

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SOME RELIGIONS AND SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

(in alphabetical order)

*This material was cobbled together from a wonderful website:
<http://www.religioustolerance.org/>*

*For a list of readings appropriate for Hospice spiritual support from various
spiritual traditions go to:
<http://www.hospicenet.org/html/watch.html>*

AGNOSTICISM:

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT WHETHER GOD EXISTS

Definition of Agnostic:

Agnosticism is a concept, not a religion. It is a belief related to the existence or non-existence of God.

An agnostic is a person who feels that God's existence can neither be proved nor disproved, on the basis of current evidence. Agnostics note that theologians and philosophers have tried to to prove, for millennia, either that God exists or that God does not exist. None have convincingly succeeded.

An agnostic usually holds the question of the existence of God open, pending the arrival of more evidence. They are willing to change their belief if some solid evidence or logical proof is found in the future. However, some have taken the position that there is no logical way in which the existence or the non-existence of a deity can be proven.

ATHEISM:

Belief in no God, and no belief in God

Atheism is not a religion in the sense that Christianity, Islam, and, Judaism are. Atheism is not generally perceived as offering a complete guideline for living as do most religions.

Atheism is confined to one factor: the existence or non-existence of a deity.

- Atheism can be the positive belief that *there is no deity*.
- Atheism can be the *absence of a belief* that there is a deity.

An Atheist will have a personal moral code. However, it is generally derived from secular considerations, and not from a "revealed" religious text.

BUDDHISM

...based on the teachings of **Siddhartha Gautama** Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world, being exceeded in numbers only by Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It was founded in Northern India by the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. He was born circa 563 BCE in Lumbini which is in modern-day Nepal. At the age of 29, he left his wife, children and political involvements in order to seek truth. It was an accepted practice at the time for some men to leave their family and lead the life of an ascetic. He studied Brahmanism, but ultimately rejected it. In 535 BCE, he attained enlightenment and assumed the title Buddha (*one who has awakened*)

Core beliefs of Buddhism:

Buddhism, like most of the great religions of the world, is divided into a number of different traditions. However, most traditions share a common set of fundamental beliefs.

One fundamental belief involves reincarnation: the concept that one must go through many cycles of birth, living, and death. After many such cycles, if a person releases their attachment to desire and the self, they can attain Nirvana - a state of liberation and freedom from suffering.

The Four Noble Truths:

The Buddha's *Four Noble Truths* explore human suffering. They may be described (somewhat simplistically) as:

1. *Dukkha*: The reality and universality of suffering. Suffering has many causes: loss, sickness, pain, failure, the impermanence of pleasure.
2. *Samudaya*: The cause of suffering is a desire to have and control things. It can take many forms: craving of sensual pleasures; the desire for fame; the desire to avoid unpleasant sensations, like fear, anger or jealousy.
3. *Nirodha*: Suffering ceases with the final liberation of Nirvana (a.k.a. Nibbana). The mind experiences complete freedom, liberation and non-attachment. It lets go of any desire or craving.
4. *Magga*: The eightfold path leads to the cessation of suffering.

The Five Precepts:

These are somewhat analogous to the second half of the Ten Commandments in Judaism and Christianity -- that part of the Decalogue which describes behaviors to avoid.

1. Do not kill
2. Do not steal

3. Do not lie
4. Do not be unchaste
5. Do not consume alcohol or other drugs

The Eightfold Path:

The Buddha's *Eightfold Path* consists of:

- **Panna: Wisdom:**
 - 1) *Samma ditthi* Right Understanding of the Four Noble Truths
 - 2) *Samma sankappa*: Right thinking; following the right path in life
- **Sila: Morality:**
 - 3) *Samma vaca*: Right speech: no lying, criticism, condemning, gossip, harsh language
 - 4) *Samma kammanta* Right conduct by following the Five Precepts
 - 5) *Samma ajiva*: Right livelihood; support yourself without harming others
- **Samadhi: Concentration:**
 - 6) *Samma vayama* Right Effort: promote good thoughts; conquer evil thoughts
 - 7) *Samma sati* Right Mindfulness: Become aware of your body, mind and feelings
 - 8) *Samma samadhi* Right Concentration: Meditate to achieve a higher state of consciousness

CHRISTIANITY

Christians follow the teachings of and about Yeshua of Nazareth, commonly referred to as Jesus Christ. (Jesus is the Greek form of Yeshua; Christ is Greek for "the Messiah" or the "anointed one.") Yeshua was a Jewish itinerant preacher who was born circa 4 to 7 BCE. He was executed by the Roman occupying authorities in Palestine, perhaps on Friday, 30-APR-7 CE (i.e. in the spring of the year 30). Most Christians regard him as the son of God. They further believe that he is God, the second person in the Trinity. (The Trinity consists of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three separate persons, all eternal, all omnipresent, who form a single, unified deity.) Most Christians believe that Jesus co-existed with God before the creation of the world, was born of a virgin, was resurrected three days after his death, and later ascended to Heaven.

The followers of Yeshua formed the *Jewish Christian* movement, centered in Jerusalem, after his death. They regarded themselves as a reform movement within Judaism; they continued to sacrifice at the temple, circumcise their male children, follow Jewish kosher food laws, etc. Saul of Tarsus, originally a persecutor of the Jewish Christians, reported having a vision of the risen Christ. Adopting the new name of Paul, he became the greatest theologian of the early Christian movement. His writings, along with those of the author(s) of the Gospel of John, provided much of the theological foundation for Christianity as we know it. Paul's ministry was directed to Gentiles -- non-Jews in the Mediterranean basin. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Army in 70 CE, the Jewish Christian movement was largely dissipated, leaving Pauline Christianity among the Gentiles as the dominant group.

The Roman Empire recognized Pauline Christianity as a valid religion in 313 CE. Later in that century, it became the official religion of the Empire. Church authority became concentrated among the five bishops or patriarchs located in Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Rome. With the expansion of Islam throughout the Middle East during the seventh century CE, power became concentrated in Constantinople and Rome. These two Christian centers gradually grew apart in belief, and practice. In 1054 CE, a split was formalized between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches; it remains in effect today.

The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century led to a split within the western church. The Protestant movement further fragmented into what is now thousands of individual denominations and groups of denominations.

A prime belief: life after death:

Christian beliefs about one's destination after death vary greatly:

- Many conservative Protestant Christians believe that people are born and remain sinful; they will end up being eternally punished in Hell unless they are "saved" by trusting Jesus as Lord and Savior.
 - Roman Catholics also believe that salvation comes from God. But they believe that it is channeled through church sacraments to sinful but repentant persons. Most people, at death, go to Purgatory, which is a type of temporary Hell; a few go directly to Heaven; others go permanently to Hell.
 - Religious liberals generally interpret hell symbolically, not as an actual place. They reject the concept of a loving God creating a place of eternal torment.
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Current status of Christianity:

About 33% of the world's population regard themselves as Christian. This percentage has been stable for decades. (The second most popular religion is Islam at about 20%. It is growing. If its present growth rate continues, it will to become the dominant religion of the world during in a few decades.) About 75% of American adults and a similar number of Canadians identify themselves as Christian

Christianity in North America is a severely divided faith, consisting of over 1,000 denominations, which are often categorized into conservative, mainline and liberal wings.

Specific beliefs

The Christian Church has held the following beliefs through its history. Conservative Christians follow these beliefs today. Liberal Christians often deviate from them:

- **Creation:** God created the universe and the first couple, Adam and Eve. Liberal Christians tend to interpret the beginnings of the Book of Genesis as mythical truth rather than a precise description of real events.
- **The Fall:** Adam and Eve were seduced by Satan into disobeying God's instructions and eating forbidden fruit. That act brought sin into the world, which has been inherited by all of humanity. Again, liberals generally regard this story as mythical and disagree with the concept of "original sin".
- **Ancient Israelites:** The ancient Israelites were God's chosen people, to whom he gave a complete set of laws to govern their behavior until the arrival of Jesus. Christians have various conflicting beliefs about the status of God's covenants with the Jewish people today.

■ **Salvation:** Almost all Christians agree that everyone has eternal life. However, Christianity had traditionally taught that the destiny of most people is to go to Hell for endless torture because of their sins, without any hope of mercy or an end to their suffering. Only that very small minority who have achieved salvation before death will live forever in heaven. Whether one has been saved is thus a topic of great importance - more important to a traditional Christian than any other factor in life.

■ **Salvation of Christians:** The Christian Church has taught that salvation involves the forgiveness by God of a person's sins. The person repents for her/his sins, trusts Jesus as Lord and Savior, and becomes reconciled with God. God makes the person into a "*new creation*." These traditional beliefs are held by most conservative Christians today. More liberal Christians place little emphasis on salvation; they often reject the concept of Hell as a physical location and interpret it metaphorically - perhaps as a state of mind, or as a place where one is separated from God. The idea of a loving God sending people to be eternally tortured is abhorrent to them.

Denominations differ over criteria by which a person is saved: some believe that faith alone is sufficient; others believe that good works are sufficient; some believe that both are necessary.

- **Salvation of non-Christians:** No consensus exists over the fate after death of three groups of people:
- people in non-Christian countries who have never heard the Christian message and therefore have never been able to accept or reject it.
 - adults who have heard the Gospel message but have rejected it for whatever reason.
 - infants, small children and developmentally delayed individuals who cannot understand the Gospel or make a rational decision to accept or reject it.
- **The Bible:** Conservative Christians generally believe that the original writings of the Bible, were inerrant (without error). Liberals tend to view the Bible as a collection of writings describing a gradual evolution of religious thought.
- **Jesus' Birth:** The Christian Church has traditionally taught that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception. Roman Catholics believe that she remained a virgin all her life. Most liberals regard this as a myth, based upon an ancient mistranslation of the Book of Isaiah..
- **Atonement:** This is the concept that, through Jesus' death, the relationship between God and Man (which had been damaged by Adam and Eve's sin) can now be restored through the process of salvation.
- **Resurrection:** This is the teaching that after Jesus' death and burial, he arose again on the third day.
- **Second coming:** Many Christians have expected Jesus' imminent return to earth ever since the 1st century CE. About one in four American adults expects him to return during their own lifetime. A substantial number expect the second coming during the year 2000. More details.
- **Incarnation:** Christians believe that God appeared on earth in human form as Jesus.

- **Justification:** an act of God in which any person who accepts that they have sinned and who believes in the atonement of Christ is forgiven of their sins and brought into a close relationship with God .
- **Regeneration of the spirit:** The belief that a new believer undergoes a spiritual rebirth.
- **Inspiration:** the belief that the authors of the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit so that their writings were free of error.
- **Deity:** God is a single deity who exists as a Trinity of three separate personalities: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Satan** is regarded by conservatives as a created being, who was once an angel but is now an all-evil tormentor of humanity. Liberals regard Satan as a symbol of evil.
- **Heaven and Hell:** Conservative Christians believe that these are locations which are places of reward and punishment. Liberal beliefs are varied.

Most conservative Christians also believe in the **Rapture**. This involves the resurrection of all saved Christians who have died in the past. Both they and currently living, saved Christians will rise towards Jesus Christ in the sky.

HINDUISM

The world's third largest religion

Hinduism differs from Christianity and other Western religions in that it does not have a single founder, a specific theological system, a single system of morality, or a central religious organization. It consists of "*thousands of different religious groups that have evolved in India since 1500 BCE.*" ¹

Hinduism has grown to become the world's third largest religion, after Christianity and Islam. It claims about 762 million followers - 13% of the world's population. It is the dominant religion in India, Nepal, and among the Tamils in Sri Lanka. According to the "*Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches,*" there are about 1.1 million Hindus in the U.S. ² The "*American Religious Identification Survey*" is believed to be more accurate. ³ They estimated smaller number: 766,000 Hindus in 2001. Still, this is a very significant increase from 227,000 in 1990. Statistics Canada estimates that there are about 157,015 Hindus in Canada. ⁴

Hinduism is generally regarded as the world's oldest organized religion.

Beliefs and practices:

Categorizing the religion of Hinduism is somewhat confusing:

- Hinduism has commonly been viewed in the west as a *polytheistic* religion - one which worships multiple deities: gods and goddesses.
- Some have viewed it as a *monotheistic* religion, because it recognizes only one supreme God: the panentheistic principle of **Brahman**, that all reality is a unity. The entire universe is seen as one divine entity who is simultaneously at one with the universe and who transcends it as well.
- Some view Hinduism as *Trinitarian* because Brahman is simultaneously visualized as a triad:
 - **Brahma** the Creator who is continuing to create new realities
 - **Vishnu**, (Krishna) the Preserver, who preserves these new creations. Whenever **dharma** (eternal order, righteousness, religion, law and duty) is threatened, Vishnu travels from heaven to earth in one of ten incarnations.
 - **Shiva**, the Destroyer, is at times compassionate, erotic and destructive.
- Strictly speaking, Hinduism is a *henotheistic* religion -- a religion which recognizes a single deity, but which recognizes other gods and goddesses as facets or manifestations or aspects of that supreme God.

Most urban Hindus follow one of two major divisions within Hinduism:

- Vaishnavism: which generally regards Vishnu as the ultimate deity
- Shivaism: which generally regards Shiva as the ultimate deity.

However, many rural Hindus worship their own village goddess or an earth goddess. She is believed to rule over fertility and disease -- and thus over life and death. The priesthood is less important in rural Hinduism: non-Brahmins and non-priests often carry out ritual and prayer there.

Hindus believe in the repetitious *Transmigration of the Soul*. This is the transfer of one's soul after death into another body. This produces a continuing cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth through their many lifetimes. It is called *samsara*. *Karma* is the accumulated sum of one's good and bad deeds. Karma determines how you will live your next life. Through pure acts, thoughts and devotion, one can be reborn at a higher level. Eventually, one can escape *samsara* and achieve enlightenment. Bad deeds can cause a person to be reborn as a lower level, or even as an animal. The unequal distribution of wealth, prestige, suffering are thus seen as natural consequences for one's previous acts, both in this life and in previous lives.

Hindus organize their lives around certain activities or "*purusharthas*." These are called the "*four aims of Hinduism*," or "*the doctrine of the fourfold end of life*." They are:

- The three goals of the "*pravritti*," those who are in the world, are:
 - *dharma*: righteousness in their religious life. This is the most important of the three.
 - *artha*: success in their economic life; material prosperity.
 - *kama*: gratification of the senses; pleasure; sensual, sexual, and mental enjoyment.
- The main goal for the "*nivritti*," those who renounce the world, is:
 - *moksa*: Liberation from "*samsara*," the This is considered the supreme end of mankind.

Meditation is often practiced, with Yoga being the most common. Other activities include daily devotions, public rituals, and *puja*, a ceremonial dinner for a God.

Hinduism has a deserved reputation of being highly tolerant of other religions. Hindus have a saying: "*Ekam Sataha Vipraha Bahudha Vadanti*," which may be translated: "*The truth is One, but different Sages call it by Different Names*"

HUMANISM

Humanist beliefs and practices:

A *Humanist Manifesto* was prepared in 1933, endorsed by 34 leading Humanists, and published in the 1933-MAY/JUN issue of *The New Humanist* (VI:3:1-5).⁵ It was updated as the Humanist Manifesto II in 1973.⁶ Some of the themes of the latter document are:

- They trace their roots to the rational philosophy first created in the West in ancient Greece. Many regard Socrates as the first and greatest of the Humanists.
- They value knowledge based on reason and hard evidence rather than on faith.
- Being secular Humanists, they reject the concept of a personal God, and regard humans as supreme. From this belief naturally follows:
 - "the preciousness and dignity of the individual person is a central humanist value."
 - a rejection of a created universe in favor of the theory of evolution and a universe that obeys natural laws
 - a rejection of divinely inspired ethical and moral codes in favor of codes derived by reason from the human condition
 - the belief that full responsibility for the future of the world, its political systems, its ecology, etc. rests with humans. There is no God in heaven to intervene and save us from a disaster
- Many Humanists believe that much historical progress has arisen from the conflict between organized religion and secular society in which the former beliefs and practices have been replaced with secular beliefs.
- They feel that religious groups' "promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful."
- They accept democracy and reject both theocracy and secular dictatorships as political systems that are dangerous to individual freedoms.
- They value freedom of inquiry, expression and action. They have a history of combating bigotry, hatred, discrimination, intolerance and censorship.
- They are energetic supporters of the separation of church and state.
- They tend to have very liberal beliefs about controversial ethical topics, like abortion, corporal punishment of children, death penalty, enforced prayer in schools, homosexuality, physician assisted suicide, etc.
- They believe that "moral values derive their source from human experience." Since most believe that an afterlife is non-existent, they regard life here on earth to be particularly precious. They are highly motivated to alleviating pain and misery around the world. Many are active in refugee, human rights, anti-death penalty, environmental groups, etc.
- Generally speaking, they do **not** believe in
 - a personal God, a Goddess or a combination of Goddesses and Gods.
 - supernatural beings such as angels, demons, Satan, Holy Spirit, etc.
 - heaven or hell or life after death.

- the separation of a person into body, soul and spirit.
 - survival of an individual in any form after death.
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Is Humanism a Religion?

The most widely used meaning of the word **religion** is probably the belief that a God or Gods exist who created the world, who is/are to be worshipped, and who is/are responsible for creating ethical and behavioral codes. In that context, Humanism is definitely not a religion, and would not be perceived as one by many of its followers. Humanists do not generally believe in a supreme deity or deities, demons, ghosts, angels, in a supernatural world, in heaven and hell, or in a divinely ordained ethical code for humans to follow. Most would regard God as a creation of mankind rather than the reverse.

Religious Humanism has been loosely defined as religion with matters of deity worship and traditional theological belief deleted. Replacing these factors is a belief in humanity as the highest known form of intelligent life, and a belief in the scientific method as the best way to determine truth.

Many **Secular Humanists** feel that the role of religion throughout history has been so profoundly negative, that the word "religion" should not be connected to their philosophy.

ISLAM

The second largest world religion...and growing.

Origin of Islam:

The name of this religion, Islam, is derived from the word "*salam*," which is often interpreted as meaning "peace." However "submission" would be a better translation. A Muslim is a follower of Islam. "*Muslim*" is an Arabic word that refers to a person who submits themselves to the will of God. Many Muslims feel that the phrases "*Islamic terrorist*" or "*Muslim terrorist*," which have been observed so often in the media, are oxymorons.

Most religious historians view Islam as having been founded in 622 CE by Muhammad the Prophet (peace be upon him). * He lived from about 570 to 632 CE). The religion started in Mecca, when the angel Jibreel (Gabriel) read the first revelation to Muhammad (pbuh). (Mohammed and Muhammed (pbuh) are alternate spellings for his name.) Islam is the youngest of the world's very large religions -- those with over 300 million members -- which include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

* Muslims traditionally acknowledge respect for Muhammad, Jesus and other prophets (peace be upon them) by adding this phrase or an abbreviation "(pbuh)" after their names.

However, many if not most of the followers of Islam believe that:

- Islam existed before Muhammad (pbuh) was born,
- The origins of Islam date back to the creation of the world, and
- Muhammad (pbuh) was the last of a series of Prophets.

Followers of Islam are called **Muslims**. "Allah" is an Arabic word which means "*the One True God*." An alternate spelling for "Muslim" that is occasionally used is "Moslim"; it is not recommended because it is often pronounced "mawzlem": which sounds like an Arabic word for "oppressor". Some Western writers in the past have referred to Islam as "Mohammedism"; this is deeply offensive to many Muslims, as its usage can lead some to the concept that Muhammad the Prophet (pbuh) was in some way divine.

About Muhammad (pbuh) :

Many unusual events have been recorded about Muhammad's (pbuh) birth and childhood:

- His mother said "*When he was born, there was a light that issued out of my pudendum and lit the places of Syria.*"
- Also at the time of his birth, "*...fourteen galleries of Kisra's palace cracked and rolled down, the Magians' sacred fire died down and some churches on Lake Sawa sank down and collapsed.*"

- His foster family had many experiences of amazingly good luck while he was in their care.
- As a young child, the angel Jibreel visited the boy, ripped his chest open, removed his heart, extracted a blood clot from it, and returned him to normalcy. 4

While still young, he was sent into the desert to be raised by a foster family. This was a common practice at the time. He was orphaned at the age of 6 and brought up by his uncle. As a child, he worked as a shepherd. He was taken on a caravan to Syria by his uncle at the age of 9 (or perhaps 12). Later, as a youth, he was employed as a camel driver on the trade routes between Syria and Arabia. Muhammad (pbuh) later managed caravans on behalf of merchants. He met people of different religious beliefs on his travels, and was able to observe and learn about Judaism, Christianity and the indigenous Pagan religions.

After marriage, he was able to spend more time in meditation. At the age of 40, (610 CE), he was visited in Mecca by the angel Gabriel. He developed the conviction that he had been ordained a Prophet and given the task of converting his countrymen from their pagan, polytheistic beliefs and what he regarded as moral decadence, idolatry, hedonism and materialism.

He met considerable opposition to his teachings. In 622 CE he moved north to Medina due to increasing persecution. The trek is known as the **hegira** . Here he was disappointed by the rejection of his message by the Jews. Through religious discussion, persuasion, military activity and political negotiation, Muhammad (pbuh) became the most powerful leader in Arabia, and Islam was firmly established throughout the area.

About Islam:

By 750 CE, Islam had expanded to China, India, along the Southern shore of the Mediterranean and into Spain. By 1550 they had reached Vienna. Wars resulted, expelling Muslims from Spain and Europe. Since their trading routes were mostly over land, they did not develop extensive sea trade (as for example the English and Spaniards). As a result, the old world occupation of North America was left to Christians.

Believers are currently concentrated from the West coast of Africa to the Philippines. In Africa, in particular, they are increasing in numbers, largely at the expense of Christianity.

Many do not look upon Islam as a new religion. They feel that it is in reality the faith taught by the ancient Prophets, Abraham, David, Moses and Jesus (Peace be upon them). Muhammad's (pbuh) role as the last of the Prophets was to formalize and

clarify the faith and to purify it by removing foreign ideas that had been added in error.

Important texts:

There are two main texts consulted by Muslims:

- the **Qur'an** (Recitation) are the words of God. Muslims believe that it was revealed to Muhammad by the archangel Jibril (Gabriel). This was originally in oral and written form; they were later assembled together into a single book, the Qur'an. Its name is often spelled "Koran" in English. This is not recommended, as some Muslims find it offensive.
- The **Hadith**, which are collections of the sayings of Muhammad (pbuh). They are regarded as the **Sunnah** (lived example) of Muhammad. The Quran gives legitimacy to the Hadith. It states: "*Nor does he say aught of his own desire. It is no less than inspiration sent down to him*" (53:3-4). However, the writings are not regarded as having the same status as the Holy Qur'an; the latter is considered to be God's word. The great Islamic scholar Yahya bin Sharaf Ul-Deen An-Nawawi compiled a collection of 43 sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It is now known as "*Al-Nawawi's Forty Hadiths*" 5

Islamic beliefs:

- Islam considers six fundamental beliefs to be the foundation of their faith:
 1. **A single, indivisible God.** (God, the creator, is just, omnipotent and merciful. "Allah" is often used to refer to God; it is the Arabic word for God.)
 2. **The angels.**
 3. **The divine scriptures**, which include the Torah, the Psalms, the rest of the Bible, (as they were originally revealed) and the Qur'an (which is composed of God's words, dictated by the Archangel Gabriel to Muhammad).
 4. **The Messengers of God**, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad -- the last prophet; (peace be upon them). Muhammad's message is considered the final, universal message for all of humanity.
 5. **The Day of Judgment** when people will be judged on the basis of their deeds while on earth, and will either attain reward of Heaven or punishment in Hell. They do not believe that Jesus or any other individual can atone for another person's sin. Hell is where unbelievers and sinners spend eternity. One translation of the Qur'an, 98:1-8, states: "*The unbelievers among the People of the Book and the pagans shall burn for ever in the fire of Hell. They are the vilest of all creatures.*" ("People of the Book" refers to Christians, Jews and Muslims). Paradise is a place of physical and spiritual pleasure where the sinless go after death
 6. **The supremacy of God's will.**

■ **Other beliefs include:**

- God did not have a son.
- Jesus (pbuh) is a prophet, born of the Virgin Mary. They regard the Christian concept of the deity of Jesus (pbuh) to be blasphemous; it is seen as a form of polytheism.
- Jesus (pbuh) was not executed on the cross. He escaped crucifixion and was taken up into Paradise.
- The existence of Satan who drives people to sin.
- Muslims who sincerely repent and submit to God return to a state of sinlessness.
- All people are considered children of Adam. Islam officially rejects racism.
- All children are born on Al-Fitra (a pure, natural state of submission to Islam). His parents sometimes make him Christian, Jewish, etc.
- When a child reaches puberty an account of their deeds is opened in Paradise. When the person dies, their eventual destination (Paradise or Hell) depends on the balance of their good deeds (helping others, testifying to the truth of God, leading a virtuous life) and their bad deeds.
- Alcohol, other drugs, eating of pork, etc. should be avoided.
- Gambling should be avoided.

JUDAISM

The term "G-d" is used in this essay to respect the Jewish prohibition against spelling the name or title of the deity in full.

Circa 2000 BCE, the G-d of the ancient Israelites established a divine covenant with Abraham, making him the patriarch of many nations. The term **Abramic Religions** is derived from his name. These are the four religions which trace their roots back to Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Baha'i World Faith.

Traditional Jewish Beliefs

They include:

- G-d is the creator of all that exists; he is one, incorporeal (without a body), and he alone is to be worshipped as absolute ruler of the universe.
- The first five books of the Hebrew Bible were revealed to Moses by G-d. It will not be changed or augmented in the future.
- G-d has communicated to the Jewish people through prophets.
- G-d monitors the activities of humans; he rewards individuals for good deeds and punishes evil
- Although Christians base much of their faith on the same Hebrew Scriptures as Jews, there are major differences in belief:
 - Jews generally consider actions and behavior to be of primary importance; beliefs come out of actions. This conflicts with conservative Christians for whom belief is of primary importance and actions tend to be secondary.
 - Jewish belief does not accept the Christian concept of original sin (the belief that all people have inherited Adam and Eve's sin when they disobeyed G-d's instructions in the Garden of Eden).
 - Judaism affirms the inherent goodness of the world and its people as creations of G-d.
 - Believers are able to sanctify their lives and draw closer to G-d by performing fulfilling **mitzvot** (divine commandments).
 - No savior is needed or is available as an intermediary.
 - Beliefs about Jesus vary considerably. Some view him as a great moral teacher. Others see him as a false prophet or as an idol of Christianity. Some sects of Judaism will not even say his name due to the prohibition against saying an idol's name.
- The Jews are often referred to as G-d's chosen people. This does not mean that they are in any way to be considered superior to other groups. Biblical verses such as Exodus 19:5 simply imply that G-d has selected Israel to receive and study the Torah, to worship G-d only, to rest on the Sabbath, and to celebrate the festivals. Jews were not chosen to be better than others; they were simply selected to receive more difficult responsibilities, and more onerous punishment if they fail.

- The 613 commandments found in Leviticus and other books regulate all aspects of Jewish life
- The Ten commandments, as delineated in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21, form a brief synopsis of the Law
- The Messiah (anointed one of G-d) will arrive in the future and gather Jews once more into the land of Israel. There will be a general resurrection of the dead at that time. The Jerusalem Temple, destroyed in 70 CE, will be rebuilt.
- Jewish belief is that a fetus gains full personhood when it is half-emerged from its mother's body.
- Boys reach the status of *Bar Mitzvah* on their 13th birthday; girls reach *Bat Mitzvah* on their 12th birthday. This means that they are recognized as adults and are personally responsible to follow the Jewish commandments and laws; they are allowed to lead a religious service; they are counted in a "minyan" (a quota of men necessary to perform certain parts of religious services); they can sign contracts; they can testify in religious courts; theoretically, they can marry, although the Talmud recommends 18 to 24 as the proper age for marriage.

The more liberal movements within Judaism differ from some of the above beliefs concerning the source of the Torah, the concept of direct reward and punishment according to one's behavior, etc.

NATIVE AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY

Native Religious Development:

Because of the wide range of habitats in North America, different native religions evolved to match the needs and lifestyles of the individual tribe.

Religious traditions of aboriginal peoples around the world tend to be heavily influenced by their methods of acquiring food, whether by hunting wild animals or by agriculture. Native American spirituality is no exception. Their rituals and belief show a blending of interest in promoting and preserving their hunting and horticulture.

The arrival of Europeans marked a major change in Native society. Tens of millions died due to sickness, and programs of slavery and extermination.² Europeans and their missionaries looked upon Native Spirituality as worthless superstition inspired by the Christian devil, Satan. Many of the survivors were forcibly converted to Christianity. The US and Canadian governments instituted policies to force Natives onto reservations and to encourage them to become assimilated into the majority culture.³ During the middle decades of the 20th century, whole generations of children were kidnapped, forcibly confined in residential schools, and abused physically, sexually and emotionally. In Canada, these schools were operated on behalf of the Federal Government by the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United and Presbyterian churches. Both the government and these religious institutions have been hit by a multi-billion dollar class-action lawsuit. Claims against the Anglican Church are much greater than the Church's current assets. They may be forced into bankruptcy by legal costs.

Native spirituality was suppressed by the U.S. and Canadian governments. Spiritual leaders ran the risk of jail sentences of up to 30 years for simply practicing their rituals. This came to an end in the U.S. in 1978 when the Freedom of Religion Act was passed.

Some suicidologists believe that the extremely high suicide rate among Natives is due to the suppression of their religion and culture by the Federal Governments. This suppression is still seen in the prison administrations; Canadian prisons have only recently allowed Native sweat lodge ceremonies; most American prisons routinely deny permission.

Natives today follow many spiritual traditions:

- Many Native families today have been devout Christians for generations.
- Others, particularly in the Southwest have retained their aboriginal traditions more or less intact.
- Most follow a personal faith that combines traditional and Christian elements.

- **Pan Indianism** is a recent and growing movement which encourages a return to traditional beliefs, and seeks to create a common Native religion.
 - The **Native American Church** is a continuation of the ancient **Peyote Religion** which had used a cactus with psychedelic properties called peyote for about 10,000 years. Incorporated in 1918, its original aim was to promote Christian beliefs and values, and to use the peyote sacrament. Although use of peyote is restricted to religious ritual which is protected by the US Constitution, and it is not harmful or habit forming, and has a multi-millennia tradition, there has been considerable opposition from Christian groups, from governments, and from within some tribes.
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The Inuit

The traditional **Inuit** (Eskimo) culture is similar to those found in other circumpolar regions: Northern Russia and the Northern Scandinavian countries. Life has been precarious; there are the double challenges of the cold, and the continual threat of starvation. (The popular name for the Inuit, "Eskimo", is not used by the Inuit.)

Their religious belief is grounded in the belief that **anua** (souls) exist in all people and animals. Individuals, families and the tribe must follow a complex system of taboos to assure that animals will continue to make themselves available to the hunters. Many rituals and ceremonies are performed before and after hunting expeditions to assure hunting success.

An underwater Goddess **Sedna** or **Takanaluk** is in charge of the sea mammals. She is part human and part fish. She observes how closely the tribe obeys the taboos and releases her animals to the hunters accordingly. There is an corresponding array of deities who release land mammals; these are **Keepers** or **Masters**, one for each species.

The **Angakut** or Shaman is the spiritual leader of each tribe. He is able to interpret the causes of sickness or lack of hunting success; he can determine the individual or family responsible and isolate the broken taboo. In a manner similar to Shamans in many other cultures, he enters a trance with the aid of drum beating and chanting. This allows his soul to leave his body and traverse great distances to determine the causes of sickness and other community problems.

Eastern Subarctic, Eastern Woodlands, Plains and Southwest Cultures

Native religions in these areas share some similarities, and differ significantly from Inuit culture described above. Tribes also differ greatly from each other. Spiritual elements found in some (but not all) non-Inuit native religions are:

- **Deity:** A common concept is that of a dual divinity:
 - a Creator who is responsible for the creation of the world and is recognized in religious ritual and prayers
 - a mythical individual, a hero or trickster, who teaches culture, proper behavior and provides sustenance to the tribe.

There are also spirits which control the weather, spirits which interact with humans, and others who inhabit the underworld. Simultaneously the Creator and the spirits may be perceived as a single spiritual force, as in the unity called **Wakan-Tanka** by the Lakota and Dakota.

- **Creation:** Individual tribes have differing stories of Creation. One set of themes found in some tribes describes that in the beginning, the world was populated by many people. Most were subsequently transformed into animals. Natives thus feel a close bond with animals because of their shared human ancestry. Dogs are excluded from this relationship. This bond is shown in the frequent rituals in which animal behavior is simulated. Each species has its master; for example, the deer have a master deer who is larger than all the others. The master of humans is the Creator.
- **Emergence of the Tribe:** This is a concept found extensively in the Southwest. The universe is believed to consist of many dark, underground layers through which the humans had to climb. They emerged into the present world through a small hole in the ground - the world's navel. Other tribes believe that their ancestors have been present in North America as far back as there were humans.
- **Sacred Texts:** Many tribes have complex forms of writing. Other tribes have preserved their spiritual beliefs as an oral tradition.
- **Afterlife:** In general, Native religions have no precise belief about life after death. Some believe in reincarnation, with a person being reborn either as a human or animal after death. Others believe that humans return as ghosts, or that people go to an other world. Others believe that nothing definitely can be known about one's fate after this life. Combinations of belief are common.
- **Cosmology:** Again, many tribes have unique concepts of the world and its place in the universe. One theme found in some tribes understands the universe as being composed of multiple layers. The natural world is a middle segment. These layers are thought to be linked by the World Tree, which has its roots in the underground, has a trunk passing through the natural world, and has its top in the sky world.
- **Shamans:** Although the term "Shaman" has its origins in Siberia, it is often used by anthropologists throughout the world to refer to Aboriginal healers. Spirits may be encouraged to occupy the Shaman's body during public lodge ceremonies. Drum beating and chanting aid this process. The spirits are then asked to depart and perform the needed acts. Other times, Shamans enter into a trance and traverse the underworld or go great distances in this world to seek lost possessions or healing.
- **Vision Quest:** Young boys before or at puberty are encouraged to enter into a period of fasting, meditation and physical challenge. He separates himself from the tribe and go to a wilderness area. The goal is to receive a vision that will guide his development for the rest of his life. They also seek to acquire a guardian spirit who

will be close and supportive for their lifetime. Girls are not usually eligible for such a quest.

- **Renewal Celebrations:** The Sun Dance amongst the Plains Natives is perceived as a replay of the original creation. Its name is a mistranslation of the Lakota *sun gazing dance*. Other tribes use different names. It fulfilled many religious purposes: to give thanks to the Creator, to pray for the renewal of the people and earth, to promote health, etc. It also gave an opportunity for people to socialize and renew friendships with other groups. A sweat lodge purifies the participants and readies them for lengthy fasting and dancing. It was successfully suppressed in most tribes by the Governments of the US and Canada. However, it survived elsewhere and is now being increasingly celebrated.
- **Sweat Lodge:** This is structure which generates hot moist air, similar to a Finnish sauna. It is used for rituals of purification, for spiritual renewal and of healing, for education of the youth, etc. A sweat lodge may be a small structure made of a frame of saplings, covered with skins, canvas or blanket. A depression is dug in the center into which hot rocks are positioned. Water is thrown on the rocks to create steam. A small flap opening is used to regulate the temperature. As many as a dozen people can be accommodated in some lodges.
- **Hunting ceremonies:** these involve the ritual treatment of a bear or other animal after its killing during a successful hunt. The goal is to appease its spirit and convince other animals to be willing to be killed in the future.
- **Prophets:** The Abrahamic Religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) trace their development through a series of patriarchs and prophets. Native religions do not have as many corresponding revered persons in their background. Some Native prophets include Handsome Lake in the Iroquois Confederacy, Sweet Medicine of the Cheyenne, and White Buffalo Woman of the Lakota & Dakota tribes.
- **Traditional housing:** There were many variations across North America: conical wigwams or tipis, long houses, and cliff dwellings. The shape of the structure often represents a model of the cosmos.

NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY

The **New Age Movement** is in a class by itself. Unlike most formal religions, it has no holy text, central organization, membership, formal clergy, geographic center, dogma, creed, etc. They often use mutually exclusive definitions for some of their terms. The New Age is in fact a free-flowing spiritual movement; a network of believers and practitioners who share somewhat similar beliefs and practices, which they add on to whichever formal religion that they follow. Their book publishers take the place of a central organization; seminars, conventions, books and informal groups replace of sermons and religious services.

Quoting John Naisbitt:

"In turbulent times, in times of great change, people head for the two extremes: fundamentalism and personal, spiritual experience...With no membership lists or even a coherent philosophy or dogma, it is difficult to define or measure the unorganized New Age movement. But in every major U.S. and European city, thousands who seek insight and personal growth cluster around a metaphysical bookstore, a spiritual teacher, or an education center." 1

The New Age is definitely a heterogeneous movement of individuals; most graft some new age beliefs onto their regular religious affiliation

New Age beliefs:

A number of fundamental beliefs are held by many New Age followers; individuals are encouraged to "shop" for the beliefs and practices that they feel most comfortable with:

- **Monism:** All that exists is derived from a single source of divine energy.
- **Pantheism:** All that exists is God; God is all that exists. This leads naturally to the concept of the divinity of the individual, that we are all Gods. They do not seek God as revealed in a sacred text or as exists in a remote heaven; they seek God within the self and throughout the entire universe.
- **Panentheism:** God is all that exists. God is at once the entire universe, and transcends the universe as well.
- **Reincarnation:** After death, we are reborn and live another life as a human. This cycle repeats itself many times. This belief is similar to the concept of transmigration of the soul in Hinduism.
- **Karma:** The good and bad deeds that we do adds and subtracts from our accumulated record, our **karma**. At the end of our life, we are rewarded or punished according to our karma by being reincarnated into either a painful or good new life. This belief is linked to that of reincarnation and is also derived from Hinduism

- An **Aura** is believed to be an energy field radiated by the body. Invisible to most people, it can be detected by some as a shimmering, multi-colored field surrounding the body. Those skilled in detecting and interpreting auras can diagnose an individual's state of mind, and their spiritual and physical health.
- **Personal Transformation** A profoundly intense mystical experience will lead to the acceptance and use of New Age beliefs and practices. Guided imagery, hypnosis, meditation, and (sometimes) the use of hallucinogenic drugs are useful to bring about and enhance this transformation. Believers hope to develop new potentials within themselves: the ability to heal oneself and others, psychic powers, a new understanding of the workings of the universe, etc. Later, when sufficient numbers of people have achieved these powers, a major spiritual, physical, psychological and cultural planet-wide transformation is expected.
- **Ecological Responsibility:** A belief in the importance of uniting to preserve the health of the earth, which is often looked upon as **Gaia**, (Mother Earth) a living entity.
- **Universal Religion:** Since all is God, then only one reality exists, and all religions are simply different paths to that ultimate reality. The universal religion can be visualized as a mountain, with many **sadhanas** (spiritual paths) to the summit. Some are hard; others easy. There is no one correct path. All paths eventually reach the top. They anticipate that a new universal religion which contains elements of all current faiths will evolve and become generally accepted worldwide.
- **New World Order** As the **Age of Aquarius** unfolds, a **New Age** will develop. This will be a utopia in which there is world government, and end to wars, disease, hunger, pollution, and poverty. Gender, racial, religious and other forms of discrimination will cease. People's allegiance to their tribe or nation will be replaced by a concern for the entire world and its people.

New Age practices:

Many practices are found among New Agers. A typical practitioner is active in only a few areas:

- **Channeling** A method similar to that used by Spiritists in which a spirit of a long dead individual is conjured up. However, while Spiritists generally believe that one's soul remains relatively unchanged after death, most channelers believe that the soul evolves to higher planes of existence. Channelers usually try to make contact with a single, spiritually evolved being. That being's consciousness is channeled through the medium and relays guidance and information to the group, through the use of the medium's voice. Channeling has existed since the 1850's and many groups consider themselves independent of the New Age movement. Perhaps the most famous channeling event is the popular *A Course in Miracles*. It was channeled through a Columbia University psychologist, Dr. Helen Schucman, (1909-1981), over an 8 year period. She was an Atheist, and in no way regarded herself as a New Age believer. However, she took great care in recording accurately the words that she received.

- **Crystals** Crystals are materials which has its molecules arranged in a specific, highly ordered internal pattern. This pattern is reflected in the crystal's external structure which typically has symmetrical planar surfaces. Many common substances, from salt to sugar, from diamonds to quartz form crystals. They can be shaped so that they will vibrate at a specific frequency and are widely used in radio communications and computing devices. New Agers believe that crystals posses healing energy.
- **Meditating** A process of blanking out the mind and releasing oneself from conscious thinking. This is often aided by repetitive chanting of a mantra, or focusing on an object.
- **New Age Music** A gentle, melodic, inspirational music form involving the human voice, harp, lute, flute, etc. It is used as an aid in healing, massage therapy and general relaxation.
- **Divination** The use of various techniques to foretell the future, including I Ching, Pendulum movements, Runes, Scrying, Tarot Cards.
- **Astrology** The belief that the orientation of the planets at the time of one's birth, and the location of that birth predicts the individual's future and personality. Belief in astrology is common amongst New Agers, but definitely not limited to them.
- **Holistic Health** This is a collection of healing techniques which have diverged from the traditional medical model. It attempts to cure disorders in mind, body and spirit and to promote wholeness and balance in the individual. Examples are acupuncture, crystal healing, homeopathy, iridology, massage, various meditation methods, polarity therapy, psychic healing, therapeutic touch, reflexology, etc.
- **Human Potential Movement** (a.k.a. Emotional Growth Movement) This is a collection of therapeutic methods involving both individualized and group working, using both mental and physical techniques. The goal is to help individuals to advance spiritually. Examples are Esalen Growth Center programs, EST, Gestalt Therapy, Primal Scream Therapy, Transactional Analysis, Transcendental Meditation and Yoga.

The Canadian Census (1991) recorded only 1,200 people (0.005% of the total Canadian population) who identify their religion as being New Age. However, this in no way indicates the influence of new age ideas in the country. Many people identify with Christianity and other religions, but incorporate many new age concepts into their faith.

NEOPAGAN – PAGAN TRADITIONS

Just as the term "*Eastern religions*" refers to Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, etc., the terms "*Neo-Pagan*" "*Neopagan*," and "*Pagan*" refer to a collection of separate religions that share a few common themes.

A Neopagan religion is a modern faith which has been recently reconstructed from beliefs, deities, symbols, practices and other elements of an ancient religion. For example, the Druidic religion is based on the faith and practices of the ancient Celtic professional class; followers of Asatru adhere to the ancient, pre-Christian Norse religion; Wiccans also trace their roots back to the pre-Celtic era in Europe. Other Neo-pagans follow Roman, Greek, Egyptian or another ancient tradition.

Many Wiccans and other Neopagans refer to themselves simply as "*Pagans*." Unfortunately, the word has many different meanings -- some quite negative. The term "*Neopagan*" is less ambiguous.

Many people are confused between Neopaganism and Satanism:

- To some Fundamentalist Christians, all religions other than Judaism and Christianity are actually varieties of Satanism. To them, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, and the various Neopagan religions are all forms of Satanism, or at least are led by Satan or his demons.
- To almost everyone else, Neopagan religions are simply individual faith groups with little or no connection to Satanism

Most Neo-Pagan traditions have many of the following factors in common:

- their faith was almost or completely wiped out in the past and has since been reconstructed from ancient information sources.
- a duotheistic or polytheistic belief system (they recognize a Goddess and God, and/or believe in many deities).
- many followers are solitary practitioners.
- others are involved in small groups, which various traditions call circles, covens, garths, groves, hearths, kindreds, etc.
- they celebrate four main seasonal days of celebrations each year, associated with the equinoxes and solstices.
- they also celebrate four additional days, each between a solstice and equinox.
- they prefer to conduct their religious rituals outdoors where practical.
- many do not practice their religion publicly because of the danger of abuse from very devout but misinformed Christians who have associated them with an evil and non-existent form of Satanism.
- they have a minimal or no hierarchical structure.
- they have a concern for the environment.

- They feel close to nature and its cycles.
- They follow a behavioral code that requires them to avoid hurting themselves or others.

SIKHISM

Sikh Origins:

No consensus exists on the origins of this religion.

- Historians and specialists in Eastern religions generally believe that Sikhism is a syncretistic religion, originally related to the Bhakti movement within Hinduism and the Sufi branch of Islam, to which many independent beliefs and practices were added.
- Many Sikhs disagree; they believe that their religion is a direct revelation from God - a religion that was not derived from either Hinduism or Islam.

Sikhism does contain many unique postulates and principles that are quite different from both Hinduism and Islam. Joseph D. Cunningham (1812-1851), the author of "A History of the Sikhs" (1848), observed: *"It has been usual to regard the Sikhs as essentially Hindu... yet in religious faith and worldly aspiration, they are wholly different from other Indians, and they are bound together by an objective unknown elsewhere"*

Its founder was Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji, (1469-1538) who was born in the Punjab area of what is now Pakistan. At Sultanpur, he received a vision to preach the way to enlightenment and God.

Sikhs number about 22.5 million worldwide. ¹ Most live in the Punjab. Close to 500,000 live in North America, ¹ of whom about 150,000 live in Canada. ²

Sikh Beliefs:

Beliefs include:

- **Goal:** The goal of Sikhs is to build a close, loving relationship with God.
- **Deity:** Sikhs believe in a single, Formless God, with many names, who can be known through meditation. This concept is similar to Islam whose followers believe in a single God who has 99 names. Only he can be worshiped. Rahras, a Sikh evening prayer states: *"[O God] since I have fallen at your feet, I do not care for anybody else. I do not follow the religious ways preached by various religions believing in Ram, Mohammed, Puran or Qur'an. The Simritis, Shastras and the Vedas lay down different doctrines. But I do not recognize any of these. O God, I have written these hymns with your grace and kindness. All that has been said is in fact spoken by you."* ⁷

- **Reincarnation:** They believe in samsara (the repetitive cycle of birth, life and death), karma (the accumulated sum of one's good and bad deeds, and reincarnation the belief of a rebirth following death. These beliefs are similar to Hinduism.
- **Caste system:** Sikhs have rejected the caste system of the Hindu religion. They believe that everyone has equal status in the eyes of God. This is a very important principle that permeates all Sikh beliefs, behaviors, and rituals.
- **Code of Conduct:** During the 18th century, there were a number of attempts to prepare an accurate portrayal of Sikh customs. None received the support of most Sikhs. Sikh scholars and theologians started in 1931 to prepare the *Reht Maryada* -- the Sikh code of conduct and conventions. It is "*the only version authorized by the Akal Takht, the seat of supreme temporal authority for Sikhs. It's implementation has successfully achieved a high level of uniformity in the religious and social practices of Sikhism*" ⁴ throughout the world. It contains 27 articles. Article 1 defines who is a Sikh:

"Any human being who faithfully believes in

(i) One Immortal Being,

(ii) Ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh,

(iii) The Guru Granth Sahib,

(iv) The utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus and

(v) the baptism bequeathed by the tenth Guru, and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion, is a Sikh."

- There are a number of traditions within Sikhism. Thousands of Sikhs, both in India and worldwide, follow living gurus who have lineages traceable back to Guru Gobind Singh. In Canada and elsewhere, major strains are becoming evident between liberal and conservative wings of the religion, as some Sikhs accommodate to the surrounding culture.

Sikh Practices:

- **Prayers:** repeated multiple times each day.
- **Worship:** Sikhs are prohibited from worshipping idols, images, or icons.
- **Temples:** There are over 200 Gurdwaras (temples, shrines or holy places) in India alone. The most sacred is at Amritsar.
- **The Five K's:** These are clothing practices followed by stricter Sikhs, called Khalsa saints:
 1. Kesa (long hair, which is never cut)
 2. Kangah (comb)
 3. Kacha (short pants)
 4. Kara (metal bracelet)
 5. Kirpan (a ceremonial dagger)

TAOISM

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

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

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

Taoist Beliefs and Practices:

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

- Time is cyclical, not linear as in Western thinking.
- Yin (dark side) is the breath that formed the earth. Yang (light side) is the breath that formed the heavens. They symbolize pairs of opposites which are seen throughout the universe, such as good and evil, light and dark, male and female. Intervention by human civilization upsets the balances of Yin and Yang. The symbol of Taoism, seen at the top of this page, represents Yin and Yang in balance.
- *"The Tao surrounds everyone and therefore everyone must listen to find enlightenment."* 4
- Taoists generally have an interest in promoting health and vitality.
- Five main organs and orifices of the body correspond to the **five parts of the sky**: water, fire, wood, metal and earth.
- Each person must nurture the **Ch'i** (air, breath) that has been given to them.
- Development of virtue is one's chief task. **The Three Jewels** to be sought are compassion, moderation and humility.
- Taoists follow the art of "**wu wei**," which is to let nature take its course. For example, one should allow a river to flow towards the sea unimpeded; do not erect a dam which would interfere with its natural flow.
- One should plan in advance and consider carefully each action before making it.
- A Taoists is kind to other individuals, largely because such an action tends to be reciprocated.
- Taoists believe that *"people are compassionate by nature...left to their own devices [they] will show this compassion without expecting a reward*