

THE GREENHAVEN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

# WORLD RELIGIONS



JEFF HAY

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by Jeff Hay

Linda Holler, *Consulting Editor*

Christine Nasso, *Publisher*  
Elizabeth Des Chenes, *Managing Editor*

**GREENHAVEN PRESS**  
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# Preface

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“A friendly study of the world’s religions is a sacred duty.”

—Mohandas K. Gandhi

The Indian nationalist and spiritual leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, known to millions as Mahatma, or “great soul,” was born and lived his life as a Hindu. But like others around the world during the violent twentieth century, he saw a need to move beyond the boundaries of traditional religions in search of the common ground shared by the major faiths. His hope was not to combine the world’s religions into a new one, but to find ways to minimize the often deadly conflicts that religious differences tend to inspire. Recognizing common concepts and understanding religious practices besides one’s own, Gandhi believed, was an antidote to entrenched prejudice, mistrust, fear, and antagonism between religious and cultural communities and a catalyst for greater tolerance and, ultimately, peace. After all, tolerance and understanding, as Gandhi and many others have pointed out, lie at the heart of the teachings of history’s religious teachers and masters, from the Buddha to Jesus of Nazareth to the Prophet Muhammad.

Resolving world conflict is an important reason for studying religion, but it is not the only reason. Religious belief and practice have always been central to the human experience. The hunter-gatherers of prehistoric eras formed religious societies, as their burial practices and other customs indicate. Humankind’s first cities—in Iraq, Egypt, and India—grew up as religious centers and temples were their greatest structures. As settled civilizations grew more complex, the world’s major religious tradi-

tions emerged, mostly in the period from about 800 B.C. (when Hinduism was taking shape) to the first decades of the seventh century A.D. (the era of the founding of Islam). Today most of the world’s more than 6 billion people either adhere directly to or live in societies shaped and informed by these great traditions, now many centuries old. In religion, people find solace, hope, meaning, connection with nature, and a sense of community. These religious traditions are living institutions that continue to evolve as human society evolves, and knowledge of them is essential to any understanding of human nature as well as global politics.

Knowledge of religious traditions is also essential to understanding world history. Many of the violent conflicts of recent decades have religious overtones rooted in religious conflict dating back at least to the third millennium B.C. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in the Indian subcontinent clashed violently and repeatedly in the late 1500s, for example, just as they have in recent decades; Christians and Muslims fought each other in the medieval Crusades and have fought each other much more recently in southeastern Europe and the islands of Indonesia in the early twenty-first century. The early twenty-first century conflict in the Middle East is based in part on centuries-old hatreds between Muslims and Jews. Meanwhile, virtually all religious traditions include ultraconservative groups who are fearful of or reject elements of the modern world such as secularism, materialism, and progressive social movements. Among them are the Islamic fundamentalists responsible for numerous

terrorist acts around the world in the last twenty-five years. Many of these conflicts have nonreligious motives as well, notably competing claims for territory or economic rivalry, but the emotional rhetoric of conflict is often couched in religious terms, as it has been for thousands of years. In an echo of the Crusades, for example, spokespersons on both sides of the current war on terrorism even speak of a “war of civilizations” between Christianity and Islam.

The “friendly study” of world religions is thus both a personal and a public duty. It is personal because through knowledge one can aspire to achieve greater nearness to God, the goal of most of the major religions. It is public because the study of religions also develops greater understanding of one’s fellow human beings, of their beliefs, aspirations, behavior, and ways of life. Ultimately, this understanding is an important step toward a more peaceful world for all.



## **Abraham** **(ca. 2000 B.C.–1800 B.C.)**

The patriarch of the ancient Hebrews and founding prophet of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Little about Abraham can be cited confidently by historians or archaeologists; what is known of him comes primarily from accounts in the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. Notions that he might not have been an actual historical figure but was rather a literary composite—an amalgamation of several historical persons for the purposes of telling a simplified story—can be no more than conjecture.

According to the book of Genesis, the first book in the Hebrew Bible, Abraham was called on by God to lead his people, the Hebrews, from the city of Ur in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) to a land unknown to him. In this new land, west of Mesopotamia, Abraham became the father of a new nation. While on the journey, which he begins at the age of seventy-five, Abraham entered into a covenant, or agreement, with God. As part of this covenant, God promised Abraham that his new nation will be fruitful and his people will be protected. Abraham, for his part, is to sacrifice his first-born son to God as a test of his faith.

Abraham fathered sons by both his wife, Sarah, and a servant named Hagar. Sarah's son, Isaac, was the youth designated for sacrifice. In the biblical account, God mercifully substituted a ram for Isaac when Abraham proved his faithfulness and obedience to God by willingly preparing

to slay his own son. Hagar and her son, Ishmael, were banished from the tribe.

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and their followers settled in the land of Canaan, roughly the area of present-day Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon. According to Genesis, the patriarch purchased land near Hebron and designated it as a family burial place. To cement his clan's ties to the region and secure the fulfillment of God's promises, Abraham assured Isaac's marriage to a Canaanite woman and Isaac's succession to leadership of the tribe before Abraham's death at the age of 175.

To Jews, Abraham is the founder of Judaism, the first figure to accept the existence of one true God and the first to seal a covenant with God. Traditionally, all Jews likewise are expected to observe the same covenant and seek to match Abraham in his righteousness. He is also credited with establishing such Jewish rites as circumcision (the symbol of the sacrifice called for in the original covenant) and prayers of benediction.

Christians consider Abraham the first of all believers, and in Roman Catholicism he is the model for all the saints. Abraham is cited as the first who put his complete trust in God, demonstrating the Christian concept that faith alone leads to salvation.

In Islam, teachings connected with Abraham draw on more sources than teachings in Judaism or Christianity, as various scholarly religious texts over the centuries have been added to the biblical sources. Abraham figures largely in the



Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, as one of Islam's major prophets. Muslims too consider Abraham the first among all prophets, the "Friend of God," ready to tolerate humiliation and suffering out of his love for God. Muslims also view Abraham as the founder of the first monotheistic faith (worshipping one God), a religion that was later perfected by Muhammad. Muslims also credit Abraham with building the Ka'aba, Islam's holiest shrine, in Mecca with the help of Ishmael (thought to be the founder of an important Arabic line of kings) and with establishing the rituals associated with Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.

SEE ALSO: Hebrew Bible; Moses; Qur'an

### **Abu Bakr (ca. 573–634)**

The first caliph, or successor to the prophet Muhammad as the leader of Islam. Abu Bakr was a merchant and relation to Muhammad who became one of the Prophet's first converts and a member of the first Islamic community established at Medina in 622. There he became known as the "truthful one" thanks to his loyalty. After Muhammad's death in 632, Abu Bakr, whom the Prophet had designated to lead prayers after his own death, was selected to replace him. His accomplishments were mostly political as opposed to religious, but in them he made substantial contributions to the faith. Under Abu Bakr numerous contentious Arabic tribes agreed to unite, and he assured that captured opponents would be treated with honor and respect in the hope that they would join the new faith. With this example he provided Islam with the concept that unity under Allah should take precedence over political differences, and reinforced the Prophet's insistence that "every Muslim is a brother unto every other Muslim." When he died

in 634 Abu Bakr was buried alongside Muhammad.

SEE ALSO: caliph; companions of the Prophet; Islam

### **Acts of the Apostles**

The fifth book of the New Testament in the Christian Bible, and one of the most important sources of knowledge of the earliest days of the Christian Church. It was probably written by Luke, one of the authors of the four Gospels contained in the New Testament (although not one of Jesus' original twelve apostles) sometime between 70 and 90 A.D., in Rome. In Acts, as this text is commonly known, Luke touches on what were to be the basic themes of this early, foundational period of Christian history. The book begins with the Pentecost, or the beginnings of the Christian Church, when God's Holy Spirit descends upon the apostles. It describes how early Christians began to break away from their society's Jewish traditions to form an entirely distinct church, and how they tried to spread Christianity to the world, or at least to other parts of the Roman Empire. Acts also emphasizes the preaching and travels of Paul, helping to firmly establish Paul as Christianity's first great teacher and thinker (after Jesus Christ himself).

SEE ALSO: apostles; New Testament; Paul

### **Adi Granth**

The primary scripture of Sikhism. The title means "original book" or "first book," but the text actually evolved over time, compiled first by Guru Arjan, the fifth Sikh guru, in 1603 and 1604, and appended several times over the remainder of the seventeenth century. When it reached its final, canonical form, the Adi Granth

contained more than 6,000 hymns and verses. Over 4,500 of these are attributed to the first ten Sikh gurus, with the heart of the text being those composed by Gum Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism. They were written in a language called Sant Bhasha, a poetic form of the Hindi language common in much of northern India. The authors used a script known as Gurmukhi, which is the script of the modern Punjabi language spoken by most Sikhs.

Modern printed editions of the *Adi Granth* contain some 1,430 pages, each of a standard length. This consistency is carried forward in the organization of the text, with the hymns and verses organized according to author, meter, and form. The verses are intended to be sung, and the main portion of the texts appends the proper musical mode for each verse. At the beginning of the book are three prayers intended to be recited daily at sunrise, sunset, and day's end. The theme of the verses is also consistent: The proper form of worship is meditation on the name of God.

Under the last of the ten Sikh gurus, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708), the *Adi Granth* became itself an object of veneration, as it replaced the series of living gurus. In this context the text is known as *Guru Granth Sahib*, meaning “guru in book form.” The text remains at the center of Sikh devotional life, and copies of the text maintain places of honor in Sikh temples, which are known as *gurdwaras*, or “houses of the guru [in book form].”

SEE ALSO: Guru Nanak; Sikh gurus; Sikhism

## African religions

Africa is a vast continent of many peoples and many religions. Nevertheless, in sub-Saharan Africa many of the largest groups of peoples are descended from Bantu-

speaking migrants who came to dominate the region after 500 B.C. and, in the broadest of terms, their religions may be considered collectively and are distinguished by some common features. They are polytheistic, often featuring a belief in an ultimate divine Creator as well as gods of natural forces or deities considered messengers between this world and the divine realm; these lesser deities are more important in daily life. A number of African religions also believe in the importance of the souls of dead ancestors who are able to intervene in the world, a likely reflection of the importance of kinship in African societies. Likewise, African religions are concerned with the maintenance of social order; rather than abstract ideas about the divine, African religions emphasize earthly relationships and proper behavior. Many rituals and ceremonies are intended to keep various otherworldly beings happy in order to ensure their generosity in this world. Commonly these rites are directed, again, at lesser deities or dead ancestors rather than the creator god, whom many African traditions believe withdrew from any interest in the world following the Creation. Central to these rites, and another feature of many African religions, are rituals of magic and witchcraft.

***West African Practices*** Among the major peoples of West Africa are the Yoruba, who number over 10 million and live mostly in the modern nation of Nigeria. Among the Yoruba, the creator god is known as *Olodumare*. But far more common is devotion to the hundreds of so-called *orishas*. Although many myths describe the *orishas* as the children of *Olodumare*, in practice they have their own separate cults complete with shrines, priests, prayers, and festivals. Among them are *Ogun*, the god of ironworking (and, in the modern world,

mechanics and drivers); Shango, the god of thunder and lightning; and the trickster orisha, Eshu. Orunmila, meanwhile, is the patron of divination, an important part of Yoruba religious practice. Divination is conducted by a figure known as the *babalawo*, or “father of secrets.” It involves the chanting of sacred verses and the reading of the signs apparent through the tossing of various ritual objects such as palm nuts. People consult a *babalawo* to gain insight into their personal futures, and the ritual often ends with visits to the shrines of appropriate orishas. Orisha cults as well as divination practices have spread to other West African peoples as well. The Fon people of modern-day Benin, for example, refer to the orishas as Vodun and consider them subdeities to a male-female pair of high gods known as Lisa and Mawu. Lisa represents the sun and daily work, while Mawu represents the moon, rest, and fertility. They, and the orishas, are a microcosm of both cosmic and earthly order, and are invoked through divination rituals. Orishas are commonly worshipped using iconic objects sometimes known as fetishes, both in larger ceremonies and within the home. These objects are thought to “contain” divine power and to give their holders or wearers a measure of that power.

The Mende peoples, who live primarily in the coastal areas of central West Africa, present a clear focus on ancestors. Their creator god is known as Ngewo, communication with whom almost always takes place through “near” ancestors, or Kekeni, or “distant” ancestors, known as Ndebla. To facilitate the intermediation of ancestors, Mende funeral rites are very elaborate, and the living continually give offerings at grave sites. A distinct feature of Mende religion is the presence of secret

societies that control specific groups of rituals. Among them are the Poro, the secret society of male initiation and political leadership, and the Sande, which controls female initiation and motherhood. Both teach initiates proper social and sexual behavior, as well as the distinct “powers” of women or men. For boys, initiation ceremonies often include circumcision, as they do elsewhere in Africa. The Mende do not practice female circumcision, however, although some peoples in other parts of the African continent do. Both male and female initiation rituals are thought to be important ways of clearly defining gender and, therefore, of ensuring fertility.

*Divination, Offerings and Numerology* To the south and east, in parts of modern-day Congo and Sudan, live the Azande people. Their creator god is known as Mbori, but few prayers or other rituals are devoted to him, and in a variation from other African practices, little devotion is granted to lesser deities or spirits. Instead, Azande ritual focuses on explanations for earthly behavior and events using witchcraft and magic. Azande witch doctors, or *abinza*, are consulted for divination purposes and have special training in reading omens or in the health-giving properties of plants, but all people are thought to be capable of gaining access to the divine. In southern Africa, the Zulu peoples refer to the creator god by several names, some of which connote a god of the sky and his “female twin,” the earth, which are the source of human life. These deities are thought to control most large natural forces, such as thunder. Mundane aspects of individual life, meanwhile, are the domain of the ancestors in the Zulu world, who are believed to live under the earth. Worship commonly involves the giving of offerings or sacrifices to the ancestors, who

will be angry if they are neglected. Divination among the Zulu is commonly conducted by women known as *inyanga*, who are thought capable of being possessed by the spirits of ancestors. As with the Azande, witchcraft is generally considered the source of danger or bad health, and diviners try to combat it with rituals and herbs.

The Dogon people of Mali have an elaborate system of myth, ritual, and social organization based on a highly esoteric view of the universe; theirs is one of the most distinct of African faiths. Their creator god is known as Amma, who created the universe by mixing his spoken word with the elements. Most Dogon devotion, however is granted to the Nommo, who are described variously as the created universe, the first ancestors, and the guardian spirits. They are most commonly thought of as matched pairs of male and female twins, which in Dogon cosmology imply the balance of Creation. In Dogon myth the original ancestors consisted of four pairs of twins; the number 8 became a sacred number, as did the notion of matched pairs. Dogon villages, for instance, are built in pairs and contain eight storehouses to contain eight varieties of grain. The Dogon high priest, or hogon, is both the intermediary of Amma and the successor of the first man, Lebe. Lebe was thought to have been sacrificed to preserve the order of the world. The hogon's house, which is considered sacred ground, contains eight stones to honor past hogons and eight to honor future ones. At the center of much Dogon ritual is the need to preserve the purity of the hogon in order to maintain the order of the world.

African religion remains dynamic as well as very diverse. The faiths of the peoples of the continent are not fixed but continue to evolve and to overlap. Newer

influences such as Islam and Christianity, which are both practiced widely, combined with the challenges of secular modernity, ensure the continued multiplicity of African religion.

SEE ALSO: Afro-Brazilian religions; Afro-Caribbean religions; divination

### **Afro-Brazilian religions**

Thanks to its ethnic mix of Native American peoples, European settlers, and Africans originally brought to the region as slaves, Brazil has been the center of a number of syncretic religious movements. These religions combine features of many different traditions: African religions, Native American spirit worship, and Roman Catholicism. Most of these began to take shape in a formal sense in the nineteenth century with the emancipation of Brazil's slaves, and they have continued to grow in appeal. Today millions of people belong to Afro-Brazilian religions, whose popularity is expanding to countries beyond Brazil.

One of the largest of the Afro-Brazilian cults is Macumba, which is practiced mostly in Rio de Janeiro and other big cities. At its heart is the belief in ancestral spirits rather than gods. These spirits are thought to be able to possess believers; the Macumba were the original founders of the faith or those who are otherwise advanced enough to be possessed. Macumba ceremonies often involve communication between these spirits and the mediums who conduct the rites. Ceremonies usually take place outdoors, and might involve animal sacrifices and the giving of offerings. A vivid example of Macumba syncretism is the worship of Roman Catholic saints, who are given African names. One of the most revered of the Macumba saints is Jemanja, the Virgin Mary. The word *Macumba*, meanwhile, is often used as a

blanket name for all Afro-Brazilian religions. Brazilians also tend to view religions as not mutually exclusive; devout Roman Catholics, for example, might from time to time engage in Macumba or other rites, while even nonbelievers might take part in festivals or other events.

***Spirit Possession*** Another important Afro-Brazilian cult is Candomble, centered in Bahia state in the northern coastal regions of the country. Candomble is thought to be the earliest Afro-Brazilian faith, and most of its adherents are women. It also involves possession by the spirits of ancestors, and its rites remain similar to those of traditional African religions. Although they generally involve singing, dancing, and the appearance of spirit mediums, rites vary depending on which location in Africa its original adherents came from or which religions their ancestors practiced. There are even Candomble sects based in African Islam. Unlike Macumba, Candomble beliefs feature the worship of gods, notably Shango, the thunder god of the Yoruba people of West Africa.

Umbanda is a third major Afro-Brazilian religion, with hundreds of thousands of small congregations. Born in the late nineteenth century, its appeal is primarily in the big cities, and its followers come from a spectrum of social groups, including the educated middle classes. Umbanda features a focus on contact with a spirit world whose ancestor spirits possess various powers depending on their origins. Some spirits are derived from those of great Native American leaders, while others are derived from respected elders during the days of Afro-Brazilian slavery. Prominent among the spirits are the orixas, no doubt variations of the orishas found in West Africa. These might be either the spirits of African gods such as

Shango, of Roman Catholic saints such as Mary, or even of Jesus. Umbanda rites, which take place in ritual houses, involve music and the giving of offerings. Leaders of these rites are known as “saint fathers” or “saint mothers,” thought capable of communing with the spirits. Aside from the general emphasis on spirits, believers often undertake Umbanda rites to solve specific problems such as joblessness, trouble with the police, or illness. An unusual influence on Umbanda was the French spiritualist Alan Kardec (1804–1869), who was thought to have pioneered ways to understand and communicate with the spirit world, and who believed that human life could be improved by such means. Modern rites have expanded, furthermore, to include versions of Hindu or Buddhist practices such as Tantricism. Umbanda numbers many prominent Brazilians among its adherents, and it has spread to other South American countries, notably Argentina and Uruguay.

SEE ALSO: African religions; Afro-Caribbean religions; new religious movements, Western

## **Afro-Caribbean religions**

The various faiths or cults that emerged in the islands and coastal areas of the Caribbean Sea over the last three hundred years. They are the product of several cultural influences and religious traditions, including the Roman Catholicism of European settlers and colonists, various African beliefs and practices maintained by slaves and their descendants, and elements of Native American religions.

Santeria, or the “way of the saints,” is a faith that originated among slaves in Cuba but has spread to other islands and, especially in recent years with the suppression of religion in Cuba, to the United States.

Its believers are not solely people of African descent; adherents include many Caucasians and people of mixed race or ethnicity. Santeria combines many elements of Roman Catholic Christianity with certain African beliefs. The Santeria tradition features faith in a single, omnipresent God, but much more prominent is its worship of various spirits. The common pattern is to view these spirits as both Roman Catholic saints and as orishas, the ancestral spirits of the Yoruba peoples of West Africa. The Yoruban war and thunder god Shango, for example, is associated with Saint Barbara, the Catholic saint and patron of gunfire; Jemanjá, the Virgin Mary, is another common focus of devotion. Each of these spirits has its own distinct characteristics, and devotion to them is expressed in specific ways. Shopana, the smallpox orisha associated with Saint Lazarus, likes to eat corn and uses crutches. Shango wears red and white beads. Rituals devoted to these figures might include giving the appropriate offerings and the “baptism” and “feeding” of the spirits in the form of iconic sacred stones. Drumming is often thought of as the “voice” of the spirits, while believers might also sing or chant, often in a Yoruba language. Believers also might practice animal sacrifice, which is thought to aid in the possession of the believer by the spirit. Once you attain possession by a spirit you are considered a santero, one who is capable of using the spirit’s power. On a more mundane level, believers in Santeria might call on their patron spirits, using various divination methods, to aid them in their daily lives.

***Obeah and Voodoo*** Obeah, a separate Afro-Caribbean faith, arose among the slave populations of Jamaica and is very much a product of the slave experience. Its founders were the Akan people of West

Africa, and it retains far more African than European or Christian features. Obeah is fundamentally a form of witchcraft in its belief that bad forces can affect human behavior and destiny. In Obeah, each person possesses a “duppy,” a spirit or soul, that is vulnerable at various times of his or her life, notably during times of sickness or weakness and at the time of death. An obeahman (sometimes in fact a woman) is thought to have the ability to take possession of one’s duppy and force it to work for him. These obeahmen are also considered to have special knowledge about such matters as health and medicine. Since African belief in witchcraft was driven underground by slave owners and overseers, Obeah arose as a way to use witchcraft to explain the conditions of slavery, to try to live a healthy life under harsh conditions, and sometimes to challenge the slave owners themselves. The more positive Jamaican counterpart to Obeah is Myalism, which is much more clearly influenced by Christianity and came to feature such rites as baptism. Myalists also hold a strong belief in the power of good, and work to combat the more evil aspects of Obeah by seeking converts and rooting out Obeah medicines and ritual objects. Like Santeria, Obeah and its Myalist counterpart have spread from Jamaica to other islands.

Voodoo, or voodoo, which originated in Haiti in the 1700s, is the largest of the Afro-Caribbean religions. Some 80 percent of the population of Haiti professes it, and Haitian migrants have taken it to other islands as well as to the North American mainland. Like other Afro-Caribbean faiths it is syncretic, combining aspects of Roman Catholicism, particularly the French version practiced by Haiti’s colonizers, and various African religions; studies suggest that as many as 115 distinct African eth-