
6. In daily life, no separation of the sacred and profane.
7. No heaven above or hell below, just a single cosmology that exists to nurture us.
8. Virtue often connected with carrying out obligations of the communal aspect of life.
9. *Ashe* the life-force that runs through all things, living and inanimate.
(*Ashe* is the power to make things happen. It is an affirmation which is used in greetings and prayer, as well as a concept of spiritual growth. *Ashe* pronounced (ah-SHAH.) It's like 'Amen' or "So it shall be." This is the Yoruba language of Nigeria.)

Golden Rule: "One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts." – Yoruba Proverb (Nigeria)

Paths to Attainment: Ceremonies, rituals and dances may be performed to elevate consciousness, and awaken spiritual energy in the body. Some may enter a trance-like state of connection with the divine.

Goals: To live harmoniously with the community, the Creator, the natural world, and the ancestors and spirits.

Major Holy Days and Festivals: Initiation Rites of Passage Ceremonies (birth, adulthood, marriage, death, burial); Celebration of natural cycles (i.e. harvest).

NATIVE AMERICAN FAITHS

“The Light of Wakan-Tanka is upon my people.” –Song of Kablaya

Origins: Indigenous and Native American faiths are handed down orally through Elders. In many nations, the teachers of the faith had to be trained storytellers who must evidence “total accuracy” in order to carry on the teachings.

Major Scriptures: The teachings of the nations, which had to be memorized in all exactness and were repeated verbatim by chosen elders (written in the heart, not through paper), included such works as the The Walum Olum, the Thanksgiving Address of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Law of Handsome Lake. The Cherokee had written texts in their own syllabary. They were the “Words That Came Before.” There were a variety of national myths and stories.

Adherents: About 60 million indigenous peoples live in North, Central and South America, with about 5.2 million in the United States.

Places of Worship: Natural and also specifically built sacred locations throughout the Americas, i.e Hopi Kivas, Ceremonial Mounds (Ohio, Tennessee, etc.), and the Big House of Iroquois, Mohawk and others.

Sects: Numerous variants by nation and tribal structures and histories.

Synopsis: Indigenous peoples in Canada are known as Aboriginal people, including First Nations, Inuit and Metis. In the U.S. they are known as Native Americans, American Indians, the Original People, the First People, the Grandfathers, the People. There are 567 federally recognized nations in the U.S. and many more not yet recognized. Diseases such as smallpox brought by European colonizers killed an estimated 90% of indigenous populations. There are thousands of indigenous nations in the Americas and countless faith and worship traditions. At least a thousand different indigenous languages are spoken in the Americas, and some have millions of speakers, including Quechua, Aymara, Guarani, Mayan languages and Nahuatl. Most cultures are matrilineal, giving highest respect to the mothers and grandmothers. Frequently, the clan mothers of nations selected the Chief. In general, indigenous worship takes place in the cathedral of Nature, frequently in silence. *“Seek lonely places and be still, listening, hearing the songs and cries of*

the winged ones, the sounds of the four-leggeds, and the cries of the insect people; feeling the breath and touch of the earth, of leaves, of bark; for all have messages for you from the Above One—let your prayers rise like smoke rises from our fires, freed from all selfish desires,” spoke Sees-Beyond-The-Lightning of the Sioux. The fruits of silence are thought to be self-control, true courage, endurance, patience, dignity and reverence.

Through group rituals such as the sweat lodge, sacred pipe ceremony, powerful chants, and dances, the Native American strives to purify the body, mind, heart, and soul in order to be an honorable and useful member of the nation.

Ceremonies within different faith traditions include the Earth Lodge, the Drum Dance, the Feather Ceremony, the Ghost Dances, the Sun Dance, Peyote Religion, the Longhouse/Big House tradition, and many others. Doing good deeds for one’s people is held in the highest honor. *“Let neither cold nor hunger, nor pain, nor the fear of them, neither the bristling teeth of danger, nor the very jaws of death itself, prevent you from doing a good deed.”* These words were spoken by an old chief to a scout hunting a buffalo in mid-winter for the relief of starving people. Tecumseh taught, *“Love your life, perfect your life, beautify all things in your life, seek to make your life long and of service to your people. Give thanks for your food and the joy of living. If you see no reason to give thanks, the fault lies in yourself.”*

Native Americans have an enlightened attitude about death. An honorable death, when in balance and harmony with oneself and the people, is the greatest gift to one’s family and descendants. In many nations, the tradition is to compose a “death song” to chant courageously at the time of death itself. *“When you die—sing your death song and die like a hero going home.”* –Tecumseh

Native American Beliefs:

1. Love, honor and respect for the Great Mystery and receive from It/Him/Her, individually, the guidance necessary for living a good life. Give thanks for the life within us and for all life. Live in a state of gratitude so as to be accountable to life and all its species.
2. Reciprocate for the gifts of nature, which often involves leaving offerings when accepting a gift from an animal or plant. Treat the Earth and all that dwell on it with respect. Everything is sacred – animals, plants, minerals – from the largest mountain to the smallest plant.

3. Stewardship of the Earth for coming generations so that the Seventh Generation would still honor and applaud an ancestor's action. Responsibility to both the ancestors and the children.
4. Emphasis on direct experience in visions, ceremonies and quests as revelations. Guidance is either by direct intervention or by the mentorship of elders (i.e. Clan Mothers, Medicine Men/Women) who have been selected by Spirit and by the nation's highest council to guide the nations.
5. Serve others. Dedicate a share of one's efforts to the greater good. Do what one knows is right. Take responsibility for one's actions. Always be truthful and honest.
6. We are all One. Show respect for fellow beings. Work together for the benefit of all mankind and give kindness and assistance wherever needed. Accept that all races and tribes of the world are children of the Creator, beautiful, different colored flowers of one meadow.
7. Respect for Elders, who keep the culture alive. Show courtesy and speak in a soft voice in the presence of Elders. Responsibility to both the elders and the children.
8. Look after the well-being of mind and body. Know what leads to wellness and what leads to destruction.
9. Hospitality. Receive strangers with a loving heart as members of the human family.

Golden Rule: *All things are our relatives; what we do to everything we do to ourselves. All is really one. –Black Elk*

Path to Attainment: From birth to death to revere the Creator and Mother Earth and serve others. Live like a crystal, clear and bright, sending only good, healing energies out into the world.

Goals: Live a life such that each action would still be honored by the Seventh Generation.

Major Holidays and Festivals: Ceremonies related to the natural cycles (Sun and Moon Dance, Green Corn ceremony, Thunder Dance, Planting Ceremony); Rites of Passage; Give-aways (Pot Latches); Pow Wows (celebration of the spirit of the people); Family/Clan gatherings.