

WORLD RELIGIONS

medals by Ľudmila Cvengrošová



*The special collector's edition of the medals is issued under the auspices
of Dr. h. c., Ing. Ján Figel', PhD., EU Special Envoy for the promotion
of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union*

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Dear friends,

we are honoured that you have decided to support our new project – the issuing of a new series of artistic medallions under the title “Religions of the World”. They have been crafted by one of Slovakia’s leading artists, academic sculptor Ľudmila Cvengrošová, and present in relief form, the symbols of the largest world religions: Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

The publication that you are holding in your hand is not intended to be a full account of the philosophical and literary background of these religions, which has already been explored by many other authors. It is intended to be an informative guide for the appreciation of this unique work and a record of how it came about.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the artist for this unique work, and everyone else who made its creation possible.

*Ing. Karol Podhora
Igor Chyla
publishers*

INTRODUCTION



Humans are beings of body, mind and spirit. Today's secularists are as wrong as the Marxist philosophers and atheistic dictators who came before them – spirituality and religion are far from being on retreat in our world. The opposite is the case. Just as mistaken in their own way are the religious militants and Jihadists, who abuse religious sentiment to promote their ideologies of hatred and fear. Most of the world's population live under severe restrictions on religious faith and belief, where torture, persecution, execution and mass murder are not unknown. In the light of developments in Europe and elsewhere in the world which have brought together populists and given extremists a new voice, we need to provide responsible management of the refugee and migration crisis and strong measures to prevent Islamic terrorism.

It is therefore more urgent than ever that people correctly understand the diversity of religions and the possibility for dialogue and cooperation in building a more humane world. This work of art presenting five world religions through commemorative medallions and its accompanying book will make a valuable contribution to such understanding, and to our awareness and discussion of our common responsibilities. The work presents an impressive artistic engagement with diverse religions and cultures. It is a deep and fundamental call for everyone to respect and advance a culture of human dignity. Each of us is part of one great human family. It is numerous and diverse. It includes those who have gone before us into eternity and left us a legacy of culture and spirituality and a rich and painful history that is a source of wisdom and experience. It is a legacy that belongs to all of us here and now on this blue planet. It is a duty we owe to those ancestors, as well as to the youth of today and the generations to come after them, that we should maintain it. In this continuum of life, space and time, every person has the same dignity and an original, authentic mission. The culture of human dignity calls us to freedom and responsibility, to rights and duties, to gifts and creativity. An imperturbable and unmeasurable dignity whose source and measure is the Absolute, whose expression is the form and image of God is the first and most fundamental value of civilisation that all world religions can and should agree on. This call also applies to secular humanism that bases its ideals on philosophy and the pursuit of the true, the good and the beautiful. Secularism becomes a problem when it goes from being a principle to an ideology or a state "religion". While secularism as a principle means opening a space for all, for plurality and freedom, secularism as policy means the closure of this space. Several western countries provide a good example of this.

More than 80% of the world's population declares a religious conviction or faith. Christians make up the largest group. The French philosopher Rémi Braque has said that Christianity has a unique characteristic: it is a religion and nothing else. The German philosopher Georg Hegel called Christianity the "consummate religion". If we get to know other religions better, we become aware that they express more than just people's relationship to a higher being, to God. If the meaning of religion is religare, to re-connect people with the Absolute and with other people, this primary communicative or directly socio-constructive function is combined with other, in some ways secondary functions, which have, however, come to dominate many traditions and pushed the original purely religious

function into the background. Judaism is linked to the concept of a chosen nation. Islam is connected with law, with sharia. A large part of Buddhism, which many people consider to be a philosophy more than a religion, is wisdom concerning the good life. Shintoism and Taoism are linked both to wisdom and to the dynastic succession of the throne.

Christianity is not a nationality or an ethnicity; it is a community of people and a universal religion. It is not a law that is intended, like sharia in Moslem countries, to serve as the basis of the justice system. Christianity was the first religion to make no claim to legal hegemony in the ancient world and did not claim that the law should be derived from religion. Western civilisation is not based on some sort of Christian halakha or sharia but on Roman law which has been infused with Christianity's values and understanding of human dignity. There is no "Christian law". On the other hand, the family law of Israel remains based on halakha, and sharia functions in many countries with Islamic traditions. "Christian morality" is not restricted to the believers in this religion but is a universal morality that is not the tradition of one nation or ethnic group.

Civilisations, cultures and religions are judged by their fruits. From this point of view, it is important that religious freedom be a respected, and guaranteed, principle in society. If public life does not respect or recognise freedom of conscience, religion or belief, neither civil nor political rights can be fully exercised either. Objective facts and scientific research shows that freedom of religion has a positive effect on the development of democracy and the rule of law, and only the development of the economy and trade. No one can understand how today's world works and the things that are happening in it without an understanding of religion, including the ways it can be abused.

This series of valuable, artistic medallions made by academic sculptor Ľudmila Cvengrošová is a welcome initiative. This publication accompanying the series of medallions will also advance our knowledge in this area. Together they provide a unique overview of the history and current situation in the world's five leading religions. As we live in an increasingly open international environment, we need to know these religions well if we want to have constructive dialogue and co-existence which strengthen peace and development. This is the only way to grow the culture of human dignity. Indifference, ignorance and fear create fertile ground for populism, violent extremism and fanaticism. Indifference, ignorance and fear are the allies of evil.

I hope that these precious artistic medallions and the accompanying catalogue will advance the idea of universal solidarity and vigorous humanity. If this prevails, the world will see better days. With all my heart I wish that for Slovakia, Europe and the international community.

Ján Figel'

Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom
of religion or belief outside the European Union



Some years ago, I was honoured to be invited, as an expert in the fine arts, to review a series of seven medallions illustrating the history of the papacy which had been designed by the academic sculptor Ľudmila Cvengrošová. This prestigious work, issued in limited editions in gold and silver (accompanied by an exclusive catalogue) eventually found many admirers all over the world. I am pleased to see that the artist has not slackened in her tradition of addressing large and vital topics, and has now brought us this series on the world's religions. This topic is all the more urgent because we are living in a time when many of our paradigms of culture and civilisation are being revalued and in particular there is a move back towards intolerance, extremism, terrorism and cheap populism promising simple (usually exterminatory) solutions. Religion is an area that is particularly sensitive to such atavisms, especially when religions have so many skeletons in their closets. These include not just the historical and doctrinal conflicts between religious systems, but sadly also those within religions themselves. This is a reason why dialogue between religions is more urgent than ever before: we need to agree to respect a basic moral ethos – despite all the differences and the unique characteristics of individual religious systems. The fundamental aim of this opus of medallion-making is to contribute to such a culture of communication, not as a cheap gesture of simulated friendliness but as a space for mutual respect and getting to know each other better. Our sculptor has addressed this task in a demanding, but artistic and meaningfully communicative way. How should we define the fundamental issues in this area?

I do not wish to comment here on the dramaturgy of the sequence of religions (although it should be noted that the chronological approach is objective and appropriate) nor on the iconography of the medallions, their obverses and reverses (which is covered exhaustively in Karol Pieta's contribution to this volume) What I would like to focus on is the work's artistic morphology, the mastery of modelling and the sculptural techniques used in Ľudmila Cvengrošová's medal-making. There were a relatively large number of challenges to be overcome in producing the series. Some came from the wide range of content and motifs that would be relevant to the topic and from the need to respect certain aspects of religion as such: dogmatic questions related to what is sacred and to holy traditions; the question of religious practice and worship, including symbols, ceremonies, holy days, liturgies, practices connected with prayer, contemplation, pilgrimages, fasting, asceticism, sexual ethics and so on; the meaning of sacred texts (the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Torah, the Talmud, the Tripitaka, the Bible, the Koran, the Sunna); the life stories and personalities of the founders and historical events and traditions of the religious community; sacred places (shrines, temples). The artist's imagination could be overwhelmed by the flood of iconographic possibilities, but it permits a wide variety in figural composition, portraits (even if fictitious), perspective views of holy sites, and the presentation of the religion's material expressions – symbols and sacred items – and exploration of the calligraphic, artistic and creative potential of the written word. A complicating factor is that some religions have aesthetic principles derived from their doctrinal frame-

work that impose a full (Islam) or partial (Judaism) prohibition on pictorial representation, and especially any personification of God or His prophets. If the divine attributes are ascribed to a book (the Quran) and the name of God itself (Allah), the creative options are reduced to lettering, which is unlikely to sustain the conceptual or expressive unity of a series on religions. It is to the artist's credit that she found a reasonable compromise on this matter, which commits no offense against truth (even artistic truth) and is equally fair to all the world religions in the series.

Before considering the meaning or the aesthetic potential of the medallions, it would be useful to recall the outline of the artist's background.

The important Slovak artist and academic sculptor, Ľudmila Cvengrošová, was born in 1937 in the village of Radošiná, not far from the major archaeological sites at Nitrianska Blatnica and Bojná that would come to provide strong inspiration for a much of her work. From 1956 to 1962 she studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, specialising in relief sculpture under the supervision of professors Rudolf Pribiš and Ján Kulich. She received the ZSVU prize in 1979 and was awarded the Order of Ľudovít Štúr by the president of the republic in 2007. She lives in Bratislava and works primarily in the fields of medal-making, free sculpture and monumental sculpture.

The academic sculptor Ľudmila Cvengrošová is a representative of realism in Slovak art and her work has opened a window on important periods in Slovakia's history for many people. Besides statues her fine art works include a wide range of medals, plaques and reliefs. She is a master of various techniques for working with stone, wood, pottery and painted terracotta. She has worked in a wide variety of genres covering many different topics. The artist herself divides it into three groups, the first comprising works directly inspired by the history of Slovakia. This work reflects both careful and wide-ranging research and a deep interest in the very different life stories of figures from our past. It has an exceptional breadth of scope. From pre-history through the era of the dawn of agriculture, the early iron age, the incursions of Celts, Germans, Romans, Slavs and Avars to the time of the Slavonic principalities and the age of Great Moravia. By confronting the ancient past, she is also entering into a dialogue with the nation's past, which she uses as a background for promoting humanist ideas. The second group is made up of artefacts influenced by her impressions from her foreign travels and the last is based on the artist's own private life.

The following are some of the highlights of her distinguished artistic career: a monumental statue of a Celtic chieftain, Biatec; statues of Rastislav and a Great Moravian priestess at Devín; sculptures of the missionaries St Cyril and St Methodius at Nitra; the coat of arms of the City of Bratislava; "Zem – Žena" (Earth – Woman) in the park by the Bridge of the Slovak

ĽUDMILA CVENGROŠOVÁ AND THE FIVE WORLD RELIGIONS

National Uprising; "Mier mláďatám zeme" (Peace to the youth of the Earth) in the grounds of the teaching hospital in Nové Zámky; an anti-war sculpture on the summit of Polom – Javorina near Žilina; a papal medallion in honour of the twenty-first anniversary of Pope John-Paul II's pontificate, which the sculptor presented to him at a private mass at Castel Gandolfo in 1999; a series of the monarchs of the House of Habsburg who were crowned in St Martin's Cathedral in Bratislava; a series of coloured reliefs of famous women (rulers, saints, sinners, social reformers). She also designed a commemorative coin featuring M. R. Štefánik to mark the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Slovak Republic. The present set of medallions follows the previously mentioned collection of historic popes.

The problem for a sculptor who takes up medal-making is to master the technique of bas-relief (low relief). In this technique, the artist must use the highly restricted space on the face of a medallion to create an illusion of sculptural volume intended for a frontal view, without the use of extension in three dimensions or a rear view, as would be possible in traditional sculpture. With regard to the formal characteristics of the series, which can never be fully separated from the iconographic context, it is worth noting the artist's skill in varying smooth surfaces, portraits, groups of figures in various compositions and rotations, architectural objects in the functional definition of geometrical description and classical perspective, decorative elements and writing – both for the identification of important monuments, persons and places, quotations from religious texts and slogans that do not always have the most positive associations (see the treatment of the "Shoah" or Holocaust on the Judaism medallion). Ľudmila Cvengrošová has very skilfully planned her religious narrations, picking out only the most significant elements so that no obverse or reverse becomes overcrowded with faces and unreadable. To evoke so many narratives in low relief really requires the hand of a master – especially when one motif partially overlaps another, as when Michelangelo's Pieta appears in front of St Peter's Basilica.

The fact that all the iconographic moments, motifs, themes and subjects are handled with unprecedented compositional virtuosity, with great sculptural feeling and vision, with appropriate spatial morphology and surfaces that are pleasant to the touch while remaining faithful to the subject-matter and artistic concept supports the evaluation of the present set of medallions as one of the finest achievements of all Ľudmila Cvengrošová's works. In this sense, it is a work of more than local significance but is of national and even international importance both in artistic and spiritual terms. In a time of secularisation and globalisation it can make us think about our own cultural identity and traditions and the urgent need for dialogue between nations – which is particularly urgent as the paradigm of civilisation changes so rapidly. It is ignorance that we should be afraid of, not communicating about things that go beyond us.

PhDr. Marián Kvasnička

Ľudmila Cvengrošová (1936) is one of Slovakia's foremost artists and in recent years she has focussed on the art of medal making to tackle some exceptionally demanding themes: a notable example is her monumental series of seven medallions dedicated to the history of the papacy and the long succession of pontiffs from St Peter to the current pope, Francis. Who knows? Perhaps this extremely complex and highly successful work was what motivated her to embark on this equally ambitious series of five medallions dedicated to the world religions Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

History has been a lifelong passion for the artist. She has incorporated the characters and stories of Slovak, European and World history into many of her individual works and her thematic series of sculptures, reliefs and medals. Working on these series requires a large and detailed knowledge not only of events in history but, what is just as important for an artist, the background features of the time such as costumes, architecture and customs, and also the social life and individual destinies of the characters to be represented. Cvengrošová typically situates her work in a strikingly accurate and meticulous historical framework based on in-depth study of primary sources and visits to the authentic environments in which history unfolded. Some of her series, such as women in history or the Bratislava coronations, have already accompanied their masterful portraits and figural representations with a rich mosaic of famous personalities and a broad survey of historical events full of symbols and facts.

Before tackling the demanding goal of portraying the world religions, Ľudmila Cvengrošová made a detailed study and carefully selected her motifs. In the work, we can recognise the vast majority of the religions' key monuments and symbols, which she has witnessed in their essential and authentic original settings in her many travels. She was thus well-equipped to face this new project and its high objectives, which we can say in all honesty that she has really achieved. The theme and the handling of the individual religions in the chronological order of their foundation shows that the artist has tried to step outside the emotional effects of her own Christian roots, determined by her given civilisation and religious tradition. Her strictly objective approach to the issue is shown in her selection of motifs, which should not be considered "profane" but rather an expression of empathy, expertise and a civil and historical approach. They show full respect for the millennia-old religious values that are shared by hundreds of millions of believers around the world.

The mosaic of motifs on each face of the medallions has been meaningfully and aesthetically composed through the author's talent to conjure familiar and unexpected symbols and characteristic features of individual religions out of the small surface area, together with authentic titles in the corresponding letters and languages. When looking at or, better said, studying the individual medallions, it is astounding how much detail the artist has included



and the high degree of rigour, seriousness, attention to detail and respect that she applied in every detail.

Hinduism is one of the oldest and largest religions, with more than 850 million believers around the world. Many of its core elements are familiar outside the religion: Brahman – the divine principle, karma (belief in the consequences of good and bad deeds), reincarnation (teaching on the wheel of cyclic existence), but also the caste system. The Vedic scriptures and Sanskrit are fundamental elements of the world's cultural heritage.

Both sides of the medallion illustrate in a realistic and highly engaged manner the characteristic features of Hinduism (Hindu dharma). The obverse is dominated by the familiar form of the dancing god Shiva, labelled with his name, accompanied underneath by a sacred cow and an elephant. In the centre of the composition is the name of Varanasi/Benares in Indic text. This city with three million inhabitants is a major cultural and religious centre in northern India. The central circular image is lined on both sides with sacral architecture and sculptures from famous Khajuraho. The lower section shows typical scenes from the life and death of believers: a group of naked pilgrims – holy men, ritual bathing during the world's largest festival, the Kumbha Mela and the cremation of the dead on the banks of the Ganges.

In the upper part of the reverse is the fragile wooden architecture of a temple in Bhaktapur in Nepal. Next to it are the elephant god Ganesh (with his name in Indic script), the ritual chariot that brings the harvest (Machindranath) and the figure of an itinerant ascetic Sadhu, whose title is written in Nepalese. In the centre of the lower part of the relief is the figure of the Kumari (a girl who is chosen to become a living goddess) surrounded by figures and symbols of Nepalese Hinduism.

Judaism has a smaller number of believers but it is a very old monotheistic religion that played a part in the development of Christianity and Islam. It is not an easy religion to represent in the fine arts because the Jews' rigorous interpretation of their faith in one invisible and omnipotent god means that from the earliest times it has been prohibited to make images of human or divine beings. The religion can trace its origins to the earliest history of the Jewish nation, at least thirteen centuries BCE. The Torah is the core of the book of books – the Old Testament Bible, which has deeply influenced world history and culture. This is one of the reasons why, for us Europeans, the history and fate of this religion and the Jewish nation are on the one hand familiar and comprehensible but at the same time full of painful reminiscences of moments when the coexistence of this ethnic and religious community with other religions and nations flared into tragic conflict. With this in mind, Cvengrošová's depiction of Judaism uses fewer motifs from the art and beliefs of the religion. Instead, especially on the reverse, she

shows the terrible effects of racial intolerance and the conclusion of the nation's exodus with the creation and existence of the state of Israel.

In the upper part of the obverse is a large seven-branched candlestick (menorah), the stone tablets with the ten commandments and Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, together with the names of great men of the faith – Moses and Solomon – in the Hebrew alphabet. The author copied the menorah from the monumental gold candlestick shown on the Arch of Titus, whose reliefs depict the treasures of the Jerusalem Temple plundered at the end of the Roman-Jewish War in 70 CE. This tragic point in Jewish history is also recalled by the figures standing beside a Torah scroll – a high priest with the ram's horn – shofar, and a silver coin – a shekel, and a Roman legionary with his legion's eagle and a coin with the legend "Judea Capta". Under a six-pointed star of David is the Hebrew word "Jerusalem".

The upper part of the reverse of the medallion recalls tragic moments of racial persecution and genocide, including the paradoxical slogan of the death camps. The lower part symbolizes the opposite of decline and fall – major Jewish scholars and artists (Freud, Einstein, Chagall) and the return to the historical homeland, symbolised by the foundation date of the state of Israel.

Buddhism, like Hinduism, is a great religion of the Far East, which has developed over two and half thousand years and has hundreds of millions of followers. Its fundamental postulates include asceticism – abstaining from worldly pleasures, overcoming suffering, tolerance, the protection of living beings (Thou shalt not kill), acts of charity, the giving up of possessions and reincarnation until the achievement of the objective – nirvana.

The obverse of the medallion represents these ideas through the representation of the bronze statue of a seated Buddha at Kamakuru, whose original is over 15 metres tall. It is labelled in Japanese characters (Buddha Daibutsu). The upper arc is filled with a greeting in Tibetan script ("Om mani padme hum"). The compositions on the two sides show other attributes of Buddhism in its various forms: Sansara – the cycle of rebirth, thunderbolt (vajra), the endless knot, a prayer wheel. In the centre of the lower axis there is the Dalai Lama and his signature.

On the left of the reverse is a stupa – a small tower shrine, with prayer wheels and lungta prayer flags, which symbolise the wind-horse that carries believers' prayers to the heavens. Titles in Tibetan (Lhasa) and Nepalese (Kathmandu) refer to the capital cities. Opposite the prayer shrine is the Swayambhunath tower – an important Buddhist shrine in Kathmandu. The scene is closed by a group of lamas playing ritual trumpets.

Christianity, with over two billion followers, is the most widespread religion in the world. Its central figure is Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross and resurrection overcame death, rec-

onciled the whole world with God and redeemed it from death and destruction. God is not, as in Judaism, the God of one chosen nation but of all the people in the world. Over time, Christianity developed into several branches, the most important of which are the Catholic, Orthodox and Reformed-Protestant Churches. To depict this religion, Cvengrošová has used well-known, defining motifs, symbols and buildings from Christianity's European history.

The central motif of the obverse is a crucifixion scene from the front cover of the Nitra Codex including a reliquary. The scene is surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists. The birth and death of the Saviour are recalled by the silver nativity star of Bethlehem on the lower left side and opposite the crown of thorns, a symbol of Jesus' death in Jerusalem.

The central axis of the reverse is the monumental 30 m statue of Christ from Rio de Janeiro (1931) below which is a classic work of the Renaissance – Michelangelo's Pieta (1499). In the centre of the medallion are three of the best known Christian churches – Notre Dame in Paris, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and San Pietro, the papal cathedral at the Vatican in Rome together with the characteristic insignia of the Catholic church hierarchy – a bishop's crozier and the papal processional cross with three horizontal bars.

Islam, the faith of the prophet Muhammad and his followers is currently the world's fastest growing religion with more than one and a half billion followers all over the world. It is also the religion that is most widely discussed in European circles. With its roots in the seventh century CE it is the youngest of all the religions featured in Cvengrošová's series. Like Judaism, Islam strictly prohibits the representation of living beings. The reason is that it is a false attempt to replicate God's creation, especially with regard to God, the angels and the prophets. This is again a challenge for the artist. Fortunately, the prohibition was not always so strictly enforced in the past and there are a number of great works by Muslim artists – in particular miniatures – which help the author to illustrate the world, culture and principal symbols of this monotheistic religion. The art most appreciated by followers of Islam was calligraphy, which therefore forms a major part of the illustration on this medallion.

At the top of the obverse are two symbols representing the religion's core spiritual principle and material form – its holy scripture: the words Allah and Quran. On the right a scene based on a sixteenth century Persian miniature shows the archangel Gabriel dictating the surahs of the Quran to Muhammad and on the left is the mysterious Kaaba – the Black Stone – recalling one of the five basic duties of the faithful – the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) The lower part shows the Prophet's ascension to Heaven on his horse Barak from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem – a city that is holy for all three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

On the reverse the strength and historical significance of Islam is shown by major architectural works from many parts of the Earth, including the less well-known tomb of one of the major figures of the era of the Crusades, the famous Kurdish-Egyptian general and ruler Yusuf Salah ad-Din - Saladin (died in 1193). "As-salamu alaykum" (Peace be with you), concludes the whole composition of this side of the medal.

In this series of medallions of world religions, Ludmila Cvengrošová has once again shown her characteristic genius for combining the ideas that represent her theme, their composition and their skilful, artistic representation in a way that is historically faithful in its tiniest details. The resulting harmony permits not only an aesthetically pure appreciation of the work but also communicates the artist's personal vision of this demanding theme in both its spiritual and human dimensions.

This ambitious series deserves to be well received by all admirers of the artist's work.

PhDr. Karol Pieta, DrSc



Hinduism



HINDUISM

"The Hindus are the people who have been debating the same questions for centuries."

Mohsin Fani, Iranian scholar, seventeenth century

THE "PROBLEM" OF HINDUISM

Hinduism is a modern collective term for the religious beliefs and practices that continuously developed in layers throughout the region of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the adjoining islands) over approximately four millennia. It is not a single uniform religious doctrine but rather a conglomerate of multiple related systems of belief and practice that show both similarities and a rich diversity. The debate about what Hinduism is and how to talk about it began with the first academic studies in the nineteenth century and still continue with fierce intensity. Some researchers, mainly in India, trace the formation of Hinduism to the period of the Indus Valley Civilisation (approximately from the third millennium BCE to the middle of the second millennium BCE) and connect it to the Vedic tradition, although many other researchers both in India and abroad disagree. Another relatively popular school of thought says that Hinduism is not a religion but a set of beliefs and practices about the world and people's place in it which should properly be considered as a culture. The continuity and historicity of what we nowadays refer to as Hinduism is nevertheless undeniable.



HINDUISM

obverse / reverse

embossed medals in gold, 6 cm diameter, 2014

The “problem” of Hinduism is also reflected in its name. For many centuries, the world “Hindu” referred simply to any Indian in the sense of a person living in the extensive territory east of the River Indus now known as the Indian subcontinent, without any religious meaning. Indian religious texts from before our era do not use the term. “Hindu” began as an exonym that the ancient Persians used for Indians. The word acquired a religious meaning only gradually, settling in India itself as it confronted the spread of Islam and it was further assisted by the colonial activities of the Europeans, who wished to distinguish between the different religious groups they were ruling over. Western studies of other parts of the world undoubtedly contributed to the classification of Hinduism as a world religion.

Looking at contemporary statistics, which take a relatively simplistic approach to people professing diverse forms and sources of religiosity under the rubric of world religions and leaving aside the frequently over-complicated academic debate, we find that Hinduism, with about a billion followers, is the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam. Compared to those religions, however, it is characterised by a number of differences, which also provide a good illustration of why it is not always clear what exactly belongs under the heading of Hinduism. Firstly, it should be noted that Hindus live almost exclusively in South Asia, in the region that the world referred to simply as India until the middle of the twentieth century. It is not therefore not a proselytising religion. Its teachings, customs, rituals, myths and philosophy are not spread widely around the world but tend to be limited to the Indian subcontinent. It is therefore known on the level of folk wisdom that Hindus are *de facto* born not made (*de jure* procedures for conversion exist but tend to be symbolic). In India and Nepal, Hindus make up the majority of the population and in other South Asian countries they are an important minority in numbers or for their culture. If Hindus are encountered outside South Asia, they are usually members of the Indian diaspora. The number of Hindus living outside the subcontinent is currently around 17 million, of whom most live in south-east Asia (over 6 million) or North America (over 5 million). There are many people who identify with Hinduism and may consider themselves to be Hindus for various reasons – western disciples of various Hindu gurus (the most notable being the Hare Krishna movement) or yoga practitioners, but it is doubtful whether many Hindus would consider such practices to be authentic Hinduism. Furthermore, an optimistic estimate of their global numbers would be at most several hundred thousand, which is an almost insignificant number out of a billion Hindus and another reason why it is irrelevant to talk about conversions in comparison with other world religions.

Hinduism shows a number of other pronounced differences from the other world religions. Its origins are far from clear. It is not possible to talk about a founder or even about a people linked by clearly defined religious faith, doctrines or practice. It is also impossible to talk about an organisation or a clearly defined hierarchy of spiritual leaders. It is also difficult to find a doctrine or dogma that could be considered universally applicable to all Hindus. There is not one book, but several. The universal texts that do exist do not provide a clear, a priori basis for Hindu religious teachings and practice. Hinduism is difficult to fit into European categories of religion such as monotheism, polytheism, animism, monism or henotheism because Indian religiosity contains some aspects of each. In Hin-

du thought it is possible to find a variety of gods, goddesses, divine and semi-divine beings, but also ideas about one God, the lord of the world, which the mystics of India have elevated to an absolute principle or, to put it another way, the one true Reality. How then should we talk about Hinduism?

When we look closer, it becomes apparent that the “problem” with Hinduism is trying to understand it with non-Indian concepts and expectations. If we give up the idea that a religion must have a founder, that some organisation must always operate within it, that it should have a holy book and clear doctrines, that they are above all texts that lay down the rules of religion and formulate a philosophy or that God is person in the singular, and we admit that a definition of religion based on a monotheistic theology need not be the only one possible (and it is enough to look elsewhere in the world to convince ourselves that this is a reasonable admission), we find that Hinduism does not present any insurmountable problems. The following article will outline the history and present identity of practitioners of Hinduism, what religious, philosophical and social concepts they have created and share, who or what they revere, what Hindu rituals are like and how Hindu concepts and practices are incorporated into Hindus’ everyday life.



THE ARYANS AND VEDIC INDIA

The earliest ancestors of today’s Hindus are generally considered to be the Aryans, a diversified tribal society that spoke Old Indo-European, which later developed into the language that Indians call the language of the Gods, Sanskrit. This is the language in which the Hindu scriptures would be written in. Historical sources date the Aryans arrival in South Asia around the middle of the second millennium BCE. There is currently a lively academic debate about whether they travelled there or were an autochthonous population. Most historians believe that the Aryan migrated from central Asia in a series of waves and settled the Indian subcontinent over several centuries. Our knowledge of the religious beliefs of the Aryans comes from the body of texts that we call the Vedas (literally “Knowledge”). They were written over a longer period (approximately 1500 – 800 BCE) and are divided into four basic collections (the *samhitas* – Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda), to which other texts are linked (the *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*; the last mentioned are the latest text that contemporary Hindu orthodoxy recognises as Vedas). The authors of the Vedas are described as *Rishis*, semi-divine beings who had insight into divine wisdom. The Vedas are often presented in encyclopaedic works as the scriptures of Hinduism but it should be noted that this claim only reflects a part of reality because it comes from the most influential class of Hindus – the *Brahmans*, who naturally consider their teachings to be authoritative. Nowadays there are many other groups of Hindus who do not take the ancient Vedic texts as the primary source of their religious beliefs and practices, or who have created their own teaching and labelled it Vedic. The Vedas are thus more a template than an exclusive sacred source for the constellation of Hindu doctrines.

The religion of the Vedas was a religion of sacrifices, rituals and hymns before the divinities of the Aryan pantheon. It could be said that the Vedic Indians worshipped personifications of natural forces or objects. For example, Agni, one of the most revered, was the god of fire and fire itself, Vayu represented the wind, Surya the sun, the goddess Ushas is the dawn and the goddess Prithvi is Mother Earth. The god Indra, the lord of all the gods, personified for the Aryans the omnipresence of divine power and strength. The Vedic pantheon, the character of the divinities and the stories associated with them offer comparisons with other divine worlds of other Indo-European cultures (Indra and his thunderbolt recall the Germanic Thor, the Slavic Perun, the Greek Zeus, the Roman Jupiter and so on). The Aryans established a special, unique relationship with the gods based on a philosophy of ritual. They believed that the gods required worship and sacrifices for them to take an interest in the human world. From another perspective, they considered sacrifice the alpha and omega of being because they believed that it was through sacrifice that the world was created, maintained and ended. It is a principle of the world that even the gods are not exempt from. If a sacrifice is performed correctly the gods are literally obliged to do what is requested of them. This inspired the development of elaborate sacrificial rituals that became the exclusive reserve of a narrow class of sacrificial officers – the Brahmins. Knowing how to perform a sacrifice correctly meant knowing the mechanisms through which the world was created and brought to an end. The Brahmins' learning thus became a secret knowledge that other classes of Aryan society did not have access to. Even so, the Brahmins were never the only group of religious specialists. There were, for example, "seekers" of the truth about existence known as Sramani. The Aryans believed that the creator god, Prajapati, had sacrificed himself and divided into four parts, which represented the four possible types of people, known as varnas: Brahmins (the bearers of knowledge), Kshatriyas (those who protect knowledge and Aryan society), Vaishyas (those who sustain them) and Shudras (those who serve the others). This became the basis for the Indian concept of moral order and the ideal social structure now known as the caste system. In contrast to the Varna system, the caste system, Jati, is primarily based on lineage and the function-based Varna system, which is not incompatible with a caste system, has been overshadowed. In theory, the varna that a person belonged to depended on the quality of the particular person whereas their caste was determined by their lineage. As an endogamous social unit, a caste is able to maintain a functional status, which means that the members of one caste often perform one social function or engage in the same occupation. This statement is not universal and it is possible to find many castes whose members have different occupation or do not engage in any of the "traditional" occupations that the name of their caste derives from. There are four varnas but there are many more castes, several thousand. This situation is the result of a breach of the principle of the functional division of society and the introduction of a division based on birth into a functionally defined social group. Castes will not be discussed in more detail here because their history in Indian society is complicated and their origins are unclear. They are, nevertheless, an important factor in Hindu social relations.



FROM THE VEDIC RELIGION TO HINDUISM

The religious concepts, practices and myths of the Aryans can be seen as the source of later Hindu concepts because although some of them would be pressed into the background, they never ceased to inspire the Indian spirit. Another important factor was that the Aryans greatly outnumbered any other population in the South Asian region and the class that guided their thinking – the Brahmins with their philosophy of sacrifice and their own indispensable place in its performance – took up an unshakeable social and ideological position in Indian society. Of course, in South Asian one encounters not only Aryans but also a rich constellation of other ethnicities (the best known include the south Indian Dravidians and the Adivasis, who are considered to be the region's indigenous inhabitants). The other groups enter the historical record later but their religious concepts and practices undoubtedly played an important role in the formation of Hinduism as we know it in subsequent and contemporary traditions. It would therefore not be misleading to say that the post-Vedic religion of the Indian subcontinent, Hinduism, is a synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan concepts and practices.

Gradually from around the middle of the first millennium BCE, Indian society began to engage more often in debates on the exclusivity of Vedic ritualism and other kinds of philosophical speculation. New religious concepts and rituals, and divinities who had little in common with those in the Vedas began to grow in popularity. It is clear that the dominant Aryans were unable to achieve complete hegemony in the diverse Indian society and that they themselves were not uniform in their thinking. In confrontation and negotiation with opposing religious trends in Buddhism and Jainism and non-Aryan societies, Aryan society reformed itself and developed concepts that their ancestors would barely recognise, if at all. Another important factor was that new peoples continued to migrate into South Asia at many times in its long history. They brought with them their own religious and cultural concepts, which could not avoid affecting the aforementioned developments. This may be why new ideas and practices dominate Hinduism more than anything that came before. The Vedic lore and rituals were not lost, but the Brahmins and the other members of Indian society (the Kshatriyas and holy people from a variety of social levels, including the lowest, also played important roles) reformed them according to the demands of the time.

As the formerly pastoral and nomadic Aryan populations adopted a settled lifestyle and established towns and relations with other ethnic groups, they needed a new religiously based moral order. The old Vedic concept of a cosmological system of gods, men and

demons (Rta) was replaced by a concept of order and duty (dharma). The Brahmin ideologies divided the human space into two basic areas – the world of towns, villages and settled farmers (kshetra), which is dominated by the Brahmins, who communicate with the gods through ceremonies, and the space of the jungle and unconstrained natural forces (vana) where there are mainly ascetics (including the Buddha and early Jains – who came from the Kshatriya class) and other holy men of contemporary Hinduism (sadhus), who were sometime in competition with influential Brahmins (though there are, of course, many ascetics amongst the Brahmins). Dharma – the principle that literally holds the world together but in particular expresses the functionality of society, is in many ways a social concept even though many people translate it as a religion. Such narrow translations can be misleading. Dharmasatras, scriptures about dharma, define ideas on how people can put themselves right with the gods and receive their assistance, how demonic forces should be banished, or simply how people can live a happy life that pleases the gods and enables society to prosper. Prosperity can be achieved only through cooperation and negotiation and requires some suppression of individual goals. In the untamed natural world of the ascetics, some social rules may be respected (for example, those governing interpersonal relations) but the dharma of the ascetics, the force that sustains and creates their world, is decidedly not about the development of a functional society. The main factors here are personal experience and the concept of individual salvation, which means emancipation from the cycle of rebirths (explained below). The Brahmins' mediation with the gods is justified only if they are able to present their experience to the ascetics in a convincing manner. As mentioned above, many Brahmins were also ascetics, and therefore opinions on the nature of the world developed in dialogues between the worlds of the householders and the ascetics. This added a new dimension to ritual knowledge. The social regulatory function of the Brahmins based on their knowledge of ritual and the Vedas remains an important part of Indian life but it becomes concentrated in the places where people need the Brahmins (kshetra) and becomes diversified or a matter for debate in areas dominated by personal religious engagement (vana).



DIVINITIES AND A LITTLE PHILOSOPHY

These changes, from which Hinduism emerged in its present form and which took place over a relatively long period (from around 500 BCE to 500 CE) had a fundamental impact on the religious life of Indians. On the philosophical level, they were reflected in the development of concepts that were open to a theology of religious experience and on the practical level concepts were developed that helped the Brahmins to maintain social domination at the cost of many concessions and the revision of older religious customs. As early as the last texts of the Vedas, the Upanishads, and in later texts there was an intensive discussion of the soul (Atman) and the world soul (Brahman). The ultimate goal

of religious life is said to be the understanding that the world soul and the personal soul are in truth identical. Religious experience has a part to play in the system but the path of experience depends on correct deeds. In this way, the philosophy of Karma (action), which is not found in the old Vedic samhitas, and which is directly linked to the concept of transmigration of the soul (Atman) and emancipation from the cycle of reincarnation (Moksha), which ultimately means the aforementioned recognition of the identity of Atman with Brahman. In simple terms, if people does not act well, which means in accordance with the instructions dharmasatras or their teacher (guru), they will be reincarnated. The quality of their deeds determines the quality of their next life. Birth cannot lead to any permanent condition, no perfect, understood as permanent, happiness but only life in temporary, varying intensity of sensual happiness (sukha) and dissatisfaction (dukkha). The ideal is not to transcend rebirth and overcome the limits of human life. Proper human action therefore depends on ideas of the moral order and the ascetic search for perfect knowledge is respected and considered a virtue.

At the same time, the philosophy of the identity of Brahman and Atman faces successful competition from other teachings on salvation of Indian origin which make free use of the aforementioned concepts (Karma, Dharma, Atman, Brahman etc.). The Samkyha school of philosophy and the practice of Yoga is a good example. Samkyha explains the reality of the world as the relationship between two different substances: nature (Prakriti) and consciousness (Purusha). Their relationship, in a nutshell, is that consciousness became lost in nature and believes itself to be identical with it, which causes it suffering and continuous changes of material form – reincarnation. As mentioned before, suffering arises from impermanence and change. Through the practice of Yoga, literally the binding or controlling of an incorrect understanding of the world, sentient beings can grasp of the true reality which is that they are an eternal consciousness. They can be assisted in this by a free and eternal spirit, the supreme lord, Ishvara. Enlightenment brings the desired immortality and freedom from reincarnation. Another example is the teaching on the duality and unity of the world understood in terms of the fixed and variable principles of the world, which are represented through gender characteristics and related to the ancient cult of the Mother Goddess. The “male” principle is embodied by the god Shiva and the “female” principle by the goddess Shakti – the energy or strength that moves the world and shapes it. According to the devotees of the Mother (Shakta and Tantra followers), the way to Shiva, father and lord, is only through the Mother. She who gave all things life and is the fundamental strength of the reality we experience. Worship of female and mother figures has been a part of the Indian thought and religion from the earliest times. It acquired its most sophisticated form in Tantric philosophy and practices, which thanks to their sexual imagery and practices also rank amongst the most widely criticised and most mysterious. Salvation depends upon understanding that people must have reverence for the phenomenal world and experience (including sexual experience), which are expressions of Shakti, if they are to find the absolute, which is the expression of Shiva. The Tantric imagination can still be seen in the ancient temple carvings and paintings that do not shy away from representing nudity or sexual intercourse.

The last change that we will consider in Indians' post-Vedic religious thinking is the idea of a personal god. In contrast to the personified natural forces of the migratory Indo-Europeans, the settled society of the Aryans and their non-Aryan neighbours increasingly expressed their religiosity through the idea of one mighty divine being, regardless of whether they revered a god or goddess. This does not mean that the other gods disappeared from the Indian consciousness. However, more and more they began to ask which god or goddess was the most perfect. Out of the constellation of divine beings that are colourfully described in the new myths preserved in story-telling collections such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, as well as the "ancient stories" – the Puranas – and other collections such as the Kathasaritsagara, there formed three main currents which are present also in contemporary Hinduism: Shiva, the fearsome and at the same time benevolent god of the ascetics, yogis and the ruler of untamed nature; Vishnu, the loving god of kings and dharma, who enters into the world through his avatars (the best known of whom are Rama and Krishna) and Shakti or Mata (the Mother Goddess) a loving but sometimes fearsome mother, who cares for her human children. Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti can be revered in many different forms. They have many associate divinities such as the elephant god Ganesh, who was created by Shiva's wife – the goddess Parvati; the goddess of wealth and happiness Lakshmi, who is the wife of Vishnu; Rama's helper – the monkey god Hanuman; or the famous fearsome aspect of Shakti – the blood goddess Kali and the warlike Durga. The cults of Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti grew to amazing dimensions over time and since the middle ages it has been quite possible to talk about Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism.

As the idea of personal gods developed, so did the basic ways of worshiping them. The scriptures, which certainly do not explain everything, mention Karma Marga – the way of deeds, particularly in the ritual sense, Jnana Marga – the way of wisdom and Bhakti Marga, perhaps the most popular – the way of devotion and love for the chosen object of personal devotion. The popularity of Bhakti is documented in many texts. The best known of these is the Bhagavad Gita (the Song of the Most High), which thanks to the universality of its message is sometimes known as the Bible of Hinduism. Bhakti can also be identified in many folk cults of saints and the rich variety of folk songs. It is possible to make a wider classification of gods that Hindus worship. There are family gods (those that are worshipped in the paternal line), municipal gods (the patron of the village) and also gods that are wished for or chosen (those that each Hindu selects for themselves). The last category may also include saints, who are often thought to be incarnations of the gods.



PUBLIC, PERSONAL AND DOMESTIC RELIGION

The changes that shaped Hinduism and its continuing development in the present can be observed not only on the theoretical but also on the material and practical levels. The Vedic religion was aniconic and oriented towards rituals carried out in remote locations that could change. Later Hinduism, despite still being influenced by the Brahmins' ideology, gradually began to produce representations of the divinities that it worshiped and in time the Hindu iconic tradition became the most developed and most diverse such tradition in the world. Varied and multi-coloured images of gods are now one of the most typical marketing items in Hindu India. A murti, or the representation of a god, can be as simple as a painted stone, usually orange in colour, or as complicated as a finely carved sculpture. Even a picture in a wallet or a small sculpture on a car dashboard or an office desk can be a murti. It is not completely clear how this radical change in relation to representations came about and we do not have the space to explain it, but it is important to mention the effect of this process. As soon as a murti exists and the represented god has been "summoned" into it by the appropriate ritual, there must be a place for it to be housed, people who look after it and procedures for taking care of it. As a result, in the early centuries of our era there appeared the temples that are now amongst the most typical symbols of Hinduism.

Temples not only protect the representations of the gods but literally embody the philosophical principle of multiple divine forms which on the mystical level are varied emanations of a single divine principle – the unborn and eternal Brahman. A murti can be taken both as an emanation of Brahman and as a real and living (jagrut) likeness of the selected divinity. Hindu temples are filled with many different gods whatever the era in which they were founded. The frequently postulated unity in diversity of expressions and meanings is not an empty phrase when it comes to India. For example, in a temple dedicated to Vishnu, you can also find shrines to Shiva or the Mother Goddess and in a Shaivist (Shiva) temple, you can find the likenesses of some of Vishnu's avatars, and so on. Larger temples always have one central shrine with the primary murti to which the temple is consecrated, but the presence of other murti allows them to show honour and respect for other divine figures. In other words, the fact that we go to Shiva's temple does not mean that we will not meet Vishnu or the Mother, and vice versa.

The mention of meeting is no accident. This is the basic action that a visit to a temple involves. Darshan, looking at the likeness of a god or goddess, accompanied by a gesture of respect (namaskar) is the minimum for which a Hindu visits a temple and precedes more complicated rituals of worship or prayer. The main form of worship in the Vedic religion was a fire sacrifice in which selected sacrificial ingredients are thrown into a fire – Yajna. When images of the gods began to be made, Hinduism evolved a ritual called Puja, which usually involves non-blood sacrifice in the form of flowers, sweets, various kinds of food and so on, although there are occasions when animals are sacrificed. In principle, the worshipper makes a gift to the chosen god, because unlike in the Vedic religion, the success of Puja prayers is entirely in the hands of the god who is invoked and the gift functions as a symbol of devotion rather than as part of a reciprocal mechanism, which was a skill claimed by the practitioners of ancient Vedic sacrifices. There is a degree of reciprocity in that sacrificial offerings are transformed by the act of offering from profane to sacred, becoming “prasada”. This most commonly relates to food which as a gift to a divinity becomes holy food and a desirable item for people who did not manage to visit the temple. The representation of the gods led to complex changes in the form of Indian religion, both in how the gods are understood and how they are worshipped. Temples also became centres of society par excellence. Besides providing space for the local life of the cult of the god who resided there (festivals, occasional meetings, religiously sanctified political acts and so on), they became destinations for pilgrimages; rulers and rich aristocrats donated property to cover their operating costs; they became centres of learning; schools were built next to them; and they naturally also became centres for a rich variety of economic exchange, which many remain to this day.

A temple or shrine is also a part of every Hindu household. It is a popular belief that the gods should be present wherever people live. It is not exactly clear when the tradition of household shrines and ceremonies spread across Hindu society, though the question itself is rarely if ever raised in research. One thing that is certain is that the Brahmins, the class that created and preserved rituals for various areas of Hindu life, were unable to control the performance of rituals in the home (or other small groups) by non-Brahmins, even though they proclaimed their rituals to be the most perfect and provided their services to others for reasonable remuneration, especially in the case of ceremonies marking stages of life such as the birth of a child, naming ceremonies, weddings, rituals for the dead and for survivors). Therefore, Hindus’ basic acts of worship for their gods (Puja and its many local variants) are based on Brahmin ceremonies in public temples but take place in their own homes. There are very few homes that do not have a household shrine. Besides the essential family gods, Hindus usually provide space for the murti of various divinities chosen by members of the family. Murti of saints are often present but are not obligatory, and it is also common for the household shrine to contain photographs of ancestors, usually from the male line.

In contrast to the relatively abstract philosophical speculations, a much more three-dimensional impression of Hinduism can be obtained from the temple, rituals and customs (such as the periodic group singing of religious praise songs known as bhajan) and various types of superstitions and belief about the ways in which people’s lives are affected by the gods or the largely indescribable but definitely influential and powerful divine principle. They create a unified platform for the diverse beliefs and practices that we refer to collectively as Hinduism. Besides personal worship (the daily performance of Puja at home or at the temple), religious concepts influence and help to organise social life. It should be recalled that worship and belief on both the personal and social levels are largely subordinated to collective objectives in Indian society. It should not be forgotten that the rules of dharma, which hold the world together and determine the highest objectives of a Hindu’s personal life, are above all about the subordination of the individual’s interest to the interest of a functional society. Hindus can literally find a god to match almost any taste, but unless they are ascetics, they have to accept the conditions that majority society expects of them – to worship the gods, to honour their elders and accept their views, to respect traditional religious teachings and customs and to accept domestic or local religious and social traditions; no to lie or to get rich at the expense of others; to control their desires in the context of social behaviour – to accept pre-marital celibacy, to get married within their caste and to accept a spouse chosen by their parents or relatives; to carry on a hereditary occupation or whatever their family prefers; to produce an heir and continue their line (which means having sons); to provide for themselves and help their children provide for themselves; to care for their parents when they are economically inactive and for relatives who get into economic difficulties; to perform the last rites for their parents and relatives; to participate actively in the social life of their social group / caste and so on. And these are only the most basic requirements. Two other objectives that are spoken of in the classical Brahmin shastras are artha (prosperity) and kama (pleasure). These are seen as subordinate to dharma. Kama, or personal desire (including sexual desire, which is discussed in detail in the famous Kamasutra), has the lowest status in the hierarchy of objectives. A separate objective, which can be reached via many paths, is moksha (the aforementioned emancipation of the individual’s soul from the cycle of reincarnation).



A FEW WORDS IN CONCLUSION

The religious life, that is to say who Hindus worship, how they worship them, why they worship them and what ethical postulates determine or accompany the performance of worship, is thus the subject matter of continuous negotiation between the metaphysical postulates of Hinduism, which talk about human beings as a soul experiencing rebirth after rebirth in search of salvation, and the social application of these concepts. The simplest way for Hindus to come to terms with everything is not to speculate too much and to accept and practice what they learned from their parents and inherited from their ancestors. Maybe this is why Hinduism seems to involve so much of what we would call culture and why it is hard to understand the sort of religion that Hinduism is. On the other hand, if we bear in mind that this whole complex of beliefs and practices as it presently appears to us is composed of multiple historically-formed layers of Indians' efforts to live and understand the world around them, in which the majority of them saw and continue to see the expression of something stronger and more perfect than merely human ability and intellect, and that Hinduism is in a state of continuous change depending on the conditions of the time and Indian social debate, as Mohsin Fani noted, it may help us to understand what we mean when we talk about culture and religion at home.

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*HINDUISM
obverse / reverse
embossed medals in silver, 6 cm diameter, 2014*



Judaism



JUDAISM

Judaism is one of the oldest monotheistic religions. It recognises one God who created everything. Its most fundamental ethical rules are summed up in the Ten Commandments, which have also been influential in Christianity and Islam. The key to distinguishing good from evil is set out in the Torah (the Five Books of Moses or the Pentateuch) and is supposed to have been given to Moses on Mount Sinai. A part of the laws laid down in the Torah, known as the Laws of Noah, apply to the whole of humanity: to act justly, not to deny God, not to serve idols, not to murder, not to steal, not to engage in sexual immorality and not to cause suffering to animals. Judaism has a national character and in the past, there was no difference between religious and secular life. The life and actions of a practising Jew are to this day bound by 613 mitzvot (commandments) which are divided into 248 positive and 365 negative commandments. Careful study is therefore considered a necessity and a condition for compliance.

Membership of the Jewish nation has been defined in the halakha (religious law) since the first century. It defines a Jew as a child born to a Jewish mother. Orthodox practice insists on this definition while Reform Judaism accepts also the paternal line. Judaism is not a proselytising religion but does accept conversions. The initiation rite for men to become members of the Jewish nation is the brit milah (covenant of circumcision), which is usually performed for new-born males on the eighth day after birth and is also required of converts. The word Jew derives from the Biblical figure Judah, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. In English, the same word identifies both a follower of Judaism and a member of the Jewish nation, though the latter may be of any religion or none.

Judaism and the history of the Jewish nation have always been linked, and the religion has determined the nation's present form. The following pages will shed some light on the key historical milestones in the development of Judaism, introduce the core works of Jewish literature and some of the personalities who have influenced its present form.



JUDAISM

obverse / reverse

embossed medals in gold, 6 cm diameter, 2015



BIBLICAL JUDAISM

Torah

Although the stories of the Torah reach into the distant past, many historians claim that it is only possible to speak about Jewish history and Judaism after the fall of the first temple (Solomon's Temple) in 587 BCE. The period known as the Babylonian Exile (587 – 538 BCE) was the beginning of the development of a monotheistic Judaism that did not depend on the existence of the Jewish state. The ethical standards, dietary rules, ceremonies for important moments in life and the religious traditions that took shape or were integrated into the religion at this time established a Jewish lifestyle that could be practised anywhere in the world. The most important parts of the Hebrew Bible – the five books of the Torah and most of the books of the Prophets (the *Nevi'im*) – took on their canonical form during the Persian period (538 – 332 BCE) following the Babylonian Exile. The remaining third part of the Biblical collection, the Writings (Ketuvim) were completed sometime in the mid-second century BCE.

The Hebrew bible is the foundational text of Jewish culture and religion. The Torah (Instructions) is its first and most important part. It is divided into five parts, which we know under titles derived from the Greek translation known as the Septuagint: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In Judaism, the books are named based on their first meaningful word. The first book (Genesis) is called Bereishith, which we translate as "In the beginning...". It begins with a description of the creation of the world and the first humans: Adam and Eve and their children. This is not a specifically Jewish tradition but is based on oral traditions from all over the Middle East. The origins of the Jewish lineage and nation begin with the travels of Abraham's family, the Egyptian captivity and the Exodus, capturing the process by which a nomadic or semi-nomadic life becomes a settled life and how a tribal society becomes a state.



The Patriarchs

Abram emigrated from the city of Ur in Mesopotamia and settled with his family in the town of Haran. Here, God appeared to him and told him to leave to a place that He would show him. He also promised Abram that his descendants would be a great nation. Abram, his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot set out to Canaan. On the way, God gradually revealed his intentions to him, promising Abram all the country from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates. God says that he plans to make the Jews His chosen nation. For the Jews, this does not mean that they are superior to other nations but that they have the

obligation to uphold the 613 mitzvot (commandments) laid down in the Torah. God also changed Abram's name to Abraham – the father of nations. Three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – consider Abraham a patriarch of their faith. His "seed" would produce all the nations in the area. Lot was the ancestor of the Trans-Jordanian tribes the Moabites and the Ammonites. Abraham's son Ishmael, whom he conceived with the handmaid Hagar with Sarah's consent was the ancestor of all the Arab tribes. In this way, the Jews recognised a shared ancestry with their neighbours. In the end, Abraham's wife Sarah bore him an heir. This was his son Isaac. Isaac married Rebecca and had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons with his wives Lea and Rachel and two handmaids. His sons became the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob acquired the alternative name Israel, which means "he who has wrestled with God", after a fight with a mysterious figure on a journey to Canaan ordered by God. The story continues with the hostility of Jacob's sons for their brother Joseph, whom they sold into slavery in Egypt. In the end, the whole family was reunited in Egypt, which is the setting for the beginning of the second book whose Hebrew name is Shemot ("the names"). The story it tells resonates throughout Jewish history. At the start of this book, the descendants of Jacob's twelve sons had become a large nation in Egypt but had gradually fallen into slavery. The pharaoh felt threatened by their number and ordered all new born males to be drowned in the Nile. One child from the tribe of Levi, placed in the river in a wicker basket, was found by the pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him. He was given the name Moses. When he grew up, he witnessed the beating of a Hebrew slave by a guard. He killed the guard and ran away into the desert. While he was living near Mount Horeb, the "Mountain of God", also known as Mount Sinai, he had a vision of God in the form of a burning bush. God revealed to him his name JHVH, which means "I am who I am". He ordered Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. To overcome the opposition of the pharaoh, God had to send ten plagues before the Israelites were released. Eventually Moses led the nation to Mount Horeb and went up the mountain to talk with God. God gave him the law, the Ten Commandments or Decalogue, which the Jews follow to this day. Moses is the main character of the second to fifth books of the Pentateuch. By the end, the Hebrew slaves have become a nation. Jewish tradition sees the period of wandering in the wilderness as a rebirth of the nation and its religion. From then on, the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the two tablets of laws and was itself housed in a tabernacle, always accompanied the Israelites on their journeys. To this day, the Jews commemorate the period of wandering with the spring festival of Pesach (Passover), the Seder dinner, at which they eat unleavened bread (matzah) and other food that recalls life in Egypt and the desert. During Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles, they build shelters from branches and sleep under the open sky to commemorate their life in tents during the forty years in the wilderness. Moses was never permitted to set foot in Canaan, the Promised Land. At the end of his life, when it was apparent that he was aging, he issued the full text of the laws. This second, revised body of law can be found in the last of the five books of the Torah, Devarim ("The Words"). The Latin name Deuteronomium ("The Second Law") is a loose but not inappropriate translation of the Hebrew text, which reads as "a copy of the law". Moses selected Joshua the son of Nun to lead the Israelites. He then climbed Mount Nebo and died at the age of 120 years.

The Bible story continues with the Book of Joshua, in which the Israelites invade Canaan and defeat its rulers and inhabitants. Episodes include the fall of Jericho, the burning of Hazor and Joshua making the sun stand still at Gibeon. It is difficult to identify archaeological proof of a connection with real history. A similar problem applies in the case of the earlier history and the time in the wilderness. The earliest non-Biblical record of the existence of the Israelites dates from the thirteenth century BCE. A stele honouring the pharaoh Merenptah mentions the extermination of this people, although we cannot now know what they understood by the term Israel. The majority view of modern historians is that Israelite culture developed in the territory of Canaan among the original inhabitants. It is, however, certain that some groups migrated from Egypt and probably brought with them the cult of Yahweh and Egyptian oral traditions that were incorporated into the stories of the patriarchs.



The First Temple

As in the case of the patriarchs, the stories of the judges and the first kings of the Israelites – Saul, David and Solomon, traditional builder of the first temple (the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE) – cannot be verified by the archaeological record or non-Biblical sources. We do not have any evidence of the united monarchy that was supposed to have split into the northern Israel and the southern Judah after the death of King Solomon. The first non-Biblical reference to the “house of David” dates from the ninth century BCE and talks about the growing strength of the kingdom of Israel in the north. In 722 BCE, this kingdom was overthrown and after this date there remained only the sparsely populated kingdom of Judah in the south, to which refugees escaped from the north. At the start of the seventh century BCE it began to prosper together with its capital Jerusalem. According to tradition, the Ark of the Covenant containing the two tablets of the law was kept here in the sanctuary of Solomon’s temple. The budding kingdom became a vassal of the Assyrian Empire and only freed itself at the end of the century. It experienced its “golden age” under King Josiah (639 – 609 BCE). He sought to reform the cult of Yahweh at Jerusalem. The northern kingdom was declared to have been impious because it had allowed the worship of Baal. At the same time the prophets Hosea and Jeremiah warned that the gods of other nations were also being worshipped in Judah and in Jerusalem itself. In 622 BCE, scrolls were found during the repair of Solomon’s temple with the text of the Book of the Law, an older version of the Book of Deuteronomy. This “accidentally” discovered fifth book of Moses is supported by his authority. It is the only book of the Pentateuch that includes the foundations of

Biblical monotheism such as the worshipping of Yahweh alone in Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem and the prohibition on His representation in any form. It also has precisely elaborated rules for the Biblical holy days, various social laws for the protection of the poor and the vulnerable, moral and ethical rules, the release of slaves after six years, love of one’s neighbour and the obligation to rest one day per week. These rules remain a part of life in today’s modern societies. Josiah’s reforms culminated in a national celebration of the Passover at which the Israelites undertook to uphold the Law. It is not known how long the reform remained effective. King Josiah was killed in 609 BCE. His successors had to defend Judah against the growing power of the Babylonian Empire. In 597 BCE, King Jeconiah was captured by King Nebuchadnezzar II and taken together with his court into exile in Babylon. The temple and the palace were looted. The Babylonians installed his uncle Zedekiah as king but he attempted to rebel and in punishment his children were executed and he was blinded. In 587 BCE, the Babylonians demolished Solomon’s Temple, pillaged its treasures and deported the population of Judah to Babylon. The Kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem were destroyed and David’s dynasty had come to an end.



Babylonian Exile

In Babylon, the Jews created a new identity for themselves and the spiritual elite began to sort, extend and amend the texts of the Pentateuch, which would reach its final form around 400 BCE. The stories of the expulsion of the first humans from Paradise, the patriarchs and the Exodus from Egypt, the wandering in the Sinai wilderness and the return to the Promised Land were intensely meaningful for the exiles and gave them hope for the future. The destruction of Solomon’s Temple and the exile were not interpreted in the Jewish tradition as the defeat of Yahweh by the gods of other nations. It was a punishment for the Jewish nation’s disobedience to their own God. In exile, a purely monotheistic form of worship developed, with new rituals such as collective prayer in a synagogue facing towards Jerusalem. It was important to worship regularly. There was an emphasis on individual prayer and study of the Torah, keeping the rituals of the Sabbath and circumcision, to which was added liturgical worship. There was a change in the organisation of society. The priests, who had previously been officials for the king, became the most important social group. The high priest traced his function from Aaron, Moses’ brother. The high priest was also the most senior member of the new theocracy.



The Second Temple

After the Babylonian Empire was defeated by King Cyrus in 538 BCE, the Jews were permitted to return to the land of the Kingdom of Judah, now called Judea. The first group had permission from Cyrus to restore the Jewish homeland and began construction of a new Temple. They are supposed to have carried with them the original temple treasures but the Ark of the Covenant and the stone tablets of the law were no longer among them. Another three groups gradually returned, led by the senior priests. Most Jews remained in exile in Babylon though. The Second Temple was consecrated in 515 BCE. It was the sole centre of the cult of Yahweh and the Deuteronomic Law was upheld there. The key personalities of this period, Ezra and Nehemiah, established the community based on the law and established clear boundaries between the Jews and the other nations.

It was during the Persian period that the Jews defined the canonical form of the most important part of their scriptures – the Torah (the Five Books of Moses). Other books were gradually added to the canon. For believers in Judaism, God's word is the text laid down at the start of the second century BCE. It consists of 24 books and no change can be admitted in their meaning. In Hebrew, they are referred to as the TaNaKh, which is an acronym based on the Hebrew names for its sections: Torah – *Nevi'im* – *Ketuvim*. The definitive form of the text in use today is based on the work of the Masoretes, a group of Jewish scholars active in the eighth to tenth centuries CE who added vowels and vocalisation marks to eliminate errors in reading.

The Jews in Judea retained their religious and spiritual autonomy in the Hellenistic period (323 – 31 BCE) until the rise of the Roman Empire. Jerusalem was governed by the high priest. The Greeks brought their Hellenistic culture into Judea and many Jews adopted their lifestyle and language. During the third century BCE, the Greek king of Egypt, Ptolemy II, commissioned a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which became known as the Septuagint. It was added to the Library of Alexandria in Egypt. Its name comes from the Jewish tradition that seventy Jewish scholars were employed in the translation. Through this translation, Hellenic communities in Europe and Asia Minor began to learn about Judaism.



Maccabee Revolt

The spirit of tolerance was interrupted by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who violated the Jews' religious autonomy and provoked a civil war known as the Maccabee Revolt (166 – 164 BCE). It was led by Judah Maccabee ("the Hammer"). In 164 BCE, the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem. Jewish legend tells that when they entered the desecrated Temple, they found that they only had enough oil to keep the eternal light burning for one day and it would take eight days to make fresh oil. They lit the lamp and it is supposed to have burned miraculously for the full period until fresh oil was prepared. Jews all over the world commemorate this miracle every year on 25 Kislev (in December) as the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah. Over eight days they light one additional candle on a nine-branched Hanukkah menorah (candlestick) – the Hanukkiah. The ninth candle is the *shamash* or attendant, which serves to light the others. On each day of the festival a piece of food fried in oil must be consumed. The Hasmoneans, as the dynasty became known, restored an independent Jewish kingdom after four centuries and it lasted for 111 years (142 – 31 BCE). Their aim was to restore a rigorous Judaism cleansed of Hellenistic influences but they gradually fell under the sway of the same forces, which caused them to lose popular support. They also broke the tradition of the Zadokite lineage of high priests (which extended back to the time of David and Solomon) and kept the post within their family. Their violations of the Law eventually led several sections of Jewish society to rebel against them and a civil war broke out (90 – 85 BCE). This weakened the country and made it easier for the Romans to take over Judea, which they would rule with short intermissions, for the next seven centuries. During the Roman-backed reign of Herod the Great (40 – 4 BCE), the Temple was rebuilt and modernised from the royal budget. The king's aim was to encourage Jews from the diaspora to return to Jerusalem, but it also attracted foreigners to make sacrifices. Despite being unpopular with religious Jews, Herod was the last great king of the Jewish nation and tried to give it a modern, Hellenistic government. His successors were unable to keep popular support and Judea was placed under the direct rule of a Roman governor.

From the time of the Maccabean Revolt, various social groups had been forming that were creating divisions in the Jewish community. The aristocratic priestly class were known as the Sadducees (linked to the tradition of the High Priest Zadok). They claimed to base their faith entirely on the literal interpretation of the written Torah and rejected all oral traditions. Against them, the Pharisees claimed that the written Torah could not cover the complexity of life in the modern age and that it needed additional interpretation based on an oral Torah that Moses was supposed to have received on Mount Sinai and passed down alongside the written text. The Pharisees took over from Hellenism a belief in the immortality of the soul, which the Sadducees probably did not share. After the fall of the Temple, it was the Pharisees who preserved and transformed Judaism for new conditions.

Another heterogeneous group was the Essenes, who are identified with the sect that lived at Qumran by the Dead Sea and preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls, an extremely valuable collection of religious texts. This sect followed a very different path than the Temple cult. They lived separately from society in a way similar to monks – with few possessions and without women. Other sects included Jewish Christians and the militant zealots and sicarii.



The Destruction of the Second Temple

The Romans initially adopted a tolerant approach to Jewish traditions. They respected the prohibition on non-Jews entering the temple, did not force them to adopt the imperial cult and even allowed Judea to have its own coins without the emperor's likeness. They respected their legislative and religious autonomy, which was exercised by the Sanhedrin – a council of seventy elders. At the start of the first century CE, relations between the Romans and the Jews began to worsen. Tense relations within Jewish society, the impoverishment of the population after the completion of work on the Temple, failed harvests and the lack of authority of the monarchy and the Roman administration, which the Jews blamed for bad conditions, led to several uprisings. In 66 CE, an uprising against the Romans turned into a civil war in which the high priest was assassinated. Jews fought against Greeks and Jewish groups fought each other. In 70 (again on 9 Av), Jerusalem fell to General Titus. The Temple was burned, the treasure was looted and the priests were killed. The last rebels held out against the Romans at a fortress called Masada until 74, when they took their own lives. The burning of the Second Temple marked a turning point for Jews. They had lost the centre of their worship and were forbidden to rebuild it. They had to pay a half shekel tax for the temple of Jupiter Capitoline in Rome. The Sanhedrin was dissolved and the priestly elite of the Sadducees, the sicarii and the zealots were massacred. Jerusalem was ruined. The Pharisees took over the spiritual leadership of society.

In 132 – 135 another large uprising against Rome broke out led by Simon bar Kochba. Despite heavy losses, the Romans ultimately suppressed it. The outcome was even more devastating for the Jews. They were expelled from Jerusalem, from whose ruins was built a new city called Aelina Capitolina. They were permitted to enter the city once a year on 9 Av to pray by the remains of the Temple (the Wailing Wall). Judea was swallowed in a new province, Syria Palestine. The decimated Jews formed only a third of its population.

The conflict between Greco-Roman society and the Jews was mainly a result of cultural misunderstanding. Jewish monotheism recognising only one invisible God was incomprehensible for Greco-Roman syncretism, which had no problem accepting and worshipping multiple gods. The Jews also considered the other nations to be heretics for their practice of sacrificing to multiple gods and building idols to them. Another point of cultural and religious contention was circumcision, which the Greeks saw as being equal to castration. They could not understand the strict dietary rules known as kashrut (the body of religious rules governing the preparation and consumption of food) and the strict observation of Sabbath rest seemed lazy to them. They were bothered by the cohesion of Jewish communities and their tendency to segregate themselves from other communities in order to comply with the many commandments of their religion. The Jews had had their state and a rich history and literature long before the Greeks and Romans entered into the light of history and therefore it was difficult for them to accept being ruled by them. The Jews used Greek, knew Greek and Roman literature and culture, while the Greeks did not speak Hebrew or Aramaic and did not know their works. Even with so many differences, many people were sympathetic towards Judaism and some even converted to Judaism.



RABBINIC JUDAISM

There is a Jewish tradition that in 70 CE the Pharisaic Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was saved from the burning of Jerusalem by his students carrying him out in a coffin. He obtained permission from the emperor Vespasian to build an academy that would preserve Judaism for future generations. This legend presents one of the ways in which Judaism and the Jewish nation survived. It was an advantage that the Jews had already survived at least one such catastrophe – they had already devised a new form of religion for use in the Babylon Exile.

The title of rabbi, rav or rabban (my teacher, my lord) began to appear after the fall of the temple. Rabbis promoted the ideas that the Pharisees had developed. To this day, their mission is linked to the study and interpretation of the Law, on which they are experts and commentators. They should not be thought of as priests because they

do not act as intermediaries between God and humanity. They work as teachers and advisors in matters of daily life. They can be the spiritual leaders of their community. In Israel, they act as judges in religious law. The present-day form of Judaism is the work of this group of Jewish scholars and therefore the form of Judaism followed after the fall of the temple is called Rabbinic Judaism.

One of the Rabbis first tasks was to adapt Judaism to new conditions. The forms of worship that had depended on the Temple needed to be brought into Jews' everyday life. The sacrifices that had been performed in the Temple were transformed into prayers. A strong emphasis was placed on studying the Torah and the later Rabbinic literature, rules of purity and diet, holy days and life cycle ceremonies in accordance with the idea "Make your home and your table the Temple". Synagogues also gained in importance. Prayer services took place there regularly according to a fixed structure in which specific sections of the scrolls of the Torah were read on specific days. The scrolls had to be made from the skin of a ritually clean animal and written in special ink by a trained scribe – sofer). In Babylon, the whole Torah was read in 54 parsha (portions) every year. In Palestine, a full reading was spread over three years. Synagogues also served as schools and meeting places for the local community. Another important part of the Jewish community was the mikveh, a bath intended for ritual purification (for which natural running water could also be used). Leading Rabbis in academies in Palestine and Babylonia also handed down rulings or Takkanot to regulate Jewish life after the fall of the Temple. These rulings were not always based on the Hebrew Bible. Palestine had a patriarch who was respected by the Jews living in the region. The most influential of these was Yehudah HaNasi (Judah the Prince). The higher authority, however, was the exilarch or rosh galut – the head of the diaspora – who was based in Babylonia. The exilarchs claimed a lineage from King Jeconiah, who had been taken into captivity in Babylon. They were also respected by the Persian rulers. The office lasted into the eleventh century while Palestinian patriarchate lasted only until the fifth century.



The Talmud

In the first and second centuries, the Rabbis began to write down the oral Torah, which became known as the Mishna ("study by repetition"), with the final revision being made by the Palestinian rabbi, Yehudah HaNasi, around the year 200. The Mishna's contents are halakha (religious law). It is divided into six "orders" covering tax and social law, the rules for festivals, family, civil and criminal law, rules for sacrifice and dietary rules, and finally the rules of ritual purity. Over the following centuries, other Rabbis extended the Mishna and wrote commentaries on it, which were collected in the Gemara ("addendum"). The Mishna and the Gemara together make up the Talmud. There are two substantially different versions of the Talmud – the Jerusalem Talmud, completed in the fifth century and the more careful and precise Babylonian (Bavil) Talmud

completed a century later. They include rules for all aspects of Jewish life and develop logical thinking and argumentation. Together with the Torah they are the basis for the practice of Rabbinic Judaism. The study of the Torah, the Talmud, their commentaries and other Rabbinic literature is a lifelong obligation for every Jewish believer.



The Middle Ages in the Muslim Countries

After the fall of the Temple the majority of Jews lived in the diaspora. From the time of the Babylonian Exile there had remained a large community in that part of the world which had spread throughout Mesopotamia. From the seventh century, this population lived mainly under Muslim rule. Islam never had a uniform attitude to the Jewish or Christian communities living on its territory. The followers of monotheistic religions had a protected status (dhimmi) and payed a special tax. They were seen as "peoples of the book" and except for a few periods they were tolerated, although they were obliged to distinguish themselves from the Muslim population in certain ways. Full civic rights were reserved to Muslims. When Baghdad was the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate it had a rich Jewish quarter, which shared in the city's prosperity. The Jews learned the language of the scholars, Arabic, and supported Jewish academies. In the twelfth century, there were 40,000 Jews in the city with 28 synagogues and 10 academies. At that time, there were only a few hundred Jews living in European cities. Judaism also prospered in Egypt under the Fatimid and Ayyubid dynasties. In Umayyad Spain, there were substantial communities in Granada, Cordoba, Toledo and Seville amongst others. As in the east, here too they integrated fully in economic and cultural life. The culture now known as Sephardic Judaism (Sephardi = Spanish or Hispanic) developed in this community with its own dialect (ladino) and other cultural differences.

From studies in Arabic Jews took up the analysis of Biblical texts and many Jewish scholars produced systematic works on religious thought, notable examples being Saadia Gaon, Abraham ibn Daud and Yehuda ha-Levi. Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon 1135 – 1204), one of Judaism's greatest personalities, came from Cordoba. He spent much of his life in Fustat in Egypt because his family had been forced to flee from the fanatical Almoravids and Almohads who conquered Morocco and southern Spain at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Maimonides wrote many of the basic works that are still used in yeshivas (rabbinic schools) today such as the Commentary on the Mishna, in which he rationalised and condensed the Gemara, the Guide for the Perplexed, which taught how Biblical texts are interpreted literally by the general population and allegorically by educated readers, and the Mishneh Torah, a code of religious law. He also wrote thirteen articles of faith (dogmas) for Judaism. To this day, these are binding in Orthodox Judaism.

In the thirteenth century, the Islamic world began to come under pressure from Christians in the west and Mongols in the east. The social and economic situation

changed, and so did the level of tolerance for minority religions. In Egypt, the Jews were forced to wear distinctive clothing and under the Mamluk dynasty anti-minority laws were enacted. There were also massacres of the Jewish minority in Iraq in the thirteenth century and in Fez in the fifteenth century.



The Middle Ages in the Christian Countries

There was considerable tension between the Christian Church and Judaism. Christianity became the dominant force in the fourth century, when the Roman emperor Constantine the Great (312 – 337) granted equal rights to all religions (including Judaism) and then in 380 Theodosius I (379 – 395) made it the state religion. In the time of Constantine, penalties were imposed on people who converted to Judaism. In 325 a church council at Nicaea prohibited the celebration of Passover at the same time as the Christian Easter, and banned circumcision and the ownership of non-Jewish slaves – in order to limit conversions. Subsequent councils prohibited mixed marriages and imposed heavy penalties for conversion from Christianity to Judaism. They also requested that Jews should not be appointed to high office. In the sixth century, these were incorporated into the civil law in the Code of Justinian.

Islam was aware of the monotheistic traditions of Judaism and Christianity but it was based on a new religious vision and saw itself as replacing them. It did not take over the scriptures of the monotheistic religions but created its own holy book, the Quran. Christianity, however, grew directly out of Judaism and took over its scriptures as the Old Testament, which it reinterpreted and combined with its New Testament. It proclaimed itself as the continuation. This led to an ambivalent relationship between Christianity and Judaism. On the one hand, it was aware of its origin in Judaism while, on the other, to distinguish itself, it asserted the truth of Christian views and the errors of the Jews. According to the Christians, the Jews had misunderstood God's plan and the messianic mission and had wrongly interpreted the Torah. Its true meaning was understood only by Christians, their successors and therefore the Jews had lost their position of chosen nation. Christianity's relationship to Judaism was defined by church fathers such as St Jerome and St Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries. Jews should live in poverty at the margins of Christian society for theological reasons – they proved the authenticity of the Old Testament. Their humiliation was necessary as proof of the truth of Christianity. Their exile (galut) and the loss of Jerusalem and their homeland were God's punishment. Christians should not kill them. In time, they themselves would recognise the truth and accept conversion to Christianity.

Until the year 1000 there were relatively few Jews in Europe and there were few complications in their relations with Christians. Their first enclaves had appeared at the turn of the first and second centuries when they arrived mainly in southern lands (the south of France, Italy and Sicily) together with the Roman legions. In the

eleventh century, their numbers started to grow and small communities (kehilla) were established first in western and later in northern and eastern Europe. Significant communities settled in northern France and on the Rhine, in the towns of Troyes, Mainz, Worms, Speyer, Cologne and Trier. Here, as in the Iberian Peninsula, a specific sort of Judaism began to develop which became known as Ashkenazi (German) Judaism. The Jews were welcomed at first because they brought economic skills and development, and they were good tax-payers. Individual communities received privileges that could be extended to the whole Jewish population. The tolerant period came to an end with the launching of the Crusades. The Jews were perceived as "infidels" responsible for the crucifixion and were murdered or forced to convert as fanatical bands of crusaders travelled across Europe to the Holy Land. Although they had many wealthy people on their side, including kings and popes, they visibly declined in Europe. This was the period when the Aramaic prayer Kadish was first prayed for the dead and the anniversaries of deaths (yahrzeit) began to be marked.

The legal status of Jews in medieval Europe had a significant effect on the life of Jewish communities. It permitted them to keep their own religion and laws in the Christian world, to engage in business and required them to pay taxes and fees that were higher than for Christians. The majority were subject directly to the emperor or the king and encroaching on their property was the same as encroaching on royal property. Changes to the law gradually reduced their social status and limited their participation in crafts and trade. The Third Lateran Council adopted a canonical prohibition for Christians to lend money for interest. As the Jews were shut out of more and more areas of economic life, they had to take up this business to survive. They were placed at the mercy of their patrons, who often ordered the cancellation of debts or interest (for crusades, for example), confiscated Jews' assets to fill the royal treasury and then expelled them from their towns and countries. Many rulers also forbade the Jews to engage in money-lending under pressure from the church. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) required Jews to wear a yellow disc on their clothing because there was no means of distinguishing by speech, clothing or behaviour between Jews and Christians, which is an indication of the degree of their integration in medieval society. Another purpose of distinguishing marks was to prevent intimate contact between Jews, Saracens and Christians. Jews' status suffered due to their exclusion from certain forms of business and the segregation of trades such as butchery, leatherwork, shoemaking and tailoring (and later also printing) in connection with dietary rules and the restrictions on materials that could be used in clothing. Medicine was the only subject that they were allowed to study at medieval universities (Padua). In earlier periods, they had been prohibited from owning land (a vassal had to swear a Christian oath to their lord) and they were now prohibited to work on the land or hold public office. The Council also set a maximum level of interest for financial loans which was unsustainable based on the tiny returns that it offered. From the twelfth century Jews were endangered by the spread of various rumours, for example accusations of ritual murder – a famous case being in 1144 in Norwich, England, but there were also rumours in France, Germany and elsewhere. In the thirteenth century people were outraged by accusations of Jews profaning communion wafers and a century later they were accused of spreading the plague. Even though secular and church authorities defended them in many cases,

they were expelled from many German towns. It was in the twelfth century that the demonic image of the Jew became a feature of Christian art. Even so, Jews continued to live in Europe and looked forward to more tolerant relations after tense periods.

Many significant scholars worked in Europe during the middle ages. Rabbi Gershom ben Yehudah (960 – 1040) from Mainz became known as the Meor Hagolah – the Light of the Exile. He was a famous Talmudist and Halakhist and established as many as 25 takkanot (binding rules) at a synod in Mainz. This gathering of Jewish religious leaders was convened to answer questions in family law – polygamy was banned for a trial period of a thousand years, problems raised by levirate marriage and forced conversion were resolved, divorce was prohibited without the wife's consent and the reading of others' private correspondence was prohibited. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040 – 1105) was perhaps the greatest of the European scholars and was the head of an academy at Troyes. He wrote a commentary on the Torah and his commentary on the Babylonian Talmud has never been bettered and is now incorporated into most editions. Nahmanides (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, 1194 – 1270), a third example, lived in Catalonia, in Christian Spain. He was working in a period when the Christian church began to have an interest in the Talmud and individual Jewish scholars were asked to defend the teachings of Judaism and the Talmud at meetings of Christian scholars. The rabbi won one such "dispute" held at Barcelona in 1263 under the auspices of King James I of Aragon and wrote a report about it. Although the king guaranteed his safety, he was persecuted by the church and eventually migrated to Palestine. Another famous incident of the thirteenth century was the public burning of the Talmud and the prohibition of its use because the Christian church considered it an obstacle to the Jews' conversion to Christianity.

In the strictly Catholic Spain of the fourteenth century, Christian missionaries applied heavy pressure on the synagogues for the conversion of Jews. Many gave into this pressure to convert. These "conversos" then had the same rights as the majority population, for whom they became competition. There were rumours that they remained "secret Jews". In 1481 an inquisition was begun in which not only Jews but also inconvenient Christians were condemned for heresy based on the claims of informers, who could be their own neighbours. In 1492 the Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon conquered the last Muslim stronghold on the Iberian Peninsula, Granada. As a measure to create a unified Christian Spain and prevent "new Christians" from returning to Judaism, they issued an edict expelling all Jews who did not convert. Around 150,000 Jews escaped to Portugal, from which they were also deported in 1497, mostly travelling through Gibraltar to Africa and the Ottoman Empire. Many others accepted baptism and remained in Spain.



The Modern Age

The expulsion of the Jews from Spain provoked a great migration in central and eastern Europe. The growing number of Jews in the German-speaking countries created an unfriendly atmosphere in the Christian population. They were driven out during the sixteenth century and migrated further east – to Ukraine, Poland and Russia. Some of the Sephardic Jews settled in the north, in Calvinist Holland, which showed much greater tolerance.

A large group moved to Venice, where a strong community had existed since the tenth century. In 1516, following the arrival of Sephardic Jews, the city set aside an area formerly occupied by iron foundries ("geto") and required Jews to live there. In 1555, Pope Paul IV ordered Jews to live in segregated districts which would be closed at night. In this way, the phenomenon of the ghetto spread to many countries in Europe. Although this segregation was forced, it gave the Jews greater physical and legal security. Strong social control in a closed space permitted the strict upholding of the Jewish law and the development of Jewish culture, art and education. The first Hebrew printing press was established in the Venice ghetto. At the start of the sixteenth century it published the Jerusalem and Babylon Talmuds and other central works in Jewish literature which it distributed to communities all over the world.

There were still significant numbers of Jews living in the east. In 1453, the Byzantine Empire had come to an end with the fall of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire had been established. The strong Jewish community that had existed here from the time of the Babylonian Exile was reinforced at the end of the fifteenth century by Sephardic Jews exiled from Spain. In 1517 the Ottomans conquered Palestine and Jewish immigration increased further. By the end of the seventeenth century Sephardic Jews made up two thirds of the Jewish population. The Jews were made welcome because the sultan found that they were good for the economy and paid tax regularly. Although they had the lesser status of *dhimmi*, the rules were often waived. The Ottoman Empire was a multicultural state where many nations maintained their own cultural and religious traditions, including the Sephardic Jews. They brought with them the Kabbalistic books that had been written in manuscript form since around the sixth century in southern Italy, southern France and Spain. The centre of Jewish scholarship developed at Safed in Galilee. Rabbi Joseph Caro (1488 – 1575), the author of the last great codification of Jewish law, lived here. His code of law, the Sulchan Aruch (The Set Table) is still considered a classic work on Jewish religious practice throughout the world. Ashkenazi practices were incorporated into this code by Rabbi Moses Isserles of Krakow in the work HaMapah (The Tablecloth). Another important scholar who worked here was the famous mystic and Kabbalist, Isaac Luria (1534 – 1572). He established a new mystical philosophy, Lurianic Kabbalah, that was spread rapidly through printing.



The Kabbalah and Messianic Movements

The term Kabbalah ("Tradition") originally applied to all Jewish teachings apart from the Five Books of Moses. Jewish mysticism is an offshoot of the Jewish traditions developed during the rabbinic period. The mystical Kabbalah began as the search for a new path to God turning faith into a living and tangible experience. It was based on values of special significance in Judaism – creation, revelation and salvation. The teaching appealed to Jews all over the world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when they were eagerly awaiting salvation and the arrival of the messiah. This explains why so many were persuaded by Sabbatai's pseudo-messianic movement and other false "messiahs" who stirred up the diaspora communities across the Middle East. Even when these movements ended in disappointment, new mystical movements took their place, the most successful of which at present is Hasidism.

Poland and Lithuania offered better conditions for Jews than the German-speaking countries. While western European countries began expelling them in the thirteenth century (1290 England; 1306, 1394 France; 1492 Spain, German cities in the sixteenth century), settlement in the east was supported by the rulers and until the fifteenth century, spreading of blood libel and similar rumours was prohibited. Jews made up a large part of the urban population and lived by trade, crafts and money-lending. The communities were autonomous with their own courts and collective representation before the state administration. Jews were able to perform their religious rituals in daily life. They communicated using their own language, Yiddish, which was based on German with many Hebrew and Slavic expressions.

The Polish nobility often hired them to manage their estates in Poland and also in Ukraine after they annexed it in 1569. Serving as tax collectors made them unpopular with people who worked the land. In 1648 – 1649, high taxes caused by the Thirty Years War provoked a peasants' revolt known as the Cossack Uprising led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky. This was primarily a national uprising against the Polish state and a religious conflict between the Orthodox Ukrainian peasantry and the Roman Catholic Polish nobility. The Jews were caught between them and were the visible agents of Polish aristocrats who remained utterly remote from the peasants. The Cossacks and the Ukrainian peasants destroyed hundreds of Jewish settlements and massacred their population. The word "pogrom" was born in this time. Many emigrated back to the German-speaking countries and the Netherlands, others went to the East. The suffering that the Jews experienced may have been a cause of the Messianic movements that developed in the region. Podolia, the region where Hasidism was born in the eighteenth century, had suffered in Bohdan Khmelnytsky's uprising. It was also an area where legends and occultism were widespread. Into this febrile environment came Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, who became known as the Baal Shem Tov (the Besht – the Master of the Good Name, 1698 – 1760). He was a folk healer and popular mystic. Many legends were told about him, which

were later written down by Martin Buber. He founded a new mystical tradition with a strong emphasis on spirituality. He said that an ordinary person who prayed devoutly was closer to God than a scholar of the Talmud. Prayer combined with ecstatic dancing, alcohol and other intoxicants was a good way to achieve a spiritual state. The Hasidim ("pious people") were opposed by the Misnagedim ("Opponents") among the Rabbis, who were led by Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, the Vilna Gaon (1720 – 1797). He went so far as to pronounce a curse (cherem) on the Hasidim because they did not study the Torah, treated every day as a festival, prayed from false texts and screamed while doing so. The successors of the Besht turned away from the popular ecstatic aspects of Hasidism and began to study the Talmud and Kabbalah and participate in traditional Jewish scholarship. It is now split into many branches and is part of "Ultra-Orthodox" Judaism.

After the wave of pseudo-messianic movements, the Rabbis promoted even stricter study and education. Until modern times, Poland remained a centre of traditional Jewish scholarship and Rabbinic education institutions (yeshivas), which trained many of the rabbis working in western and central Europe.



The European Enlightenment and Emancipation

European humanist and enlightenment philosophers gradually began to adopt a pragmatic attitude to Jews and discussed their integration into modern society. At the end of the seventeenth century John Locke wrote a "Letter Concerning Toleration" arguing for the admission of religious minorities to national political and social life. Many western states opened their borders and permitted Jewish immigration (Britain, France, strong communities in Amsterdam and Hamburg). The German-speaking countries had employed several Jews as "court Jews" to the nobility and royalty. They were responsible for negotiating business and arranging financing. They were respected as representatives of their community, the founders and sponsors of education, Hebrew printing presses and Jewish institutions. They often lived outside the ghetto and took on the lifestyle of Christian society. Their position was entirely dependent on their paymasters. Despite the change in perceptions, many countries continued to impose restrictive measures (restrictions on birth, conclusion of marriage, worship only in private, life in the ghetto etc.).

The new economic theory of mercantilism encouraged countries to increase their trade and supported immigration insofar as it helped the state to prosper. Jews once again began to be seen as a useful group. In many countries, including the German-speaking countries, there was an effort to centralise control of the state. This led a gradual separation of church and state and the ending of the autonomy of independent religious groups. This raised the question of whether they should be granted equal rights with the majority population. The process in western and central Europe lasted

about a hundred years from the end of the eighteenth century. As modern European nation states developed, the importance of membership of this or that religious group declined. Governments issued laws prohibiting punishment for religious offences such as refusal to practise religion, which had previously been punishable with death. It was important to identify with the nation. The thinking of the European enlightenment had an effect on Jewish scholars. They called themselves maskilim (enlightened people) and their movement aimed at modernising Jewish society and allowing it to integrate with the majority was called Haskalah.

In the 1770s the Haskalah became influential in the German-speaking world. A leading figure was Moses Mendelssohn (1729 – 1786), a Jewish philosopher who won recognition also in non-Jewish German academic circles. With the support of his friend, the German dramatist and writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, he began to publish his philosophical works. He tried to explain his attitude to Judaism and to illuminate the characteristics of the religion for the majority society. He became a spokesman for Judaism in the German-speaking countries. He believed that if Jews wanted to live amongst a majority culture and have equal rights and obligations, they would have to adopt the language of the country they were living in and assimilate. The practice of Judaism should be an entirely private matter. For this vision to be realised, it would be necessary to modernise Judaism and adapt it to the demands and possibilities of the modern world. Modern Jewish schools were opened in Berlin and other cities which taught secular subjects and the local language, which the reformists also began to use in their worship. Until then education had been entirely religious in character and had been intended primarily for the male population. The new schools were attended by girls too. As part of the religious emancipation process, the European countries adopted laws allowing Jews to attend university. This made it possible for them to enter previously closed careers. Emancipation or the “opening of the ghetto”, which meant establishing equal rights in economic, political and religious life was a long process that proceeded at different speeds in different countries (France 1789 – 1831; Italy 1793 – 1870; Prussia 1812 – 1847, Great Britain 1858; Austria-Hungary 1781 – 1895).



Different Views on Judaism

Changes in the status of Jews and the effect of the Haskalah changed the ways in which Judaism was practised in everyday life. It divided into a number of branches in the nineteenth century. In 1810 the first Neolog / Liberal synagogue opened in Seesen. It had an organ and a choir (neither of which were acceptable for Orthodox Judaism) and sermons were preached in German. In 1869 the first Reform Judaism community was established in Berlin. Prayer services were conducted in German and even on a Sunday – the liberal Jews wanted to adapt to the life of the majority society to the greatest possible extent. They argued against the literal interpretation of the Torah because the demands of the dietary rules, the prohibition of work on the Sabbath and so on did

not meet the needs of the time and the reformists did not accept the divine origin of the Rabbinic tradition (the Talmud and its interpretation). Faith in the return of the Messiah also gradually declined in their prayers. The Rabbis dressed like protestant pastors and the bema (the elevated platform with the lectern at which the Torah is read) was situated at the front rather than in the centre, as it is in Orthodox synagogues. Boys (aged 13 years) and girls (aged 12 years) celebrated joint bar/bat mitzvah (“son/daughter of the commandment”) ceremonies, at which they read from the Torah scrolls in front of the congregation for the first time. In this way, they became adults in the religion, responsible for upholding the mitzvot (religious commandments). In Orthodox communities, girls are not called to the Torah nor are they counted towards the minyan (the ten Jewish adults necessary to hold a public religious ceremony). Liberal Judaism also allows women to be rabbis.

Orthodox Jews consider the law to be eternal and unchanging as it is laid down in the Torah, the Talmud, halakha and commentary. They reject all attempts to adapt Judaism to the requirements of modern life and seek to uphold the mitzvot in even the most complex conditions. Rabbis study the Talmud, its commentaries, the Sulchan Aruch and other religious works in yeshivas. Religious adult males are obliged to uphold the 613 mitzvot throughout their life; women are exempt from this rule because they have a different path. Their duty is to care for their household, their husband and their children, to introduce them to religion in infancy and uphold the kashrut rules in the household. Additionally, it is their duty to mark the Sabbath on Friday evening by lighting candles and reciting a blessing, and the wife and husband are jointly responsible for maintaining family/ritual purity (Taharat Hamishpacha). Although they received less education than men in the past, they were still better educated than their Christian neighbours and many of them studied the rabbinical texts. Nowadays, education is a natural part of daily life and it is often said that “women are the neck that turns the head”. This branch is sometimes referred to inaccurately as “Ultra-Orthodox” Judaism. Followers of this branch refer to themselves as Haredim (“God-fearing”) They live in several communities around the world such as Mea Shearim (Jerusalem), Bnei Brak (Tel Aviv), New Jersey (USA). They make up 5 – 10 % of the world’s Jewish population.

A branch intended to be a modern alternative to Orthodox Judaism was founded by Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808 – 1888). Neo-Orthodox (“Modern Orthodox”) combines Rabbinic Judaism with modern western civilisation. Secular education is seen to have benefits. The Torah is not to be changed, however, and any aspects of modern life that conflict with it must be filtered out. This branch is most widespread in the USA and Israel.

Conservative Judaism makes a compromise between Orthodox and Liberal Judaism. It combines traditional Judaism with a modern historical and critical approach. It was inspired by Rabbi Zecharias Frankel (1801 – 1875) who argued for retaining the use of Hebrew in worship. This branch accepts the revealed authority of the Torah and the Talmud but permits small changes that do not violate the law. It also allows some relaxation of the kashrut, admits women in the minyan and has allowed them to become rabbis since the 1970s.

Another development alongside the formation of these religious branches was the rise of Jewish nationalism in western Europe from the 1890s. This movement was inspired by Theodor Herzl (1860 – 1904). It has both secular and religious aspects. It was a response to a number of issues – modernity in Jewish and European society, the secularisation of society, the need to preserve the Jewish identity, Anti-Semitism and European nationalism. The Zionists achieved their ambition to recreate a homeland for all Jews in 1948. The state of Israel is a secular state but it accepts certain Jewish religious traditions in daily life. It makes provision for the rules of kashrut and the Sabbath, allows the regulation of family and personal status by the Halakha and observes Jewish festivals as state holidays. At present, there are over seven million Jews in Israel. A larger number remain scattered in the diaspora, primarily in the USA, to a lesser extent in western Europe and in a minimal extent in central and eastern Europe, which is a consequence of the Second World War and the region's totalitarian regimes. Around a half of them practice Judaism in the forms described above. The remainder are secular Jews.

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*JUDAISM
obverse / reverse
embossed medals in silver, 6 cm diameter, 2015*



Buddhism



BUDDHISM
 obverse / reverse
 embossed medals in gold, 6 cm diameter, 2014



BUDDHISM

Buddhism was history's first world religion – the first religion to spread beyond the boundaries of the culture of its birth. Half the world's population live in countries where Buddhism plays, or used to play a dominant religious role. At present, it has around 350 million adherents living mainly in Asia.

THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS (DHARMA)

Rejecting the concept of the soul while also rejecting materialism is the famous Buddhist "middle way", the most characteristic feature of Buddhist teaching (*Dhamma/Dharma*). Siddhartha Gautama, better known as the Buddha (literally the "Awakened One"), taught that each of these extremes was a barrier to religious life. The first, because teaching about an eternal soul (*Atta/Atman*) in its various forms always assumes the existence of something absolute, perfect and therefore unchanging, which are precisely the characteristics that would make it resistant to any religious act. A similar effect results from a materialism rejecting the basic principle of Indian religion in the Buddha's time, which is that a people experience rebirth after rebirth in accordance with their past deeds (*karma*) and that the aim of a religious life is to escape from the cycle of reincarnation.

The Buddha and the tradition of Buddhist thinkers following him offered many arguments against the soul and against materialism. What alternatives did they offer?

Buddhist doctrine argues that it is impossible to separate a thing from the way it is perceived. The external world always incorporates something from us ourselves: when we put on rose-tinted spectacles, the world changes colour; people perceive the world differently from, for example, bees; values, customs and priorities change. Precisely because we are involved in the creation of the world and all that it contains – including our own image, we are able to change the world, and therefore the work of religion has meaning. This is the key concept that the history of Buddhist thinking has expressed in many ways and forms. The Buddha's teaching was that non-self (*Anatta/Anatman*) and impermanence (*Anicca/Anitya*) are characteristics of everything that exists, in contrast to his contemporaries' teaching about the soul (*Atta/Atman*). People do not have a soul and things do not have their own nature independently of us. The unsatisfactory nature of the world (*duhka/dukkha*) and the need for release from the wheel of reincarnation is a result of precisely these two characteristics. Later Buddhist philosophers preferred the expression emptiness (*shunyata*) to "*anatta*" in order to express that things are only what we put into them by custom, that of themselves they are "empty". They also spoke about "only sentient beings" emphasising the critical role of thought in religious life and the formation of the world. All emphasised that the way in which the world is formed is only under our control in a very limited extent. The whole process is dominated by *karma* – our past actions and the traces that they leave in our mind. Their effects last for more than one lifetime; from the viewpoint of Buddhism a lifetime is an abstraction in the same way that "one day" is. The reality is a continuous flow of changing feelings, perceptions, unconscious content and physical characteristics. Later schools of Buddhism spoke about Karma literally as a "habit" – the way in which we perceive the world and what we do settles in our mind (literally "perfumes" the memory) and thus determines our subsequent perception of the world and our actions. Karma is nourished by attachment and ignorance: because we do not know that things are never independent of what we put into them, they become objects of desire or aversion and thus the motivation of our actions. The only way to confront the habit of karma is through meditation, a specific technique for developing focussed attention (*vipassana*) on one's actions and mental states. This was the method by which the founder of Buddhism Siddhartha Gautama "woke up" to the correct view of the world and became the Buddha.

We can say with certainty that the Buddha's teachings were originally intended only for a small group of wandering ascetics and involved developing awareness of all one's own feelings and actions – from mystic trances, which other religious groups considered to be contact with the absolute, to the experiences of defecation and urination. Converting the most trivial and the most refined things into neutral objects of contemplation produces a fundamental change in one's perception of the world – things that we routinely consider to be fixed objects become a continuously changing flow of properties that do not belong to anything permanent. There is no "my", "his" or "I".

Contact with other religious doctrines, the laity and the creation of a monastic community had the "unforeseen consequence" of gradually establishing a Buddhist philosophy and cosmology including heavens, hells, spiritual empires and their mythical inhabitants, and also the adoption of universal ethical standards and the formulation of specific monastic codes of conduct.

While its philosophy and cosmology helped to distinguish the Buddhist meditation experience from the many other ways of experiencing a different consciousness and the rules for monks created conditions for spiritual development, the religious life of the Buddhist laity was no different from the standard religious practice of the time. It involved compliance with standard rules of ethics (not to kill, not to steal, to avoid lying, insults and gossip, to avoid inappropriate sexual behaviour and intoxicants) and there was an emphasis on charitable giving (every altruistic gift was a religious act bringing "merit", meaning better karma). Only the study of the transcendental Dharma – the teaching of the three marks of existence (*anatta, anicca, dukkha*) and the path of liberation are a uniquely Buddhist practice. The general formulation of the path to *nirvana* is the noble eightfold path. Its divisions are designed to develop moral virtues, meditation and insight:

The area of moral virtues includes right speech (abstaining from words that may cause harm), right action (abstaining from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct) and right livelihood (abstaining from harm of other beings). Meditation includes right effort (suppressing unwholesome states and cultivating wholesome states), right mindfulness (seeking to do everything that a person does with full consciousness) and right concentration: the specific technique of Buddhist meditation designed to develop full consciousness. This begins with a concentrated focus on the breath which is gradually transferred to feelings and thoughts and finally to the world-view described by the Buddha. This view (right view) belongs to the area of insight and is the foundation for the last division of the path, right thought, which is thought liberated from anger, hatred and attachment.

Even in the first stage of its development, Buddhist meditation was a very complex system. Besides direct techniques for focussing attention it includes a range of techniques for suppressing habits that are unwholesome for spiritual development. For example, the contemplation of decomposing bodies at a burial site would reduce sexual appetite and the contemplation of kindness would negate anger. Some meditation techniques are said to develop supernatural abilities and to this day they provide a strong motivation to enter a monastic order.



BUDDHA

Historians now agree that the Buddha was a real person in history who later became enshrouded in layers of myths. He was born as Siddhartha Gautama around 2500 years ago, probably in a district in southern Nepal, according to tradition in a garden at Lumpini not far from the town of Kapilavastu. Kapilavastu was the seat of his father Suddhodana, the leader of the Shakya clan, and his wife Majadevi, Siddhartha's mother. The future Buddha, also known as Shakyamuni ("the sage of the Shakya clan") spent approximately the first thirty years of his life here. Probably in response to a deep emotional experience, which Buddhist mythology represents in the story of four trips from the palace on which

the Buddha met in turn with a sick person, an old person, a dead person and finally an ascetic seeking escape from the cycle of death and rebirth, Shakyamuni left his palace to live in the forest and seek a way to free himself from his woes. In the Buddha's times, India was undergoing a transformation in religious ideology. The emphasis was moving away from religious rituals to a personal search for the "supreme reality" – referred to as *Atta*, *Atman*, *Brahman*, *Purusha*... depending on the religious tradition. Union with the Absolute would mean freedom from the sorrows of reincarnation. Becoming a homeless wanderer was a typical part of this search. After years of palace life and six years of severe asceticism in the forests, Shakyamuni realised that none of the extremes would lead to final liberation (*nibbana/nirvana* – extinguishing, blowing out) and identified a "middle way" between them: the development of mindfulness and a moderate lifestyle in place of severe asceticism. Practising in this way leads to a liberating knowledge of the world and after achieving enlightenment the Buddha declared:

"This liberation is final; this has been my last birth and there will be no further rebirth for me."

The Buddha then preached his teachings for around forty years. He died at the age of eighty, according to Buddhist tradition at the village of Kushinara in the present-day Indian state of Uttar Pradesh on the day of the full moon in the month of Vaisaka in the Indian lunar calendar (April or May in the Gregorian calendar). He thus died on the same day as he was born and achieved liberation on. This day is one of the most important official Buddhist holy days. Likewise, the locations of the Buddha's birth, awakening (Bodhigara) and *parinirvana* – death, with no subsequent rebirth – are important Buddhist pilgrimage destinations.

After his awakening, the Buddha did not feel like either a god or a man – he had ended the cycle of reincarnation, which is neither a human nor divine situation. Both humans and gods die and after death they are reborn according to their karma. Mythology has accumulated around this supernatural aspect of the Buddha and later schools of Mahayana Buddhism, now followed mainly in the countries of East Asia, have explained the historical Buddha as an illusion, a projection of the eternal law or "dharma body". An opposite modern distortion is to focus solely on the human character of the Buddha.

Nevertheless, all Buddhist traditions see the historical Buddha as one of many Buddhas who periodically appear in the world to proclaim the Dharma. The Buddha of the modern age is Maitreya, who is currently waiting in one of the Buddhist heavens, and it is the desire of Buddhists across a range of denominations to be born in a time when he comes in human form so that they can finally find liberation under his teaching.



THE MONASTIC COMMUNITY AND BUDDHISM AFTER THE BUDDHA

Gautama Buddha established what is now the longest lasting monastic tradition in history. Its role was to create conditions for achieving nirvana and to preserve and spread the Buddha's teaching.

These teachings were communicated orally until the first century BCE, when the canon of the oldest surviving Buddhist tradition, Theravada ("school of the elder monks"), was written down in Sri Lanka. The canon of this tradition is known as the Pali canon because of the language used in the text. The Buddha did not appoint a successor – an authority in the interpretation of his teachings – and the whole monastic community (the *sangha*) was supposed to ensure the preservation of the Dharma. The community included "living books", specialists in memorising particular parts of the Dharma. The Buddha also laid down several methods for verifying the correct interpretation of the Dharma. The original monastic community included both monks and nuns. While the line of monks (*bhikshu/bhikkhu*, literally "mendicant") continues to this day, the line of nuns (*bhikshuni/bhikkuni*) was interrupted in India around the twelfth century and continues only outside it. Since there are not enough nuns to ordain new members of the order, Buddhist nuns are not found in the Theravada countries (south and south-east Asia). Although there are efforts to restore the lineage, nuns ordained in non-Theravada lineages are not officially recognised in the Theravada countries.

The Theravada canon contains 227 basic rules for monks and 311 rules for nuns. These regulate behaviour in practically every area of life: from universal ethical standards – to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, to special monastic rules: remaining celibate, keeping apart from money and valuables, not to eat after midday and so on. There are also rules for communicating with the laity, with members of other religions, with women, how to walk, what posture to keep, the putting on of the monk's robes, the handling of objects, a list of things that monks can and cannot receive and even rules on the correct way to empty one's bowels. This basic codex was later adapted into various local forms. The common characteristic of what may at first sight appear to be absurdly detailed rules is an effort to create conditions for development of mindfulness and to avoid difficulties with lay Buddhists and members of other confessions.

The behaviour of the monks and the purity of the monastic community were always priorities for Buddhist communities. The “middle way” to nirvana is based on the assumption that a true understanding of teaching is only possible through meditation. Moral virtue and control of action are essential conditions for meditation. What is more, because monks are officially prohibited from working, the monastic community is dependent for its existence on the lay community. In return for economic support the monks spread the Dharma and through their exemplary conduct they create good karma in which lay people can share through alms giving. Thirdly, the prosperity of Buddhist kingdoms were traditionally linked to the quality of the monastic community. Monarchs, who considered themselves to be future Buddhas, would periodically “cleanse” the monastic community of unsuitable monks in order to demonstrate their interest in the sangha and the state’s welfare.

In the beginning the monastic community was peripatetic, which means that the monks travelled around the country without a permanent residence. Later the Buddha stipulated that monks should live in one place in groups during the rainy season. The social elite provided land – usually close to towns and larger settlements – and resources for the construction of the monks’ dwellings, and over time these temporary dwellings developed into monasteries. To this day, the sangha in south-east Asia is formally divided into monks who live in monasteries in towns and villages, and “forest monks” who keep themselves more isolated. This division is reflected, although not exclusively, in the religious orientation of the monks – monks living in towns are usually concerned with the study of Dharma, while forest monks place more emphasis on meditation and often consider books to be an obstacle to spiritual development. Buddhist texts record disputes over the importance of these two orientations for achieving *nirvana* at the earliest stages of development. Although the Buddha emphasised the necessity and the interdependence of both perspectives, the history of Buddhism tends to be the history of preferences for one or the other type of practice.

After the Buddha’s death, the monastic community organised councils aimed at agreeing a standard interpretation of his teachings. Tradition states that immediately after the Buddha’s death, a great council took place at Rajagaha, at which the Dharma was set out essentially in the form in which we know it from the Theravada canon. This first great council is probably just a fiction but smaller gatherings that consolidated the teachings were an important part of Buddhism’s development during this period. One such council took place under the auspices of probably one of the most important Buddhist rulers, Ashoka, who ruled from 268 to 232 BCE.

Although Ashoka supported all religions, the one he promoted most was Buddhism. According to the Mahavamsa, the chronicle of early Sri Lankan history, Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries on missions to Sri Lanka, across south-east Asia and north of the Himalayas. His royal edicts, carved into stones and pillars that he erected all over his empires are the oldest surviving Buddhist texts. One of the edicts states:

“King Piyadasi, beloved of God, wishes that all religions should prosper everywhere, for they all share the aim of self-control and purity of heart. People have different desires and passions, and may abide by all or just a part of what religions require of them. But a person will be unworthy, whatever other gifts they may have, if they lack self-control, purity of heart, gratitude and diligence.”

A significant factor in the success of Buddhist missions was the portability of what was sacred to them. The religion’s most sacred objects – its monastic communities, texts and relics – were not tied to specific places and could be incorporated into any local culture.

Buddhism in India experienced periods of expansion and decline. Its presence and meaning differed from one period to another and even during the reign of Ashoka Buddhism was not dominant throughout the country.

After Ashoka, probably the second most important event in the history of Indian Buddhism was the rise of Mahayana Buddhism in northern India. Mahayana was a new line of thought, initially represented only by diverse and frequently contradictory texts, which brought a new interpretation of the original motifs of Dharma. A typical feature of the new approaches was an emphasis on the concept of “emptiness”. It was in relation to this that a great deal of philosophical argumentation was generated aimed at establishing that all claims reflected an individual perspective or a convention and were therefore “empty” (*shunyata*). Here we see the development of rationalism in Buddhism. Later, approximately in the fourth century CE, a new Mahayana school appeared which preserved the intellectual standard of the movement but emphasised the need for meditation (yoga), as its name, Yogachara, suggests. This school had great interest in the analysis of mental processes. This was seen as the most direct way to understand the teachings on *anatta*.

A common feature of the diverse Mahayana movement is the aim of developing the characteristics of a *bodhisattva*. While the religious ideal of Theravada is an *arahant*, a person who has achieved the final goal and who differs from the Buddha only in not having himself or herself discovered the teaching and not having developed any supernatural powers, the new religious ideal – *bodhisattva* – seeks to achieve a state of control over reincarnation and help other beings to achieve nirvana. For this reason the movement gave itself the name *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle) and assigned the dismissive name *Hinayana* (Small Vehicle) to the original form of Buddhism.

The new ideas had a strong influence on Buddhism in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Mongolia and central Asia, where the new texts are often part of the sacred canon.



BUDDHISM OUTSIDE INDIA

Theravada Buddhism – the oldest of existing Buddhist traditions – is the only surviving branch of Hinayana and is widespread in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. All the Theravada countries share a common canon and rules for monastic life and reject the Mahayana texts as inauthentic. The Theravada canon is referred to as the *Tripitaka* (Three Baskets) because of its division into the sermons of the Buddha (*Sutta-pitaka*), the rules and regulations of monastic life (*Vinaya-pitaka*) and philosophical and psychological discourses and interpretation of the sermons (*Abhidhamma-pitaka*)

All the mainland countries in south-east Asia claim to be the Land of Gold (*Suvarnabhumi*) to which the Mahavamsa claims King Ashoka sent one of his religious missions. According to the prevailing views of historians, Suvarnabhumi cannot be identified with any specific country but refers to the whole region south-east of India. Some people even hold that Buddhism was already present in these areas before Ashoka's reign and the missions were simply intended to support it.

Buddhism came to south-east Asia in several waves and a variety of forms. It probably first had contact with Mahayana Buddhism. It would seem that Theravada Buddhism may have entered the northern part of south-east Asia as early as the fifth century and it remains the official Buddhist doctrine in the region to the present.

During the fifth century Buddhism became officially recognised in China and Korea as a religious tradition alongside traditional Taoism and Confucianism. Buddhism had been present in China from the first century BCE but it took a long time to establish a foothold amongst elites and it was clearly distinct from Taoism. Chinese Buddhism had a formative influence on Buddhism in Korea and Japan, especially through the four schools: Tiantai, Huayan, Chan and the Pure Land School. Each of them developed a specific aspect of the Dharma: the first two tried to achieve an intellectual synthesis of all available interpretations of Buddhism. Chan, better known under its Japanese name Zen, developed special meditation techniques for "sudden enlightenment". In Europe and the USA it was first popularised by the Beatnik writers as a form of Buddhism that rejected convention and the textual tradition. It is important not to overestimate the rebellious aspects of Zen. Chan/Zen Buddhism did reject rigid conformity to the sacred texts but also refused any complete rejection. Its middle way lies between these two extremes and even the famous saying "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him" is just a shocking reminder of the Buddha's own warning against indiscriminate reverence for religious leaders, including himself. Besides this, the life of Chan and Zen monks was far from rebellious and was regulated as strictly as that of monks in any Theravada monastery.

Pure Land Buddhism is a form of Buddhism based on devotional worship. It probably evolved out of meditation techniques intended to develop positive traits characteristic

of a Buddha (loving kindness, compassion, equanimity...) by visualising a Buddha with whom the meditator identifies. Later, this visualisation was externalised as one of many Buddhas (Buddha Amitabha/Amida) sitting in a "Pure Land", a heaven into which believers could be reborn by faithfully reciting the Buddha's name.

These schools in east Asia are the most widespread schools of Mahayana Buddhism. Their specific forms, canons and monastic rules are diverse and even within one and the same school different editions of the canons may show significant differences. All the canons have the same origin and contain texts that are identical with parts of the Tipitaka.

Northern Buddhism, the Buddhism of Tibet, Mongolia and central Asia draws on all the preceding traditions. It is characterised by highly developed rituals: special verbal formulas (*mantra*), visual symbols (*yantra*, *mandala*), visualisations, gestures (*mudra*) and bodily practices offering a fast route to liberation. This is the origin of the name of this branch of Buddhism *Tantrayana* ("Vehicle of Tantra") or *Vajrayana* ("Diamond vehicle"), which cuts like a diamond across the slow meditation techniques of the other forms of Buddhism.



BUDDHISM IN DAILY LIFE

This overview, like other brief introductions to Buddhism, is an idealisation based mainly on Buddhist texts. The Buddhist canons are extensive. The Theravada canon contains more than 20 000 pages and the Mahayana and Vajrayana canons add other texts to this. The first printed edition of the Chinese canon at the end of the tenth century required the use of 130,000 wooden tablets. An edition published between 1924 and 1934 covered a hundred volumes, each of which had over a thousand pages. If the texts are read, which is by far not the most common religious practice, it is never the complete canon. Buddhists tend to identify with a particular monastery, a section of the canon and the teachings of individual monks rather than with the canonical texts as a whole. Theravada Buddhists also revere and follow the teachings of individual monks and reject or ignore others. They read the sermons of their favourite teachers, or listen to them on CDs, and the interpretation of the Dharma can vary widely from one teacher to another, and often incorporates elements from other forms of Buddhism or other religious systems. Monks routinely perform exorcisms and make astrological predictions, practices that the Buddha strictly prohibited. Magic tattoos, protective amulets and love potions are daily business for contemporary orthodox Theravada monks. In early twentieth century Thailand only a very few monasteries owned the complete canon and most practised a Buddhism based on fragments of texts, local beliefs and the interpretative creativity of individual abbots.

For a long time, the focus of the religious and political authorities, with a few exceptions, was on monks' behaviour and the doctrinal background was less important. The monarchy had little interest what went on in subordinate territories as long as taxes

were paid on time. The situation underwent a fundamental shift in the nineteenth century. The Buddhist rulers began to build absolutist states in the model of European kings and nation states required a unified system of religion. Like Ashoka more than two thousand years before, the Thai kings Mongkut (1851 – 1868) and Chulalongkorn (1868 – 1910) sought to consolidate a unified realm with a unified monastic community. Faced with the scientific and religious ideas of the colonial West, they also sought to cleanse Buddhism of “superstitions”. Everything supernatural in the sacred texts was rejected as Hindu opinions that the Buddha only adopted to win over people who had still not fully understood his teaching, or as explanations in the form of metaphors: the heavens are not really heavens but happy states of mind, hell is not underground but in the heart, and so on. Some contemporary representatives of this line of “modern” or “protestant” Buddhism such as the famous Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906 – 1993) even cast doubt on the teachings on karma.

Where the Buddhist monarchies were replaced by a colonial administration, the religious elites took over the task of modernising Buddhism and the form of modern Buddhism was affected by European and American enthusiasts and researchers. In 1873 a great debate was organised in Sri Lanka between Christian missionaries and Theravada monks concerning the relative intellectual merits of the two religions. A transcript of the debate came in the hands of Henry S Olcott (1832 – 1907) who was so impressed by the rationalism he saw in Buddhism that he converted and became a great promoter of “scientific Buddhism”, which highlighted the contrast with the unscientific “revelations” of Western religion. Buddhism’s rejection of a creator-god was attractive for sceptics and critics of Christian monotheism in a Europe that was coming to terms with the revolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin and the teaching on karma and the interdependence of all beings – explained as a quasi-scientific law of cause and effect – was seen as a “more rational” alternative to divine rewards and punishments.

Like other religious texts, Buddhist scriptures are open to a range of interpretation and are compatible with many different lifestyles. The path to nirvana, the highest doctrinal goal, is not the aim of the vast majority of Buddhists, who are generally interested in a better rebirth or a better life in the here and now. As a living religion, Buddhism reflects the changing social and cultural conditions in which it, like other religions, continuously seeks to find a place and to present its message according to the needs and wishes of those that wish to hear it.

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*BUDDHISM
obverse / reverse
embossed medals in silver, 6 cm diameter, 2014*



Christianity



CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is at present the world's largest religion with approximately 2.4 billion believers across all the continents, which is around a third of the planet's population. As a result of historical development it is now made up of four main branches: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican. The largest Christian church is the Roman Catholic Church, which has around 1.2 billion members (it is a family of 24 churches – the Latin church and 23 eastern catholic churches – headed by the pope); around 900 million people belong to various Protestant churches; eastern Christianity (the Eastern Orthodox church and Oriental Orthodox churches) have around 200 million believers and around 80 million Christians are considered to be Anglicans.

JESUS OF NAZARETH

The history of Christianity begins in the first century of our era, when Jesus of Nazareth (probably born in the period 6 – 4 BCE) came to attention with his teachings of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Although far from the only eschatological and apocalyptic preacher of his times, his band of disciples did not dissolve after his death by crucifixion (around 30 CE) but on the contrary continued to grow and within a generation of his death had expanded beyond the borders of the Jewish homeland. His followers believed him to be the promised Messiah (from the Hebrew *"Mashiach"*, Aramaic *"Meshiach"*, Greek *"Christos"* meaning "anointed one"). Its universal message spread rapidly across the Greco-Roman world helped by the infrastructure of the Roman Empire and the widespread use of demotic Greek as a common language. In Greek he was frequently referred to by his given name and Messianic title as *Iesous ho Christos*, later Latinised as *Iesus Christus* and brought into English as Jesus Christ. Over the following centuries Christian teaching identified Jesus of Nazareth not only as a man but as the Son of God, who had a divine substance and who had been born of a virgin.



CHRISTIANITY

obverse / reverse

embossed medals in gold, 6 cm diameter, 2014

Although there is no direct evidence of Jesus's existence, contemporary historians agree that he was a real person. Early Christian texts represent him in divergent and contradictory ways that make it impossible to give an entirely coherent description of him or his teachings. All these texts were written decades after his death (the earliest around 50 CE) and reflect the divergent views that early Christians had on Christology – the theological explanation of Jesus's meaning and mission. The ways we understand Jesus today are the result of nearly two thousand years of religious and cultural reflection by different forms of Christianity on their founder and reflect many different, often contradictory, schools of theology and Christology existing in parallel.

The early Christian texts say that after his crucifixion Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven forty days later and sent the Holy Spirit to protect the Christian church as his successor. Jesus's mission and the foundation of the church are the subject-matter of the part of the Bible known as the New Testament. They are theological and religious texts that were written in a specific historical context. The core books of the New Testament are the four gospels, which concentrate on Jesus's earthly life. Another major section are the epistles, or letters, of apostles (in particular the letters of Paul, a Pharisee who converted to Christianity), which are concerned with the development of Christian communities and the principles of the Christian life. The last of the 27 books of the New Testament is the Revelation of the Apostle John (also known as the Apocalypse), which is traditionally interpreted as describing the end of this world and the creation of the new world (the "Heavenly Jerusalem"). Further testimony about the lives and thinking of the early Christians is given in apocryphal texts (of which there are a few dozen), which also talk about the life and teaching of Jesus and the early church but were not considered to be divinely inspired and were therefore left out of the Christian Bible. They have, however, provided inspiration for novelists and film-makers as the apocryphal gospels – unlike the four gospels in the New Testament – give very specific details about the whole of Jesus's life.



EARLY CHRISTIANITY

In its early days, Christianity was very different from the church as we know it today. From the beginning, it was a broad movement whose discipline and doctrines were not standardised and organised. While still in Israel, early Christianity had two forms: one based on his immediate disciples and another made up of Jews from the Diaspora ("Hellenists"). The first Christian martyr was a Hellenist Jewish Christian, Stephen (even his name was Greek rather than Jewish). Even in the first generation of Jesus's followers, the Christian message travelled beyond Palestine and people began to become Christians who did not have Jewish origins. The claims of these "Gentile Christians" living in the polytheistic world created tensions in the early Christian community (and the dispute between Paul and Peter), which had to be resolved by a council of the apostles as Jesus's closest disciples. This ended with a requirement that the new Christians would have to follow only four of the prohibitions laid down in the Jewish Law: "to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood"). When the requirement to be circumcised was lifted, Christianity began to follow its own path separate from the Jewish tradition and the divergence increased after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. By the end of the first century CE, Christianity had begun to form its own religious identity completely separate from Judaism.

Although early Christianity remained in two forms (Jewish and Gentile), over time the dominant form became that which was better adapted to the non-Jewish environment. Early Christianity lost its Jewish character and its doctrines and ritual practice came under the influence of the Greco-Roman world. It was affected by the cults of the gods, the solar cult, the cult of the Emperor, Mithraism, Gnosticism and the views of various philosophers and their schools, which gave it a diverse character. Jewish Christian beliefs became the minority, were marginalised and were eventually viewed as heresy. An example is the case of the Ebionites, who revered the apostle James the brother of Jesus (as he is referred to in the New Testament) and considered Jesus to be the Son of God in the Jewish sense, not considering him to be himself God, and saw Paul as an apostate from the Law.

Until the fourth century there was no unified Christian doctrine, unified hierarchy, unified form of worship or unified canon of sacred texts. The early Christian period was more a time of “Christianities” than a unified Christian system. What they had in common was the recognition of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who had proclaimed the coming of God’s kingdom, who died a violent death on the cross and whom God had raised from the dead. His death and resurrection were explained as a victory over sin and death. They took Jesus as their lord and saviour who would save their souls if they were baptised and lived according to the example of his earthly life. They saw in Jesus’s life a model of faith and moral conduct and considered his most important commandments to be to love God and your neighbour, and to love your enemies. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” was the golden rule of Jesus’s ethics. All people were equal before God – “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. They considered it their duty to help the poor and the sick. The ideal Christian should give up all their property for the benefit of the community, which should hold all things in common.

The Christian ideal was attractive to many but the early texts show that early Christian reality was not without snags because some people looked for loopholes in their new religion. The New Testament condemns this and as a warning tells the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who did not give the church all the money that they got for selling their property and kept part of it secret. Peter, the leader of the Christian community, revealed their misconduct and they “fell down and died” one after the other, as a result of which “great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things”.

In the beginning, Christians considered themselves to be followers of a “way” (in Greek “*hodos*”), which only later became a religion, as the Romans understood it (under the word “*religio*”). Because Christians refused to respect the divinity of the Roman emperor and violated the principles of the state religion, they were referred to as “*atheoi*”, which means atheists or godless people. Their refusal of the imperial cult caused Christians to be persecuted with varying degrees of intensity culminating during the reign of Diocletian in the first decade of the fourth century. Christian martyrs were highly respected in their communities (“the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”) and were later revered as saints and mementos of them (relics) played an important role in Christian worship and spirituality.

At that time the word church took on a dual meaning: it identified a local Christian community and also all the followers of Christ in the world. Despite the diversity of their communities, all Christians had a sense of belonging to one church. Some authors (such as Ignatius of Antioch) used the adjective *katholikos* (general, universal) in connection with the church, not to identify a particular church but as part of its overall characteristics alongside words like one, holy and apostolic. To this day, all Christian churches recall this ancient use of the word *katholikos* and consider to show the universality of Christianity. It is included in the fourth-century Nicene-Constantinopolitan

creed, which is accepted by all the Christian churches. Every Christian church is catholic according to this sense of the word and its use in the name Roman Catholic church is considered an usurpation by the other churches. The “non-catholic” churches interpret the word *katholikos* as “universal” or as an equivalent to the word “Christian” as a way to emphasise the universality of Christianity and prevent its monopolisation by Roman Catholics. Every Christian church considers itself to be the inheritor of the early Christian tradition and its own later-created form to be an attempt to return to the “source of Christianity”.



CHRISTIANITY AS AN ORGANISED RELIGION

The fourth century was a turning point in the development and organisation of the Christian church. The changes began in 313 when Constantine I and his co-emperor Licinius established freedom of religion in the Roman Empire, ending the persecution of the Christian church. The Christian church gained a special status in 380, when the emperors Theodosius I, Gratian and Valentinian II issued the edict *Cunctos populos*, which made Christianity the state religion. The Olympic games, the oracle of Delphi and the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus were closed as symbols of paganism. The decree defined true Christians as “Catholic Christians” and said that other would be “branded with the ignominious name of heretics” and could not call their groups churches. In 81 a council was convened at Constantinople that built on the doctrines established at the Council of Nicea in 325 and definitively condemned Arianism, which was the belief that Jesus was inferior to God the Father. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed became the binding statement of the true faith. The condemnation and suppression of Arianism, as the main theological rival to the concept of the Holy Trinity was a fundamental step towards the unification of the forms of Christianity. The term “Catholic church” began to be used (for example by the influential classical authors Augustine of Hippo and Vincent of Lérins) to distinguish the “true church” from communities of heretics.

As a result of the division of the Roman Empire into two parts, the western part of the church (linked with the Latin language and culture) and the eastern part (influenced by Greek language and thinking) became more alienated from each other and theological misunderstandings and mental differences grew. There began to be tensions between eastern and western Christianity. As there was only one patriarchate in the West, at Rome, while the East had patriarchates at Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, the Latin church developed a strong sense of identity in which the Bishop of Rome was not only a moral authority but the head of the whole Christian church with primacy of jurisdiction. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, the popes began to give their position a political dimension. The Roman church’s view of itself as the “mother and head” of all churches was opposed in the East, which saw itself not

only as the inheritor of Roman imperial status and power, but also as the bearer of Christian values.

The growing division between West and East developed gradually over several centuries but the traditional date given for their schism is 1054, when the papal legate Cardinal Humbert of Silva Candida and his delegation excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople Michael I Cerularius and his party. A synod was then organised in Constantinople that excommunicated Humbert and his party in return. This schism reached its dramatic climax in 1204 when the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople and established a Latin empire (which lasted until 1261) together with a Latin patriarch in the city (the office remained, although only as a formality until 1964), effectively trampling on the ancient tradition, status and privileges of the Constantinopolitan patriarch, who was considered “*primus inter pares*” (“first amongst equals”) by the autocephalous (autonomous) eastern churches. The western church continued to use the term catholic to distinguish itself from heretics, amongst whom it included the churches in the Christian east who did not accept the pope as the head of the whole church. In return, they emphasised their conviction of their true faith and worship by referring to themselves as “orthodox” (faithful to the truth). Christianity was *de facto* divided into two branches. Although the mutual excommunications of 1054 were lifted by a joint declaration in 1965, the eastern and western churches have not been reconciled in any fundamental way.

During the middle ages, two councils were held in the west (the Second Council of Lyon in 1274 and the Council of Florence in 1439) which tried to find a settlement that would reunite east and west but they were motivated more by political-military interests than religious reasons. Although theological compromises and deeds of unification were signed, the reconciliation of east and west was short-lived and formal and its implementation was also prevented by the fall of Constantinople in 1453. An Orthodox synod in Constantinople in 1484 expressly rejected it, annulled the conclusions of the Council of Florence and renewed the Orthodox Church’s general rejection of Rome.

After the fall of Constantinople, the Russian Orthodox Church became more important in eastern Christianity. Russia (Kievan Rus had been Christianised in 988 under Vladimir I) remained the one Orthodox country not to fall under the Muslim rule of the Ottoman Empire and therefore became the voice of the Orthodox world. In 1589 the Russian Orthodox Church declared itself independent with a patriarchate in Moscow, which the other patriarchs recognised the following year. Based on its status in the Orthodox world, people began to talk about Moscow as the “third Rome” (Constantinople, the “second Rome” had lost its political and ecclesiastical significance under Ottoman rule).

Eastern Christianity also includes the Oriental Orthodox Churches (also known as Old Oriental, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite or Miaphysite churches), which recognise only the first three Christian councils while the Orthodox Church recognises seven of them. Their main point of disagreement with the other churches is their understanding

of the nature of Jesus Christ – the Oriental Orthodox Churches talk about a single divine nature of Jesus Christ which also includes his humanity (“like a drop of honey in the sea”) while the other churches, following the conclusions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 talk of Jesus Christ having two natures, human and divine, in one divine person. The Oriental Orthodox Churches include the Armenian, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches. Until the twentieth century the other churches regarded them as heretics but the ecumenical movement of the second half of the twentieth century has established a theological dialogue with these churches to better understand their theological terminology and Christology in their historical context.

Amongst the most important formative factors in Christianity were the monastic and religious orders that developed in Roman Catholic and eastern Christianity. They are based not on Jewish traditions but on the lives of the desert fathers in third and fourth century Egypt. St Anthony the Great founded the eremitic tradition of solitary living and St Pachomius founded an early form of communal or coenobitic monasticism at the start of the fourth century. The eastern church considers St Basil the Great, who died in the 379, the founder of their monastic tradition, while the western orders see St Benedict of Nursia as their first founder. Each wrote rules for the life of monks which became the model for eastern and western monasticism respectively. Monasticism in the east has remained in one form to the present. In the west, on the other hand, there has been a continuous stream of new orders and communities over the centuries produced either by the reformation of existing orders or the establishment of entirely new ones. Over time, some merge with others or are dissolved, but today there are still so many orders and congregations that even a small country like Slovakia has 30 male orders and 50 female orders. Eastern monasticism is focused on prayer, worship and the spiritual life, and the public are at best tolerated (mainly tourists, who are seen as a source of income). The monastic and religious orders in the west cover all areas of life from contemplative orders who live in strict isolation from the world to orders focussed on missionary work and public service in education, social care and medicine.



THE REFORMATION

The sixteenth century was another turning point in the development of western Christianity. Although the church had made regular efforts to reform in previous centuries, none were as extensive as the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. It was launched by Martin Luther’s protest against conditions and religious practices in the church of his day. The social and political situation in Germany provided fertile ground for his opinions to develop into a programme for the renewal of the church which inspired large groups to leave the Roman Catholic Church, especially in north and central Europe. Christian movements and societies that were formed directly in the Reformation in the sixteenth century or which built on its legacy are referred to collectively as

Protestantism. The Reformation was not a single movement. It established itself with difficulty and gradually and it was most successful in areas where it won the support of the political elite. The result was therefore not a united, global “Protestant Church” as a counterweight to the Roman Catholic Church but a variety of Protestant churches, societies, directions and currents that divided further over the centuries. The multiplicity and variety forms of Christianity is not viewed as a negative in Protestantism but is considered to be a response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. As well as schism, there have been efforts at reconciliation and mutual cooperation, which culminated in the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century, the aim of which was to try to find what linked the Christian churches and overcome the things that divided them.

Protestantism and Catholicism have the same doctrines on the Holy Trinity and Jesus Christ, which were formulated mainly in the church councils of the classical period (the first seven councils are recognised by all Christian churches except the Oriental Orthodox Churches). Protestantism stands out from Catholicism in its conception of the church and papal authority, its relationship to the Bible and to tradition, its understanding of God’s grace and the sacraments (Catholics have seven and Protestants two), the refusal of the mass, monasticism, the cult of the Virgin Mary and the saints, pilgrimages, indulgences and all forms of Christian practice without Biblical foundations.

One very superficial way to map Protestantism is in terms of the Lutheran (“Evangelical”) and Calvinist (“Reformed”) branches and a more radical branch made up of many movements and groups including the Mennonites, the Amish, the Hutterites and Baptist movements.

Anglicanism is a sort of middle way between Catholicism and Protestantism. The name covers a group of churches that began after the Reformation on the British Isles and which are in full communion with each other. They were originally under the influence of the Church of England but now have full independence. Anglicanism, like Protestantism, is not a unified, global organisation but a communion of churches that claim adherence to the principles of Anglican Christianity. Anglicanism retained some Catholic elements in its doctrine and practice but was also influenced by the Protestant Reformation. Different mixtures of these elements resulted in three main wings – Low Church is closest in its thinking to Protestantism while High Church maintains more Catholic elements and the third wing, Broad Church, tries to act as an intermediary between the Protestant and Catholic wings and make space for the broadest possible spectrum of positions.

It is common to count as Protestants certain groups that differ quite significantly from the mainstream branches but which were formed in the Protestant environment and took inspiration from it, such as the Quakers, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Salvation Army and Pentecostalism. They are characterised by a rejection of permanent church structures preferring to organise ad hoc and apply “bottom up” principles. They claim to base their religion on the Bible, not as interpreted by an authoritative individual or group but by the consensus of the community, especially in social and ethical matters.

The Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation was the Council of Trent, which met at irregular intervals between 1545 and 1563 and laid down the rules that applied throughout the Roman Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council in the twentieth century. The Roman Catholic Church defined its doctrine in reaction to Protestantism and established dogma in areas that had not previously been areas for dispute such as the number of sacraments or the number of books of the Bible. The recently created Jesuit order (“the Society of Jesus”) took upon itself the role of enforcing the council’s decisions and in addition to previous orders’ vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, its new members swore absolute loyalty to the Pope.

The division of western Christianity into Roman Catholic and Protestant factions also had major political and cultural consequences. A line was drawn between the Catholic and Protestant worlds: the European and American north are mainly Protestant while the south is almost entirely Catholic. They developed zones of mistrust, conflict and war, not only in religious and ideological matters but also over political, economic and military interests, as a result of which the Christian religion in its various forms became part of merciless competition, power games and unscrupulous strategies.



CHRISTIANITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the twentieth century Christianity was challenged by changes in social and political relations, especially in Europe: the break-up of the monarchies, the two world wars, the break-down of the colonial system, Communist, Fascist and National-Socialist dictatorships, the Cold War and the division of the world into power blocks. The self-confidence of the Christian church was shaken by the First World War and even more by the Second, when appalling levels of devastation and slaughter broke out in the western Christian environment and sucked in all the main currents of the Christian world.

Military conflict also brought together the members of different churches who had previously seen each other only through the filter of their own church’s ideology. One outcome of the calls for cooperation and communication between all Christians was the foundation of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. The main force driving closer relations was an effort to overcome the shame and remorse that Christian individuals and churches felt for their failure to prevent the outbreak of two of the most destructive armed conflicts in the history of humanity on a “Christian continent”. The post-war reconstruction of Europe accelerated changes in the Christian churches, which began to involve themselves more intensively in social processes and the development of cooperation. There had never been a greater sense of urgency for the renewal of the Christian churches and their opening up to the world and to each other.

The Roman Catholic Church initially adopted a reserved approach to ecumenical activities whose main impetus came from Protestant environments. It began to take part more actively in the 1960s under the influence of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965), which took as its aim not to fight against “modern errors” (such as the syllabus of 80 errors issued by Pope Pius IX in 1864) but the positive goal of finding new opportunities for the church in the contemporary world. The changes that the council gradually announced were seen as a revolutionary event in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, including a much more open attitude to the non-Catholic churches. The scope and assertiveness of the changes was without equal in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Most church members accepted the changes with hopes of a positive outcome but there were also groups that accused the council of betraying Roman Catholic traditions and rejected the council’s decisions. Pope John Paul II (the first and so far, only pope of Slavic origin) attempted to promote inter-faith dialogue through a number of symbolic gestures to non-Catholics: he visited a synagogue in Rome (1986), invited representatives of the world religions to a meeting at Assisi (1986), prayed at the Western Wall in Jerusalem during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land (2000) and on Ash Wednesday in the jubilee year 2000, he asked for forgiveness for sins that Catholics had committed in the past.

The collapse of Communism at the end of the 1980s made a big difference to the Christian churches in central and eastern Europe. The churches were freed from state control; religious activities were no longer monitored by the security services and the churches took a stronger role in social, economic and political life. There was a process of renewal in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches, many of which demanded compensation for their persecution and suffering under Communism. Although the modern states are officially secular in character, religion has begun to play an important role in social life in the post-Communist countries.



CHALLENGES FOR CHRISTIANITY AT THE START OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Christian churches are undergoing significant change as they enter the new millennium. The most serious challenge for traditional churches in western European countries is their declining membership. They are therefore looking for a way to combine Christian teaching with modern ways of presenting it to communicate the church’s message in a way that appeals to the public, how to manage situations that could affect the church’s reputation in society and how to use social networks in the church context. This has met with some understanding, mainly from the younger generation, but there are also voices who claim that the current ways of promoting the Christian faith are too liberal and call for a return to traditional forms of Christianity.

Although the number of Christians in the world is increasing, their share of the world population has remained the same at around a third. The demography of the Christian population is changing in favour of the Third World – while the number of Christians in the developed countries of Europe and North America declines, their number is increasing in Africa and Latin America. These changes are very strong when looked at in the context of the last hundred years – the demographic centre of Christianity has shifted out of the traditional Christian countries.

In the early decades of the new millennium, Christianity also finds itself in intense confrontation with its ancient neighbour and rival Islam. In Europe, a significant part of the population identifies with Islam. Most are people who came there as economic migrants after the Second World War or their descendants. In recent years, an increasing number of Muslims have come to Europe as refugees from the political and military conflicts in the Middle East and in Africa. The combination of a population explosion in Africa that affects both Christians and Muslims and poverty, shortages of resources, political corruption and climate change causes social tension and violent conflict, which often has a religious dimension. Christians feel motivated by their Muslim neighbours, but also threatened.

In past centuries, the Christian churches had to come to terms with the discoveries of the natural sciences, the contradictions of Christian cosmology, the theory of evolution, which tells a different story of the origins of human beings from the Bible and also the development of the social sciences, which have overturned Christian ideas about the organisation of society and the church’s place within it. At present one of the major factors affecting Christian thought is the rapid development of biotechnology, which represents a challenge for Christian bioethics. The ethical questions resulting from the transplantation of organs and tissue, somatic cell gene therapy, human cloning, euthanasia, abortion, contraception, in vitro fertilisation and research on embryos and embryonic stem cells demand a response from the Christian churches, which cannot fall back on the Bible and past traditions and must formulate a new position. Most Christian churches currently regard biomedicine and biotechnology with a cautious distrust, concerns about the potential for abuse and a sense of danger on the individual, social and global levels. Only a few of the Protestant churches see the potential of biotechnology, mainly in vitro fertilisation and research on embryos and embryonic stem cells, as a new, morally justifiable and acceptable opportunity that modern science is offering to individuals and society.

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A third of humanity currently identifies with Christianity based on the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Christians see him as the Christ, God’s promised Messiah, who died on the cross for the sins of humanity, rose from the dead and went ahead of his followers to Heaven, from where he will return at the end of history to judge the living and the dead. After the Last Judgement, the good and the faithful will live in an eternal paradise

in a new world. Christians revere Jesus Christ both as a person and as God, one of three divine persons making up a single divine being. Even though the core of Christianity is Jesus's commandment to love God and your neighbours, including your enemies, the nearly two thousand years of Christian history are also a history of tragic misunderstandings, escalating disputes, bloody conflicts and hatred both of one's own people and foreigners, other Christians and non-Christians. Despite the diversity of the Christian churches, their efforts to maintain their own identity and the historical differences between them, they all declare an ecumenical willingness to work on the positive things that unite them and a determination to learn from the errors of the past for the benefit of Christians and non-Christians alike.

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*CHRISTIANITY
obverse / reverse
embossed medals in silver, 6 cm diameter, 2014*



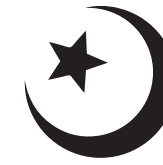
Islam



ISLAM

obverse / reverse

embossed medals in gold, 6 cm diameter, 2015



ISLAM

There are over 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, which means that nearly every fourth person on our planet is a follower of Islam. It is one of the largest religious communities in the world. It is impressive that the second most numerous religion on the planet grew in fifteen hundred years from the handful of believers who gathered around the Prophet Muhammad in the market town of Mecca in north-west Arabia early in the seventh century. The rich and diverse history of the Islamic faith, which expanded from an Arab market town in the middle of nowhere to cover a territory from Morocco to Indonesia, from the Caucasus to Mozambique, changed the course of human history and continues to influence our world today.

MUHAMMAD AND HIS LIFE

In the time of Muhammad's birth and youth, Mecca was a small but important commercial hub for merchants travelling between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. The child who would become the prophet was born in an economically dynamic and developing world which was rife with social and economic crises. The young Muhammad acquired relatively rich experience in this area. He was born into the respected but not very wealthy Banu Hashim clan. His family had been strong but his father died before he was born and his mother died not long after. Growing up as an orphan in a patriarchal society was not easy. Although Muhammad had the protection of his grandfather and later his uncle Abu Talib, he had to start work quite young. He became a caravan leader and made a good name for himself. When he was 25, he received an offer of marriage from a significantly older widow called Khadijah. Muhammad accepted the offer and not only significantly improved his economic situation but also, by all accounts, enjoyed a happy marriage. Muhammad's new situation allowed him to take an annual holiday, during the month of Ramadan, which he spent in isolated places close to his hometown, thinking about the world and humanity's place in it. It was on one such occasion around the year 610 that the archangel Gabriel is supposed to have appeared to him in a cave named Hira on the mountain Jabal al-Nour and recited the first vice verses of Surah 96: *"Proclaim! in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created man, out of a clot of congealed blood:*

Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, – Who taught by the pen – taught man that which he knew not.” This was the moment at which Islam was born. Although Muhammad denied that he knew how to preach or even read, he assented to Gabriel’s instructions and after some initial hesitations, he began to dedicate himself fully to his mission. For around two years, he did not preach in public but then he began to proclaim the messages he had received in Mecca and its surroundings. His preaching provoked fear and doubt rather than enthusiasm.

It was particularly unwelcome to the Quraysh aristocracy who formed the political and economic elite in Mecca. The main reason for this was that Mecca’s business success was closely linked to the pre-Islamic Arab religion. Before the birth of Islam, Mecca and the rest of the north of the Arabian peninsula appear to have followed various forms of polydemonism and polytheism. People followed many gods and goddesses but Mecca had a unique status because of the great annual pilgrimage to the Kaaba, a cube-shaped shrine. The pilgrimage itself was less important than the truce in tribal conflicts that it brought, which created an opportunity for business deals. The pre-Islamic society of the Arabian peninsula was strongly marked by the tradition of blood feuds, which could go on for several generations and prevented the normal functioning of social and commercial relations. During the pilgrimage to Mecca the blood feuds and other conflicts were suspended and Mecca became the best place to do deals in the whole region. Because Muhammad attacked the traditional religious concepts, those in power saw him as a threat. However, Muhammad was preaching not just a new religion but major social and political reforms. He taught that although society would always be unequal, in God’s eyes all people were equal whether they were men, women or slaves. He also had ideas for bridging the differences between tribes and built the Islamic community (called in Arabic the *Ummah*) above any tribal or other structures. It may be a surprise to see Muhammad presented as a champion of women’s rights but the fact was that he prohibited the burying of first-born girls in the desert, which had been a custom in pre-Islamic times and gave women legal capacity to inherit and act as witnesses for the first time, although only with half the status of a man.

After the death in 619 of Khadijah and his uncle Abu Talib, his two main protectors, dark clouds gathered over Muhammad’s prospects in Mecca. The Muslim community was faced with a major crisis. Some Muslims had already sought refuge from persecution abroad, travelling to Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 615. In 619 there was an abortive attempt to escape to the oasis at Ta’if close to Mecca but in 622 negotiations with the rich but internally divided agricultural town of Yathrib led to a breakthrough in the development of Islam. The migration of Muhammad and his followers to Yathrib became known as the *Hijrah*, and was later made the start of the Muslim calendar. Yathrib was renamed in Muhammad’s honour as *Madinat an-nabi*, the City of the Prophet, but this was later shortened to Medina, the name it retains to this day. At Medina, the Muslims could function as an independent community (*umma*), which initially included also Medina’s Jews. The Prophet would still have to face military struggle with the Meccans, but he would eventually return from his exile in triumph and without bloodshed in 630. After his return, Muhammad did not execute his former enemies but he did order the destruction of the idols housed in and around the Kaaba. He died in 632, just two years after this victory.

Muhammad’s death did not change the legacy that he left to the Muslims. The etymological origin of the word Islam is “surrender to God’s will, subordinate yourself to it, accept it”. Those who do so are called Muslims. The guidelines that Muhammad passed on for this are contained not only in the Quran, which Muslims consider to be the authentic word God, but also in records of Muhammad’s words and deeds, which serve as a model for Muslims.



QURAN

In Arabic, *al-Qur’an*, often referred to as the Noble Quran or Koran (in Arabic *al-Qur’an al-karim*), is accepted by Muslims as the authentic word of God, revealed by the archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad. Islam conceives of the Quran as being based on the eternal and unchanging content of a heavenly book that is the mother of all books and an attribute of God himself. The external form of the Quran, for example, the text in a specific language is created subsequently and is adapted to circumstances. Muslims do not see the Quran as the first time that God has spoken to humanity. The first Muslim, and also the first prophet, was Adam, who received the first revelation – the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet, followed by Abraham (in Arabic Ibrahim), a great role model for the Prophet Muhammad, who also received certain writings from God, followed by Moses (Musa), who received the Torah as a Muslim prophet, followed by David (Dawud) who received the psalms and Jesus (Isa) who received the gospels. After them, Muhammad received the Quran because human interference had caused the previous revelations to become inauthentic and relations between God and humanity had to be put back into order. The Quran will remain in force from its revelation to Muhammad until the end of the world.

Muhammad received the texts of the Quran piece by piece and in his lifetime they were mostly preserved orally. After the Prophet’s death and the expansion of Islam, it became apparent that it would be necessary to write the Quran down. The codification took place during the government of Caliph Uthman, when a commission of experts led by Muhammad’s own secretary collected together the texts that had been written down or that were still living in the oral tradition. The work took five years and the first full text of the Quran in writing was issued in 656, though it would be revised a few times for clarification. Seven basic readings of the Quran were recognised. Today’s most widely used standard edition dates from 1924.

The Quran is traditionally divided into 114 chapters (called *surah* in Arabic), which are organised by length, apart from the first one. The first surah, known as the *Opening* (in Arabic *al-Fatihah*) is a short prayer of Muhammad that Muslims everywhere in the world recite when they pray. The chapters are divided into verses. The chapters and verses are numbered to make it easier to remember them but the surahs also have traditional names, for example the second surah is called the *Cow Surah*. The chapters are also classified based on whether they were revealed to Muhammad at Mecca or Medina.

A Quran is a part of every traditional Muslim household. It is kept in a place of honour and handled with respect. Copies of the Quran are also found in mosques. Every Muslim is expected to recite the whole of the Quran during the month of Ramadan and for this purpose practical divisions breaking the Quran down into 7, 30 and 240 parts of equal length are marked on the margin of the book.

The recited form of the Quran is highly esteemed and it can be heard everywhere in the Muslim world, in recordings or in live performance. Quran recital competitions are held and the best reciters become popular celebrities.

The Quran sets out the basic theses of Islamic doctrine but the text is so complex that they can be difficult to interpret.

Muslim religious experts (*ulama*) studied the texts and formulated the articles of the Islamic faith in five points. These form a brief summary of Islamic doctrine with universal validity. The first article of faith is the doctrine of God's oneness (*tawhid*) The Islamic understanding of monotheism is a strict one: God is eternal, has no co-divinities and cannot be represented anthropomorphically. He is absolute God and the angels carry out his will. True faith in angels is the second point of the Islamic articles of faith. The pre-Islamic Arabs believed in demons, spirits and djinns and Islam continued this belief, but faith in angels is an innovation in this environment and needs to be emphasised. In Islam angels are sexless beings made of light that often take an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic winged form. Their main function is to praise God and carry out His will. Another of the core principles of Islam is belief in prophets and prophecy. In Muslim doctrine, Muhammad is not the first but the last of the prophets. The long genealogy of Muslim prophecy extends from the first human, Adam, through Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, John the Baptist, Jesus and others to Muhammad. God's continuous communication with these prophets is the guiding force in Muslims' understanding of history. The next article of Islamic doctrine is belief in a degree of predestination and in God's absolute justice. In early Islam, a key point of discussion was the form of predestination and the final doctrine was a compromise in which God preordains many circumstances and possibilities in human life (for example, when and in what condition people are born and so on) but everyone is responsible for their own actions. At the end of time, God will judge these actions independently and justly. The fifth article of faith is the last judgement and resurrection, and therefore also the immortality of the individual soul. Shia Islam adds a further article which is belief in the infallibility of imams, the religious and political leaders of their community, whom Shia Muslims see as guarantors of the functioning of this world.



THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Alongside the five, or for Shiites six, articles of faith, no less important are the five obligations that Muslims must perform in their daily practice. These are also known as the five pillars

of the faith and represent the most important duties that Muslims must fulfil. The first is the declaration of faith (*Shahada*). This means the public recitation of a sentence that sums up the essence of Islam: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God" (In Arabic: *La ilaha ila Allah wa Mummadu rasul Allal*). Muslims must express it honestly and before witnesses as a verbal declaration of their Muslim identity. The first part of the declaration of faith refers to the strict monotheism which is an undoubted article of Islam and the second part of the *shahada* tells how people are made aware of God and His form, which is through His messenger and prophet, Muhammad. The other four pillars represent the practical form of the declaration through actions not just words.

The second pillar is prayer (*salat*). It is not a petition prayer but a declarative prayer through which Muslims express their total dedication to God's will. Prayer takes place five times daily in the form of a series of movements and the recital of texts from the Quran and other traditional sources. A prayer is valid if it meets certain conditions. The first and most important is the ritual and physical purification of the person who is praying, followed by the cleanliness of clothing and the location where the person prays. It is also important to be suitably dressed. Prayers must be recited while facing in the right direction, which is towards the Kaaba in Mecca. It is also important to pray at the correct time, which is determined by the current position of the Sun. The last and most important condition for correct prayer is a good intention, which means that Muslims must be sincere in their prayers. Prayer, apart from Friday afternoon prayer, need not take place in a mosque, but a mosque is an ideally equipped space that ensures most of the necessary conditions for prayer. There are often wells or fountains in the courtyard of the mosque or nearby, sometimes even baths, which make it easier for Muslims to perform the ritual washing before prayer. The interior of the mosque is kept clean by carpets. Visitors to mosques are required to take their shoes off when entering in the interest of ritual and physical cleanliness. With regard to the direction of prayer, every mosque is oriented towards Mecca and within the building the direction is marked by a special niche (*mihrab*) or by other means. A *mihrab* can be recognised by the fact that it is usually the most richly decorated part of the mosque. Some large mosques may have multiple *mihrabs*. Mosques use minarets to inform worshippers of the time for prayers. These thin towers carry the sound of the call to prayer over the widest possible area. Although mosques have begun to use amplifiers and loudspeakers to broadcast the call to prayer, there should always be a live human voice at the microphone. Of course, in modern Muslim countries, information on the time for prayer is broadcast not only from minarets but also via the radio and television, which interrupt their broadcasts for a time. Prayer times are also printed on the front pages of local newspapers.

Muslim men are expected to attend the mosque for Friday afternoon prayers because a sermon is preached then. The preacher usually preaches from a pulpit (*minbar*) next to the *mihrab* to explain religious issues and often also to address current social and political affairs. Women are not required to attend Friday afternoon prayers but can attend joint prayers on Friday. Women and men pray separately in mosques. Women have access to the men's section of the mosque but men cannot go into the women's section.

The third pillar is fasting (*sawm* or *siyam*) during the month of *Ramadan* from sunrise to sunset. Fasting is obligatory for adult men who are good mental and physical health. Fasting is not obligatory for children, the elderly, pregnant or breastfeeding women, the sick, travellers, those performing hard labour or Muslims on active military duty. The majority of these people can fulfil the duty later, though this does not apply in the case of the chronically ill and the elderly, who can replace the fast by donating food to the poor. Children should learn to fast gradually. Muslims who fast are expected to abstain not only from food and drink but also from smoking, sexual intercourse and even “inappropriate” thoughts. There is also an emphasis on fasting as a means for maintaining a good physical and mental, as a means for strengthening Muslims’ discipline and self-control and as an expression of solidarity.

The fourth pillar of Islam is alms-giving (*zakat*) This is a principle of mutual help amongst Muslims and in some Muslim states it functions as a religious tax. It is not only an obligation but also a right, which means that Muslims in financial need do not pay *zakat* but receive it. The emphasis on alms-giving may be a reminder of Muhammad’s difficult childhood and additional voluntary alms-giving (*sadaqa*) is highly regarded. this gesture could be observed when the Islamic Foundation in the Slovak Republic sent material assistance to the victims of flooding in eastern Slovakia.

Perhaps the best known of the five pillars is the last one, the Great Pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca during the month of *Dhu al-Hijjah*. It is an extraordinary event and sequence of rituals that every Muslim is expected to complete at least once in their lifetime. At present, the Great Pilgrimage attracts around two million pilgrims per year from all over the world and the whole event is managed by the Saudi ministry for the *Hajj*, which issues visas for pilgrims, organises their accommodation in huge tent cities and ensures their safety and the smooth running of the largest religious festival in the world.

A few centuries ago, setting out on the pilgrimage was really the adventure of a lifetime. It was a journey that could take many months or even years and many people never came back from the pilgrimage. That is why even today it is expected that pilgrims should settle their family affairs and other business before setting out. The ritual of the Great Pilgrimage begins at the external borders of the holy district (*haram*), which are 20 to 40 kilometres from the Kaaba itself. Before entering the district, pilgrims must put on the special pilgrim’s garments (*ihram*), which for men consist of two pieces of white fabric – one of which is worn around the waste and the other is worn over the shoulder. Women are expected to wear simple clothing, which should be white if possible. The purpose of such clothing is to be a reminder of the equality of Muslims. After entering the zone of *haram*, pilgrims must abide by special rules, such as the prohibition of cutting hair and nails, hunting and all violence, and they must also keep a calm mind and not get angry whatever the circumstances. If a pilgrim breaks these rules, the pilgrimage will be deemed invalid. The series of rituals making up the pilgrimage begins with a collective prayer. The next day the pilgrims walk around the Kaaba, in total seven times, trying to touch the building and, if possible, the black stone itself, which is built into a corner of the building. After completing the circuits, the pilgrims run between the hills of Safa and Marwah to commemorate how Abraham’s wife Hagar searched for water and as

a result the legendary Zamzam well was opened. To this day, the well provides water for the whole of Mecca. This run, or rather walk, is also performed seven times. The next day the pilgrims travel from Mecca to the plain of Mina, where the tent city is built and from there they travel to a place called Arafat to perform rituals involving standing in prayer and other actions. They also climb the Mount of Mercy, from which Muhammad proclaimed his last sermon. In the evening, they travel back to Mina to collect stones for the next day, when they perform the ritual of stoning three columns at Jamarat, which represent the devil. The same day, animals are ritually sacrificed, usually sheep and goats, to commemorate Abraham’s sacrifice, and this is the final act of the pilgrimage. Many Muslims then stay on in Mecca or travel on to Medina to visit Muhammad’s grave. After returning from the pilgrimage, they decorate their houses and proudly bear the title of “pilgrim” (*hajji* for men and *hajja* for women), which gives them prestige in their community.



SHIITES AND SUNNIS

Most Muslims belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. There is however a significant minority in the world Muslim community that differs from Sunni Islam not only in its history but also in specific beliefs about religion and politics. This minority is Shia Islam. At present Shiites make up around ten percent of Muslims and are a dominant majority in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain as well as an important minority in Lebanon, Afghanistan, India, Qatar and many other parts of the Muslim world, including the European Muslim community. At earlier times Shiites had a more important role in Muslim history than it might appear from their current status. Shiite scholars, artists and political and religious leaders played a major part in many historical episodes in many parts of the Muslim world.

Shia Islam was born in the period immediately following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, when the early Muslim community experienced a succession crisis. The ideal period of direct presence and harmonic unity of religious and political authority in Muhammad’s person had not lasted long. Serious problems concerning succession appeared immediately after his death in 632. The main reason for this was that he did not leave any instructions for selecting a successor. The Muslims believed that Muhammad, as the “Seal of the Prophets”, had brought to an end a period of human history lasting from the time of Adam when “God’s messengers” had been the only legitimate religious and political leaders of human society. However, it was still necessary to lead and govern Muslim society for the period until the end of the world, and there were sharp differences of opinion on what this government should be like. One group of Muslims believed that “successors” or caliphs should be chosen to lead the whole Muslim community. The short period from 632 to 661 saw the rule of the four orthodox or “rightly guided” caliphs and is considered to be a direct continuation of Muhammad’s government, the period of the “prophetic caliphate”. The first caliph was one of Muhammad’s oldest friends, Abu Bakr, and he was succeeded by two other prominent members of the community, Omar

and Osman. There was discontent in the Muslim community even under these rulers, however, and this culminated in Osman's assassination in 656,

The point at issue that led to the assassination of the third caliph, and which motivates a schism lasting to today, was the question: Who is the legitimate political and religious leader of the community of Muslims? The two opposing sides had radically different views but each considered the other's arguments to be illegitimate. These circumstances gave rise to the arguments that seemed to justify Osman's assassination. They claimed that they had killed "only" an illegitimate ruler, and had in fact been carrying out justice. They believed that rule should remain within the prophet's family according to the dynastic principle. The fourth caliph was their candidate – Ali, Muhammad's cousin and the husband of his daughter Fatima. His supporters, who began to call themselves the "Party of Ali", whose Arabic form "*shi'at Ali*" was later shortened to "Shia", had come together immediately after Muhammad's death but began to promote their interests only during the rule of the third caliph. There is a lot that is unknown about the creation and early development of Shia. According to their arguments, Muhammad had allegedly designated Ali as his heir and successor and passed on to him secret esoteric knowledge that would make him and his descendants the legitimate rulers of the Muslim community. In the end, Ali was elected and recognised as caliph by only a certain group of Muslims. Supporters of an elected caliphate led by Osman's nephew, the governor of Damascus Muawiyah, claimed (probably falsely) that Ali was responsible for the third caliph's assassination, which had enabled him to become caliph. This led to a schism, not only within the Muslim community but within Muhammad's family.

The birth of Shia Islam was as much a matter of politics as dogma. The schism widened into a series of military conflicts. It was the first civil war between Muslims, something that Islam considers one of the worst evils. After several battles, the Shiites were defeated and Muawiyah established the Umayyad Caliphate based in Damascus, but Shia Islam was not finished and had only begun its effects. Ali became the first imam of the Shiite community. The Shiites teach that an imam is the highest political, legal and sacral authority and must be a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. They are the best of people, they have the highest authority and God Himself has ordained that people must obey them, that their orders and prohibitions are orders and prohibitions of God Himself. According to Shiite doctrine, in the absence of prophets, imams are a direct guarantee of the proper function of the world. Imams are qualified to perform these tasks by their exceptional personal qualities and the fact that they have the disposition and the obligation to preserve and maintain, care for and apply God's message through the prophets and a special esoteric talent to explain and help believers to understand the internal, hidden meaning of God's message, in particular to unlock the secrets of the Quran and tradition. A further function is to combine the exoteric and esoteric aspects of Islam and provide a continuous connection between God and humanity. The imam is also infallible, which is why only he has the ability and the right to intermediate God's will.

After Ali's assassination, his elder son Hasan was proclaimed the second imam at Kufah. Hasan lived until 669. He was persuaded by a conspiracy to give up his claims to Muawiyah and he retired to Mecca. His descendants are still considered to belong to "noble"

(*sharif*) families, which ruled until 1924 in Hejaz, for a short time in Syria and until 1958 in Iraq. They continue to rule in Jordan and Morocco, but now follow Sunni Islam. The third *imam* was Ali's younger son Husayn (who died in 680). Relations between Shiites and the Umayyads worsened after Yazid I became caliph (he ruled from 680 to 683). Husayn's assassination at the city of Karbala in Iraq on 10 October 680 set the stage for further conflicts. This tragic event became a major milestone in the development of Shia Islam. Husayn's death as a martyr gave special significance to martyrdom and self-sacrifice in the Shia tradition. The anniversary of Husayn's death, called Ashura, remains one of the most holy days in the Shia calendar and his grave at Karbala is its most frequently visited pilgrimage site. During this hectic period the Umayyads also faced another rival. Yazid's authority was questioned by Muhammad's surviving companions, who captured Mecca and in 683 declared as caliph Abd-Allah al-Zubayr, the son of one of the prophet's companions. The Umayyad army occupied Medina and began a siege of Mecca. The holy city was finally captured in 693 and the "anti-caliph" ibn Zubayr was killed in battle. The Shiites initially took the side of the Mecca caliph, but after several disagreements, they launched their own rebellion. The centre of Shiite resistance was the city of Kufa in southern Iraq, the traditional centre of Shia Islam. The rebellion's leader was Mukhtar Abu Ubaid (Al-Mukhtar). In 685 he declared that Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyah, a half-brother of Hasan and Husayn, was the imam. He died around 700. In 693 the Muslim caliphate was reunited thanks to the activities of the greatest of the Umayyad rulers, Abd al-Malik (who ruled from 685-705). However, neither he nor his successors could entirely calm the political and religious opposition. It was above all Shiites who claimed the religious and political leadership of the community. Ali had many descendants so there were always many potential candidates as imam. A century after the birth of Islam, Shia Islam was becoming fragmented with the continuous formation and dissolution of groups and fractions. This tendency towards fragmentation remains characteristic of Shia Islam to this day.

Early on there were two large groupings of Shiites. The first group, which was formed from followers of Al-Mukhtar and later became known as the *Kaysaniyya*, was made up of various groups recognising various imams of Hashemite provenance. The *Kaysaniyya*, whose popular base included many non-Arab converts to Islam, became one of the main driving forces of the later Abbasid Revolution. Another group, which was later known as the *Imamiya* and which initially kept itself remote from any political activities, developed around Kufa. For them the imam was Ali Zayn al-Abidin (died in 714), who is now regarded as the fourth imam by present-day Shiite factions. His son Muhammad al-Baqir (who died in 733) and his grandson Jafar al-Sadiq (who died in 765) were regarded as being amongst the most learned scholars and experts on tradition and had a decisive influence on the character and dogma of Shia Islam. In Jafar's time there was a new period of strife when in 740 his uncle Zayd led an uprising against the Umayyads in Kufa, which failed and led to his death. The uprising did leave behind a new movement called *Zaidiyyah* in his honour and which also recognised him as the fifth imam. The movement operated in Hejaz, in Tabaristan, Baluchistan and elsewhere until the Zajdi imams finally settled in Yemen, which their dynasty ruled from 898 to 1962 continuously through 66 generations. This is the longest uninterrupted rule of Muhammad's descendants.

Another division of the *Imamiya* took place after Jafar al-Sadiq's death. He had selected his eldest son Ismail as his heir but Ismail died while his father was still alive (around 754). Jafar failed to designate another successor before his death and five candidates then competed for the title of imam. They included his eldest grandson, Ismail's son Muhammad (who died or "disappeared" sometime between 796 and 809) and Jafar's younger son Musa al-Kadhim (who died in 799). The Shia community became internally divided. The first large group recognised Ismail's line and were therefore known as the *Ismailiyah*, the followers of Ismail, or "seveners", based on the number of imams they recognised. However even this group was not united. The majority of them took as their imam Muhammad the son of Ismail, who allegedly went into Occultation ("concealed himself") to return at the end of time as the *Mahdi*, "God's guided one". Muslim tradition represents the *Mahdi* as a leader who will restore Islam and bring Muslims together at the end of time. Shiites identify the figure of the *Mahdi* with the hidden imam. Another group of Ismailis admitted that Muhammad had died and saw his descendants as imams. These descendants allegedly included the founder of the Fatimid dynasty. Besides Muhammad's supporters there were also some who adhered only to his father Ismail. This minority position, known as true Ismailism, saw him as the true imam and denied his death and hoped for his return as *Mahdi*.

The history of the *Ismailiyah* is one of the most surprising and complex chapters in the history of Islam. The sect split into many groups and factions, each of which often underwent great changes. I will try to give at least a brief summary of the highlights of its story. *Ismailiyah* and other branches of Shia Islam were forced underground for many years and survived thanks to the doctrine of *taqiya* propounded by Muhammad al-Baqir. *Taqiya* permitted Shiites who were at risk of losing their life to publicly deny their true religious identity and survive undetected within majority Sunni Islam. Ismaili communities operated everywhere in the Muslim world and were led by the *dai*, who were something like "missionaries".

The sect experienced a significant change with the rise of the Fatimid dynasty. The Fatimids (who traced their lineage to Muhammad's daughter Fatima) came from an Ismaili tradition that considered Ismail's son Muhammad to be the hidden imam. The first Fatimid, Abdullah al-Mahdi Billah declared himself to the *Mahdi* in 899, throwing off the tradition of secrecy and causing further splits in the *Ismailiyah*, which forced Abdullah to flee his rivals to North Africa. Here he achieved great political success and he established a base at Raqqada in Tunisia, where he proclaimed himself caliph in 910 and laid the foundation for the future success of the Fatimid Caliphate. He was not universally popular, however. The Ismaili groups that did not recognise Abdullah as the *Mahdi* began to gather around Hamdan Qarmat, the movement's leading representative in Iraq. This Ismaili group became known as Qarmatians after their founder and were best known for their militancy. They raided Iraq several times and robbed pilgrims travelling to Mecca. Once they even came close to capturing Baghdad. The most terrible act of the Qarmatians was the sacking and pillaging of Mecca during the pilgrimage in 930, during which they stole the black stone from the Kaaba and returned it only in 951 after a ransom was paid. They were strongly opposed to both the Sunnis and the Fatimids and they operated an independent political unit centred on al-Hasa in Bahrain. They expected the imminent arrival of the

Mahdi. They thought that he had arrived in the form of a young Persian in 931. As soon as he took office, however, he revealed strong anti-Arab feelings, cursing Muhammad and the other prophets and instituting strange rituals. It was when he began to systematically execute leading members of the community that he was declared a false *Mahdi* and executed. This fiasco weakened the community and contributed to its downfall. Soon after its establishment, the Fatimid Caliphate (910 – 1171) founded the city of Cairo as its centre. At the time of its greatest flourishing, the Fatimid Caliphate ruled an extensive territory from Tunisia to Syria. It also sent out active and successful missionaries throughout the Arab east. An important event in the history of the Fatimid dynasty was the rule of the extravagant and cruel caliph al-Hakim (996 – 1021, when he "disappeared"). He engaged in unprecedented persecutions of Jews and Christians, including the demolition of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, alongside the introduction of many radical reforms and orders. Finally, in 1017, al-Hakim declared himself to be the embodiment of God and a short while later "disappeared" in the desert. His followers became the ancestors of today's Druze.

Another schism took place after the death of Caliph al-Mustansir in 1094. A disagreement over which of his sons was his legitimate heir divided the Fatimids into two camps. The first group recognised al-Mustali (1094 – 1101) while others favoured Nizar (who died or "disappeared" in 1095). Al-Mustali's party eventually secured the caliphate, but the followers of Nizar founded a new sect, named the Nizaris after their founder, though they would later be referred to as "Assassins". The Nizaris became famous for their practice of political murders and their secrecy, which inspired some of the West's earliest romantic legends about Islam, although there is little truth in them. European legends about the "Assassins" (drugs, religious fanaticism, the earthly paradise etc.) came to us chiefly through the works of Marco Polo. The Nizaris operated mainly in Iran and Syria in closed communities organised around mountain fortresses. These communities were led by imams who claimed be descendants of Nizar and who were based at Alamut in northern Iran. The first leader of the group was the Persian Hassan-i Sabbah (1090 – 1124) and another famous twelfth century leader was Rashid ad-Din Sinan, "the Old Man of the Mountain", who was the head of the group's branch in Syria. The Nizaris lost their stronghold at Alamut in the Mongol invasions but some then relocated to eastern Iran and in the eighteenth century to India. In the present time, there are Nizaris in India, eastern Africa and in central Asia and their leader is Aga Khan IV, who is the 49th imam after Nizar.

The other major branch of Shia Islam besides *Ismailiyah* derived from the group that accepted Musa al-Kadhim as the true imam and who now see him as the seventh of twelve Shiite imams, hence *Athnaashariyyah* (Twelverism). The remaining five imams were Ali al-Ridha (died 799), Muhammad al-Taqi (died 835), Ali al-Hadi (died 868), Hasan al-Askari (died 872) and Muhammad al-Mahdi (died/disappeared 872). According to Twelver Shiites, the last of the line did not die but concealed himself in order to return at the end of the world as the expected *Mahdi*. There are doubts, however, as to whether he ever existed at all. Allegedly, he was only seen by a hand-picked elite. He disappeared from the market in Samarra in Iraq, allegedly to go into Occultation until the end of time. His Occultation is divided into "minor" and "major" periods. During the first period lasting from 872 to 939, the imam directed the community through deputies, to whom he occasionally appeared and

delivered instructions. The second period will last until “God gives the imam permission to appear”, which means until the end of the world. Even in his concealment, however, the imam continues to guide the “outer” and “inner” actions of Muslims. Nevertheless, Shia doctrine does not leave the people without leaders in the imam’s absence. Until his return, the community is to be led by the most promising and most highly qualified individuals who understand and interpret Islam correctly. These Muslims are active curators and interpreters of tradition and law who uphold the imam’s authority. They form a Shiite “clergy” of experts on religion and law, the highest ranking of whom have the title *ayatollah* (“Sign of God”). One of these, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, became the leader of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. Twelver Shiites are by far the largest of the present-day branches of Shia Islam and in Iran, this doctrine is the state religion.

Western media most frequently mention Shia Islam in connection with the radical politics of Iran and the militant ideologies of armed groups such as the *Mahdi Army* in Iraq or *Hezbollah* in Lebanon. This is a more than misleading over-simplification. Shiite Islam represents a rich and original religious and cultural tradition and an essential part of the overall Muslim heritage.

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