

# Hidden Religion

The Greatest Mysteries and Symbols  
of the World's Religious Beliefs



MICAH ISSITT AND CARLYN MAIN

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*The Greatest Mysteries and  
Symbols of the World's  
Religious Beliefs*

Micah Issitt and Carlyn Main



Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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# Preface

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Comparative religion is a complex academic field covered in a wide variety of publications, from specific research studies to broad, general analyses. This book is not intended to provide comprehensive coverage of the field or even to encapsulate the main issues in religious studies. Rather, this is a reference guide that has been designed to facilitate research. This volume examines global religion through two separate but interrelated factors: the development and use of religious symbols and the origins and continuation of religious “mysteries,” defined here as aspects of religion that are poorly understood or frequently given to misconception.

Symbolism lies at the intersection of culture, art, and language, and the exploration of religious symbols is illustrative of broad cultural patterns. As cultures blend in an increasingly globalized world society, it is inevitable that individuals will more frequently encounter the symbols of other religious traditions. A basic knowledge of these symbols is like a field guide to this avenue of human expression and (in the best scenario) can help to facilitate greater cross-cultural understanding.

The secrets and mysteries associated with the world’s faiths are equally important, at times representing the fringes of a religion and at other times the hidden core of knowledge that religious groups seek to protect from outside corruption. More importantly, religious mysteries are sources of misunderstandings and fear, all too often leading to distrust and even animosity between people of different faiths.

The secrets and mysteries covered in this book include descriptions of such secret societies as the Nine Unknown Men, the Knights Templar, and the Bizango sect and investigations of such sacred rituals as the peyote ceremonies of the American Southwest and animal sacrifice among the African diasporic faiths. We also examine aspects of religions that provide a unique way of looking at the universe: the creation of spiritual calendars, numerological systems, and ways of viewing nature. This book also looks at the lives of such important spiritual figures as Jesus Christ, Confucius, Buddha, and Zoroaster. These biographical studies

are included as “mysteries” because they inhabit the space where historical study and divine belief meet. Each of these individuals is said to have existed as a real historical figure, and yet the stories of their lives are shrouded in folklore and supernatural belief.

To explore these separate yet intertwined elements of religion, this book has been organized into broad categories that are often used in comparative religion research. For instance, the faiths that evolved in the Indian subcontinent have been grouped into a section called “Dharmic Religions,” while the religions of China and Japan are included in a section called “East Asian Religions.” Each section contains descriptions of one or more religions or broader religious groups and is introduced with a short history and outline of the major beliefs of the tradition. For example, within the “East Asian Religions” section, readers will find an entry for “Shinto,” a native religion of Japan, and an article describing the history and beliefs of the Shinto faith.

Each religion is then examined through a series of articles (listed alphabetically) that cover various aspects of the religion. For example, within the subsection on Japanese Shinto, readers will find articles on Kagura, Kami, Tomoe, and the Torii Gate. Some of these articles cover religious symbols, providing information on the history, use, and ascribed meaning of these symbols, accompanied by an illustration for visual reference. In the case of Japanese Shinto, the articles on Tomoe and the Torii Gate refer to symbols associated with this religion. The remaining articles cover the mysterious or poorly understood aspects of each tradition. Returning to Shinto, as an example, the articles on Kagura and Kami help to explain the Shinto approach to divinity and musical worship.

The major world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity/Catholicism, and Taoism, are explored in the greatest detail because these faiths are familiar and culturally dominant around the world. Efforts have been made to address both the major issues and some of the lesser-known facets of these dominant traditions.

The remaining religions were chosen for different reasons. Some, such as the African diasporic faiths, were chosen because they help to illustrate key aspects of cultural evolution, in this case the way that the Atlantic slave trade affected religious development in the Americas. Other religions, such as Zoroastrianism and Ancient Egyptian Religion, have been included because they comprise an important spiritual substrate for the origin of the dominant faiths. Gnosticism, for instance, which is a relatively minor and unimportant strain of pseudo-Christian mysticism, has fueled a number of occult spiritual movements and even modern conspiracy theories, and so it helps to illustrate the origin and evolution of religious mysteries. A similar justification accounts for the inclusion of a number of articles on New Age and neo-pagan spirituality, which have become a fecund source of symbolism and esoteric spiritual beliefs.

The well-known adage “truth is stranger than fiction,” most often attributed to Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*, was a guiding concept for this book, as the authors believe that the history of the world’s religions, cults, schools, and teachers and the ways that religious concepts have shaped the world are far more bizarre, meaningful, and interesting than the often superficial theories that comprise much of popular mysticism. We recognize that there are many spiritual seekers in the world, searching for meaning amid a plethora of potential options, but this book is not one of the many aimed at providing spiritual direction or selling mystical knowledge. Rather, we hope to provide information, background, and history to help readers of all stripes, from seekers to skeptics, to gain a better understanding of the world’s complex religious landscape.

We would like to explain the use of the terms “myth” and “mythology” in this book. There are two generally accepted definitions of “myth” listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first of which can be summarized as a traditional story relating to the history of a culture and typically involving divine or supernatural elements. By this definition, the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah’s ark, and the heroic deeds of Hercules are all myths, despite the fact that there are some who believe one or more of these stories should be considered historical rather than mythological. A myth can also be defined as a widely held but false belief, and we will not generally use this definition unless referring to the way that outsiders view the spiritual beliefs of another group. The difference between a myth and an historical account has to do with our ability to verify the events described in a story. Stories involving divine power and supernatural beings cannot be verified in this way because, as of this writing, science and scholarship have found insufficient evidence to verify the existence of these phenomena. Thus, when referring to myths and mythology in this text, we do not mean to make qualitative judgments about the truth of any specific religious belief. Rather, we apply the term broadly to the entire family of traditional stories that form part of the essential substrate of *all* religions.

The material for this book was partially taken from primary source materials, including studies and papers written in furtherance of research in archaeology, sociology, and history. Secondary source materials include books and articles written for the popular press or for the casual scholarly community. We would like to thank the public library systems of Philadelphia and San Francisco and the university libraries of both the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, and Washington University, in St. Louis, for providing access to journals, books, and other research materials. We further extend our thanks to the librarians and administrators who continue to work in these institutions and to provide excellent resources for students and independent scholars like ourselves. All of the illustrations in this book, unless otherwise noted, were created by author Micah Issitt, and we hope that our readers find them aesthetically pleasing and illuminating.

Each entry in this book is accompanied by a note on further reading that may be of interest to readers wishing to gain more in-depth knowledge of a particular subject. In this information age, scholars and students are fortunate to have access to a variety of online databases and encyclopedias, such as *Wikipedia* that can sometimes provide comprehensive and accurate information on a variety of subjects. A scholarly article or book, like this one, fills a different niche because a book or article is meant to be experienced as a whole, presenting information through a specific viewpoint and context. Both online databases and traditional sources of knowledge are important facets of the modern catalog of information, and students should attend to all of these sources to enhance their understanding of any subject.

We would like to thank the editors and staff at ABC-CLIO, especially George Butler, for their help in finishing this book. The written history of world religions cannot exist without archaeological and anthropological research, and every historian around the world owes a debt to the pioneers, visionaries, and everyday researchers in these fields who have contributed to the substrate of historical data. Finally, we would like to thank everyone who took the time to purchase, borrow, and read this book. We consider ourselves links in a chain of expanding human knowledge, and it is our hope that the information in this book will inspire our readers to take the quest for knowledge further, perhaps exploring fields and issues previously unimagined.

# Introduction: History and Mystery

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*Pentheus: And these mysteries, what are they?*

*Dionysius: They are forbidden, unutterable to unbelievers.*

—*The Bacchae of Euripides: A New Version (459–477/31)*

## **LIFE, THE UNIVERSE, AND EVERYTHING**

---

Spirituality is the belief in or the search for the sacred or divine aspects of reality, and religion is a system for enacting elements of one's spiritual beliefs. Both religion and spirituality are tools or methods that can be used to investigate life, reality, and the universe. Spiritual beliefs can be defined as beliefs that are not amenable to scientific or physical theories of the universe. The belief in a god or gods is a spiritual belief, as is the belief in a soul or such unearthly realms as heaven and hell. There are also a variety of spiritual beliefs that are nonreligious or quasi-religious, such as the belief in palm reading, ghosts and spirits, or even the ineffable concept of fortune or luck. The key concept in the spiritual/religious investigation of the universe is faith, which is a belief based on personal or spiritual understanding rather than evidence or logic.

Consider the existence of the human soul, which is taken as spiritual truth by many religious adherents but not supported through rational inquiry. Scientists have been attempting to “find” the soul for centuries, and thousands of pseudoscientific theories have been posited to explain the soul in material terms. For instance, Massachusetts physician Duncan MacDougall reported in 1901 that there was an unexplained loss of some 21 grams of weight from a human body after death, and MacDougall believed that this was the result of the soul departing the body. Subsequent investigations failed to confirm MacDougall's findings, though many continue to believe in MacDougall's 0.046 pound spiritual substance. The belief in the soul is not empirically supported, nor can it be confirmed through any known scientific method. The ideation of the soul is a faith-based belief and requires that



believers make a figurative leap from what can be proven to what they personally believe to be true of the universe. This “leap of faith” is *the* characteristic that sets spiritual/religious beliefs apart from other methods of investigating reality.

Science is another method of investigating the universe, based on the accumulation of knowledge through experimentation and rational hypotheses about nature. Unlike spirituality, science is not supposed to function by way of faith. This is not always the case, however, because many scientists develop (necessarily) a certain faith regarding the efficacy, functionality, or accuracy of science itself, and this aspect of science overlaps with religion in many key ways. However, unlike faith-based beliefs, scientific theories must be testable and reproducible. A theory or hypothesis is *not* scientific if it *requires* faith of any kind, and all scientific theories, to be accepted as scientific truths, must be able to be subjected to independent repetition to prove that the same conclusion can be reached again and again. MacDougall’s 21-gram theory, for instance, is an invalid scientific hypothesis because further research failed to reproduce MacDougall’s results.

Historical research is based on the scientific method. Historians and archaeologists throughout time have studied ancient relics, art, and writings and developed hypotheses about the cultures, religions, and societies of the past. Religious mythology often contains the belief that religions themselves are divine creations, transmitted from spiritual forces through messengers and omens. This is the history of religion based on faith because, in all cases, these miraculous events cannot be “proven” through the scientific study of nature and history. There is no physical evidence, for instance, to suggest that a divine being actually spoke to Muhammad to provide the revelations that became the Koran, nor is there any evidence suggesting that the patron god of the Aztecs led them to found the city of Tenochtitlan.

Belief in legendary revelation depends on faith and not on a rational understanding of the universe. From time to time, theologians have proposed systems of “evidence” to support spiritual beliefs. Some believe, for instance, that the intricate interconnectedness of life on earth provides evidence of divine influence or purposeful design. There are, of course, many ways of explaining the evolution of ecological interdependence, and divine influence is by no means *necessary* to explain natural phenomena.

Historians cannot approach religious history from the faith-based perspective because this position obscures the connections between religions and their larger cultural environments. Every religion comes from somewhere (usually from another religion), and this emergence involves adapting to and coopting elements of the parent culture (or religion). Just as the stone knife is the ancestor of the samurai sword, historians must view religions as part of a developmental progression, rather than as independent occurrences. While a historian may have his or

her own faith or a personal belief in divine revelation, historical *research* must take the nondivine path, attempting to place religion on par with other historical developments.

## RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION

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Religious theorists have created a complex system to organize religions into different categories. Monotheistic religions, for instance, are those that involve belief in one god, while polytheistic religions involve the belief in multiple gods, and pantheistic religions involve the belief that god and the universe are one and the same. This type of categorization is helpful for demonstrating the differences between religions but obscures the fact that most of the world's religions are as similar as they are different.

All religions have a concept of “ultimate divinity,” seen as the highest manifestation of reality and spiritual truth. The ultimate divinity is often conceived as a distant entity or force responsible for creation and usually too complex, wonderful, infinite, beautiful, or alien for complete human comprehension. In the Abrahamic faiths, this position is given to God, while Buddhism affords this status to a vague, impersonal cosmic reality underlying the spiritual and physical universe. All religions also have a concept of “proximate divinity,” which is usually conceived as a divine or semidivine being, book, artifact, animal, or force that bridges the gap between humanity and the source of divine power. In the Abrahamic faiths, prophets, angels, and saints are the proximate sources of divinity, while in Buddhism, arhats, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas take up these positions in the religious hierarchy.

Within all polytheistic religions, there is still a belief in an ultimate god or force that is the source of all creation and divinity. Polytheistic Greece had the primal deities Chaos, Gaia, and Uranus, while polytheistic Hinduism has the creative deity/force Brahma. On the other side of the proverbial coin, all monotheistic faiths have semidivine beings or other objects that bridge the divide between humanity and the creator god. The Abrahamic faiths have their angels and saints, while Sikhism has a system of gurus. Even if these semidivine beings are not gods per se, they are venerated just like the minor spirits and deities of the polytheistic faiths. Substantively, monotheism and polytheism contain many of the same concepts and goals. The fact that believers consider these two approaches to faith to be diametrically opposed is largely a matter of perception.

Students of religious history might wonder why some faiths have spread so successfully across the world while others have languished or remained small. Most of the world's dominant faiths—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Judaism—have one important characteristic in common: they are migratory

religions that have been generalized to such a degree that they can be easily transplanted to any location. Early human societies were intimately linked to their physical environments and were less mobile than modern populations. Therefore, the earliest religions were highly ecological in character as ancient humans believed that their specific home territory, country, or ecosystem was the source of divine power. In Hinduism, for instance, the river Ganges was once worshipped as a goddess, while among the Peruvian Incans, the Andes Mountains were venerated as the home of their pantheon.

Over the millennia, religions gradually increased their focus on “humanistic” faith and reduced their focus on sacred ecology. Judaism provides one excellent example of this evolution. The early Jews, like their polytheistic predecessors in the Middle East, believed that the Holy Land was a sacred geographical region designated by God as their divine home. Some Jewish people still hold this belief, hence the Zionist movement that resulted in the establishment of the Israeli state in Jerusalem. Later manifestations of Judaism, including Christianity and Islam, focused more on the personal, internal relationship with God and far less on the spiritual potency of their environment. As religions became more humanistic, it became possible to transplant these faiths to new environments without the sense of leaving the ecological source of spiritual power.

Another factor in the rise of the dominant faiths has been the intolerance of the monotheistic worldview. Polytheistic and monotheistic faiths tend to adapt differently to being transplanted to new areas. For instance, when Greek polytheistic paganism was imported to Egypt, the religion simply expanded to absorb the Egyptian pantheon, resulting in a mixed bag of gods from both Egypt and Greece. By contrast, monotheism tends to have difficulty absorbing other deities and spirits because monotheistic faiths often contain the belief that the worship of other deities is immoral or evil. As Christianity—among the most intolerant of the monotheistic faiths—was imported around the world, Christian churches attempted to prohibit and prevent the worship of native gods and often absorbed indigenous spirits into the faith as demons or representations of evil.

To believers, it might seem that their particular faith is popular because it is more “true” or “correct” than other religions. Some Christian theorists have argued that Christianity is the world’s most popular faith because converts simply recognize the inherent superiority of the Christian approach. However, the success of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and the other dominant faiths has little to do with perceived spiritual superiority and has more to do with the convergence of interrelated historical patterns. Christianity succeeded through military conquest and because the inherent intolerance and migratory generality of the faith made it an excellent representation of evolving human priorities. Buddhism’s spread through China followed a similar pattern after the faith was adopted by a series of

military leaders. Like Christianity, Buddhism is an inherently humanistic faith that can be easily adapted to new cultures.

## **SYMBOLS AND SECRETS**

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Religions emerge from within broader linguistic and artistic traditions, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the development of spiritual symbolism. Religious symbols serve a number of purposes simultaneously, providing signifiers of membership and representing key elements of belief and mythology. Symbols also link religion with language and with the capacity for artistic reproduction. Before there were alphabetic languages, humans communicated through ideographic and pictographic symbols, and religious symbolism often falls into this category. Many religious symbols predate written language and therefore represent the earliest literary impulses of humanity, attempting to symbolize thoughts and ideas through relatively simple drawings.

The study of religious symbols is illuminating because many symbols are related to, or derived from, one another, and this creates yet another way to look at the underlying connections between religions. The most common symbolic motifs (star, circle, cross, etc.) are simple in design, requiring only a few basic lines or shapes. Even those who have no artistic talent whatsoever can quickly reproduce simple graphic symbols, and this reproductive simplicity may be a factor in the evolution of the world's most popular symbols. The five-pointed star, for instance, is so basic that even a young child can easily approximate the design. A more complex symbol, such as a detailed drawing of a god's head, would be unlikely to stand the test of time because few could reproduce it accurately.

Symbols also allow for the transmission of hidden and secret meanings, and this blends into the development of mystery traditions. For instance, early Christians used to hide their adherence to the controversial faith by using secret Christian symbols (like the swastika) on their tombs and avoiding symbols that were recognized by the Romans as Christian. In essence, Christianity became a "secret society" within the Roman Empire, organized through surreptitious meetings in confidential locations. Many early Christian symbols were also, therefore, secret symbols.

Few aspects of religion arouse more interest than secret societies and hidden cults, partially because secrecy itself invites curiosity. Many of the world's best-known secret societies began as exclusive, members-only clubs. Some emerged within religious traditions, while others began simply as social or occupational organizations. Conspiratorial theories about various clubs and cults generally come from those who are excluded or from social or political rivals who fear

the growing influence of the organization. Over decades or centuries, secret clubs often become convenient scapegoats for societal problems and historical mysteries that have little, if anything, to do with the organizations.

Secret societies comprise a characteristic type of myth that emerges in cultures around the world and tends to follow a similar pattern. A club or group emerges, either with religious or social purpose, like the Templar Order or the White Lotus Society, or simply as a way for men to avoid spending time with their wives and children, like Freemasonry. The club decides to become “exclusive,” either because the group is subversive and holds illegal political views, like early Christianity, or because membership is restricted to some elite group, again, like Freemasonry (the elite group being affluent white men). If the group begins to gain a modicum of social, political, economic, or spiritual influence *and* the organization chooses to remain members-only and secret, a conspiracy theory is likely to emerge. Over time, this conspiracy theory will fall out of favor but will remain a tantalizing bit of mythic history that can be revived and embellished in subsequent generations. This is the pattern that led to the seemingly far-fetched linkage between the Templar Order and the conspiracy to hide extraterrestrial visits to Earth, to cite one of many examples.

Religion itself often serves as a simplification of the universe, resulting from the basic human desire to abridge the overwhelming complexity of existence. This same motivation is behind the popularity of conspiracy theories, pop psychology, and a variety of other mystical systems. For instance, the complex nature of crime and morality and the danger that each human faces from human and nonhuman threats can be simplified by believing in the existence of a devil, demon, or other objectively evil force that seeks to corrupt or harm humanity. Similarly, the existence of a secret society controlling the world’s finances is a simplification of the multifarious economic and political patterns that lead to the fortunes and financial failures of humans living within society.

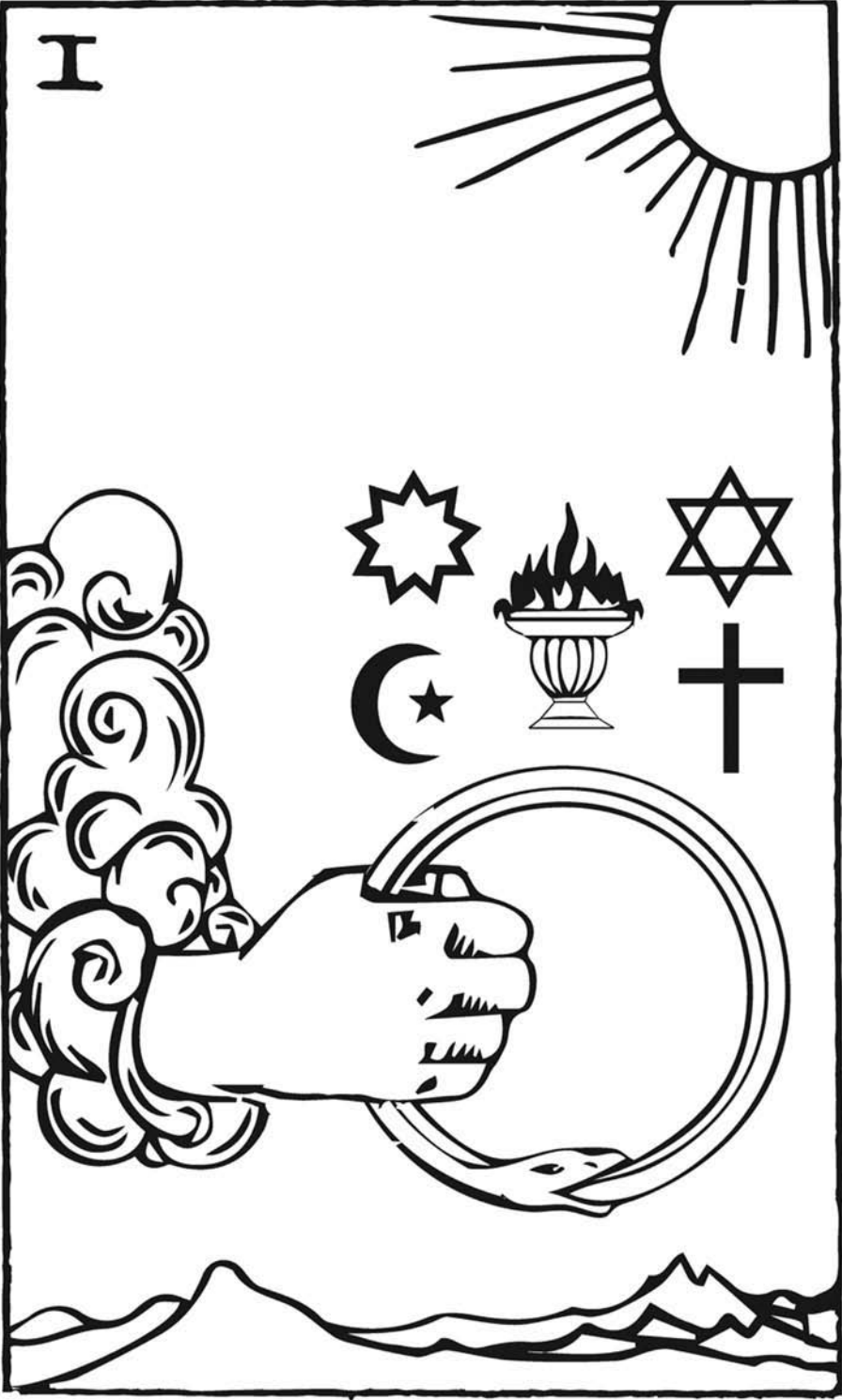
Ignorance and lack of familiarity are at the root of nearly all mystery theories, conspiracies, and mystical conceptions of the universe. Many modern religions are based on theories of secret, lost knowledge from the ancient world. While it is true that a vast amount of knowledge from ancient cultures has been lost because of a lack of documentation, the idea that this loss involved the disappearance of essential secrets that represent major spiritual and philosophical breakthroughs is largely a matter of misconception and creative invention. In the West, for instance, it is common to believe that Eastern philosophy contains transformative secrets that can unlock a variety of human abilities, from improved emotional balance to immortality. Eastern philosophy is relatively difficult to comprehend and may simply seem more “exotic” to those raised in the West, and this contributes to the perception of secret depth and mysterious power. The same “exotic” appeal may

have contributed to the success of Christianity in Japan, where this foreign faith seemed alien and mystically potent to those raised in the Eastern mold.

Another interesting factor in religious mysteries is the degree to which mystery, conspiracy, and spiritual secrets have been commodified or transformed into products for human consumption. Religious and philosophical mysteries have become a perennial trend in the West, where thousands of books, films, and self-help programs are marketed under the pretense that they are based on archaic arcane knowledge. Marketing alleged mystical wisdom is a process that has been going on since the roots of Western civilization, from the fortune-tellers and astrologers of antiquity to modern psychospiritual programs that offer to pass on esoteric wisdom on subjects ranging from Celtic cults to extraterrestrial visitors. While the most basic research can easily disprove the “theories” behind most pseudospiritual hypotheses, these concepts continue to be popular, and even the most incredulous spiritual theories can attract a group of ardent followers.

The concept of religious mystery is as old as religion itself, and within many religions, the idea of “the mysteries” refers to the supernatural aspects of faith, including miracles, magic powers, and divine mysticism. The mysteries provide the “evidence” that the supernatural exists and a tantalizing sense that the faith contains deeper knowledge that is too powerful for the laity and therefore reserved for those who reach a higher level of awareness or commitment. In some sense, a religion can never fully divulge its secrets, because once this occurs, there is no deeper level of understanding to achieve and the process becomes uninteresting. Having the mysteries in the background provides a goal and an added level of allure for those who wish to deepen their mystical connection.

Any secret that can be revealed is not, by definition, a secret any longer. The historical study of religious mysteries does not involve the revelation of divine truth, but rather looks at how religions develop, hide, reveal, and treat the mysterious aspects of their faiths. The examination of religious mysteries reveals a great deal about the origins and development of religion and helps to dispel the misconceptions that often occur through poor scholarship and fear of the unknown. The Salem witch trials, the execution of the Templars, and countless other examples reveal the potentially disastrous consequences when religious differences are misconstrued as signs of evil or impurity. The revelation of secrecy, even if it removes some of a religion’s mystical appeal, is therefore a path toward greater understanding. Only by viewing religion as the product of our shared culture and history can we understand how religion functions in society and how the patterns of religion bind humanity together as much as they pull us apart.



# ABRAHAMIC AND IRANIAN RELIGIONS

The term “Abrahamic religions” is used in comparative religious studies to refer to a group of monotheistic religions that originated in the Middle East. The primary representatives of this category are Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and subreligions that have emerged from these faiths. In 2012, more than half of the world’s population identified themselves as belonging to an Abrahamic faith. The Abrahamic faiths are also united by a shared mythological tradition that includes the presence of Abraham, who is variously called “Ibrahim,” “Abram,” and “Abu-ramu” (the original Assyrian version of the name). Abraham is a major figure of the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament and is also a minor figure in the Koran and the Torah. Abraham is considered the first Jew in Jewish legend and is also a major prophet in Islam and a minor prophet in Christianity. Versions of Abraham’s life and deeds vary between different faiths.

The Iranian religions are a small group of spiritual traditions that emerged in Iran and through the migration of cultures that utilize the Iranian languages, which include Old Persian and Avestan. Most of Iranian traditions, including Zurvanism and Mandaism, have become extinct or greatly reduced in the modern era. Zoroastrianism is the most significant extant religion that represents the ancient cultures of Iran and is believed by many historians to have been an inspiration for the development of the Abrahamic faiths.



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# Judaism

Judaism is the oldest surviving monotheistic religion and the first of the Abrahamic faiths. Over the centuries, Judaism has developed into a unique blend of cultural and spiritual characteristics, and belonging to Jewish culture no longer necessitates adherence to the Jewish faith. Some classify Jewish culture as a distinct ethnic group that is united by the possession of genetic characteristics derived from the maternal chromosomal lineage. Conversion to Judaism is relatively rare, and Jewish populations have historically been insular because of persecution, thereby preserving genetic strains within the larger population. Interbreeding will, over time, reduce and eventually diffuse these inherited links, but genetic lineages of Jewish cultures still exist in the 21st century.

There are approximately 14 million adherents of Judaism in the world, making Judaism the twelfth- to fourteenth-largest religious/cultural tradition in the world. Because of the complex relationship between Jewish culture and Jewish spirituality, it is unknown what percentage of the 14 million who call themselves “Jewish” adhere to the spiritual aspects of Jewish practice. In North America and parts of Europe, some studies indicate that as many as 50 percent of self-identified Jews do not believe in God. Atheistic and secular Judaism has increased as a proportion of the Jewish population in the 20th and 21st centuries, constituting one of the driving forces in the evolution of Judaism in the modern era.

## Origins and Evolution

Judaism emerged in Canaan (now Israel and Palestine) around 2000 BCE, after a fabled communication between God and Abraham, the first Jew, in which God told Abraham that the Jews were the chosen people who were intended to demonstrate the proper life to humanity. God delivered spiritual law to the populace through another messenger, Moses, to whom God presented the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. What followed was a golden age of Jewish kings and the establishment of Judaism as an influential spiritual/social institution centered around the First Temple built by King Solomon.

## 4 | Hidden Religion

The Jewish people split into tribes around the 10th century BCE, and this significantly weakened the Jewish kingdom. The dissolution resulted in the destruction of the First Temple around 600 BCE, after which the Jewish people were thrown into exile. Jews reclaimed the region around 164 BCE, an event celebrated with the festival of Hanukah, but it was a temporary return to independence as the Jewish people were again subjugated in the 1st century CE by the Roman Empire. Rabbinic Judaism, the strain of Judaism centered around adherence to scriptural law, emerged in the 1st century CE, driven partially by the development of Christianity and the resulting competition between Jewish and Christian sects for followers.

The Jews attempted to revolt against the Roman Empire several times, the first in 70 CE, which resulted in the destruction of the Second Temple. The second revolt shortly after resulted in the exile of the Jewish people from Jerusalem. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine, Judaism remained a lesser and often persecuted tradition throughout most of Europe. As the Jewish people spread across Europe, a new center of Jewish culture emerged in Spain, which was under the control of a lineage of Muslim rulers.

Over the centuries, the Jewish people endured an extensive series of persecutions, under Christian leaders during the Crusades and also at the hands of Muslims in Islamic territories. Judaism never managed to eclipse Christianity, even though Christianity originally arose as a Jewish sect. The new tradition of Christianity, split from its parent faith, gained prominence throughout most of Europe and the entirety of the New World. Jewish populations were repeatedly restricted in their movements and at times subjected to social and political penalties for their faith. The persecution of the Jewish people culminated in the events of the Jewish Holocaust during World War II and the attempted extermination of the Jewish people at the hands of the German Nazi movement. In the wake of this tragic period, European and American authorities cooperated to establish a new Jewish state in what is now Israel, thus returning the Jewish people to control of the legendary Holy Land of Jewish Scripture.

### **Jewish Beliefs**

Judaism is a “monotheistic” faith, characterized by the belief in a single god, and Jewish Scripture forbids “idolatry,” defined as the worship of any other figure other than God. Jews believe in the primacy of such Jewish prophets as Abraham and Moses, through whom God delivered prophecies to the Jewish people. Traditional Judaism is also embodied by adherence to Jewish law, as enshrined in the Torah and the Talmud, books specific to Jewish spiritual practice. Judaism also

**Forbidden Haircuts**

“Payot” are uncut locks of hair worn in front of the ears by some Orthodox Jews because of an interpretation of a verse in the Torah that says that men should not shave the “corners” of their heads.

recognizes the original contents of the Old Testament as another source of spiritual Scripture.

Over the centuries, Judaism has given rise to a variety of different sects and schools of thought. Orthodox Judaism is the school closest to traditional practices, and followers of the school attempt to follow the 613 laws laid out in the Talmud. By contrast, Reform Judaism is a modernized version of the faith that has removed such traditional practices as animal sacrifice and the segregation of women and men. Liberal Judaism and Jewish humanism represent further modernization of Judaism, in some cases doing away with the worship of God altogether for a more humanist approach.

Judaism has also given rise to several strains of mysticism, including Kabbalah, a mystical practice and theory believed to have been a part of the original Jewish practice transmitted by God in the 13th century BCE. Kabbalah has experienced a resurgence in the 20th and 21st centuries, becoming a “new age,” generalized form of mysticism that is most popular in North America. While some Jewish traditionalists reject Kabbalah and other forms of mysticism, others believe that mysticism is an essential element to Jewish tradition and culture.

As the oldest of the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism has evolved through the centuries, traveling the spectrum from orthodox adherence to the modern humanistic and atheistic approaches to the faith. A similar phenomenon can be seen in Hinduism, one of the oldest religious traditions, which has also evolved into a range of approaches from traditional adherence to an almost atheistic approach. Even as Jewish culture is now represented by a growing population occupying the Holy Land, the modern evolution of the faith is marked by a reduction in traditionalism in favor of the view that Judaism is a cultural rather than a spiritual institution.

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## CHAI SYMBOL

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### Symbol of Life

The chai symbol has become a popular decorative motif in Jewish architecture and sacred objects. It is used to decorate mezuzot, jewelry, and other items to “advertise” allegiance to Judaism or Jewish culture. While the chai symbol has ancient origins, the symbol did not become a popular representation of Jewish culture until the 20th century.

### Life in Jewish Culture

The word “chai” is a Hebrew term meaning “life” and is often taken to symbolize the Jewish focus on the value of life. The protection of life is considered one of the principle tenets of Judaism. Some interpretations of Judaism hold that the focus on life is a representation of the Jewish belief that all humans are descended from the same individual and therefore every life symbolizes all lives and the whole of humanity. The focus on life is therefore seen as a representation of wholeness in Jewish culture and of the interconnectedness of all beings.

Though there are 613 commandments listed in the Talmud, traditional Jewish law “requires” that an individual violate almost all of the commandments if doing so is necessary to save or preserve someone’s life or health. Pregnant women and the elderly are not supposed to fast on Yom Kippur, for instance, though this is a commandment for all others. Similarly, medical professionals are permitted to answer emergency calls on the Sabbath, though it is a commandment that all others refrain from work on this occasion.

The value of life also places certain restrictions on medical practices and procedures. For instance, in the Talmud it is written that one is prohibited from moving an ill person in any way if doing so may shorten that person’s life. Similarly, Jewish law is usually interpreted as strictly forbidding euthanasia, suicide, and assisted suicide. These prohibitions have become the subject of debate as ancient Jewish laws have come into conflict with modern medical ethics debates. Jewish law does permit patients to refuse extraordinary procedures to keep a person alive and also permits individuals to refuse certain types of care when ill.

### Meaning of the Chai Symbol

The chai symbol is a combination of two Hebrew letters, “chet” and “yud.” Chet is the 8th Hebrew letter and the symbol of life. Chet also symbolizes the

ritual of circumcision, which occurs on the eighth day of a child's life. The chai symbol also contains the letter "yud" or "yod," which is the 10th letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Yud is also the smallest letter and is therefore used to represent "humility." The word "yud" also means "arm" or "hand," and the character yud is modeled after hands raised in prayer.



Chai symbol

According to Jewish numerology, or "gematria," the chai symbol has a value of 18, as the symbol combines chet (8) and yud (10). The number 18 has consequently become important in Jewish culture. Some Jewish people believe in giving monetary donations in multiples of 18. The number 18 has also become symbolic of God because only God is seen as perfectly alive and thus is the only being who embodies the concept of chai in its entirety.

Chai is also a component of the popular phrase "l'chaim," which literally translates as "to life," and has become a common toast in Jewish culture. The origins of l'chaim as a toast are unclear, though some historians have traced it to the 13th century. Toasting over wine in general is a very old practice; historians have found evidence that Greeks drank toasts to each other's health and life around the 6th century BCE. Some early histories on the subject suggested that toasting was originally related to the fact that poisoning was a common method of assassination and that individuals would toast each other's health to assure one another that the wine was not poisoned. Intriguing as this suggestion might be, historians have found no evidence to support the poison theory of the toast. Most historians now believe that the toast developed from religious rituals that involved giving blood or wine to the gods, accompanied by prayers for long life and health. In Jewish culture, the toast retains this more ancient meaning, petitioning god to grant boons of health and prosperity to all those gathered to share in the feast.

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## GEMATRIA

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### Divine Mathematics

Gematria, or “Hebrew numerology,” is an ancient system of assigning numerical values to letters and words and deriving symbolic relationships between numbers associated with certain divine or sacred concepts. The etymology of the word is uncertain. Some scholars believe that the Hebrew term derived from the Greek word “*geomatria*,” for the mathematical study of geometry, but it may be a combination of the Greek terms “*geometria*” and “*grammateia*,” which translates as “amounting to.”

The term “gematria” has been in general usage since the 18th century, but the study of numerology may have begun in the Jewish Mishnah Period, which is generally taken as between 10 and 220 CE. It is believed that word-based numerology can be traced as far back as the 8th century BCE in Mesopotamia. Most Hebrew scholars consider gematria to be an auxiliary facet of studying the Torah, but there are some sects in which the numerological study of the Torah has become a major focus of study.

### Calculating the Value of Letters

There are four primary methods used to calculate the value of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet, each of which can lead to vastly different interpretations of meaning. The “absolute value” (“*mispar hechrachi*”), or “normative value,” system is the most common method and assigns each of the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet a value from 1 to 400. Special values are also given for the five “final forms,” which are forms used for letters when they appear at the end of a word. Taken together, there are 27 forms in the *mispar hechrachi* system, with values from 1 to 900. Traditionally, the letters are grouped into three enneads (groups of nine), each corresponding to a decimal value from ones to hundreds.

First Ennead:

- Aleph: 1
- Beth: 2
- Gimel: 3
- Daleth: 4
- He: 5
- Vau: 6
- Zayin: 7
- Cheth: 8
- Teth: 9

## Second Ennead:

- Yod: 10
- Kaph: 20
- Lamed: 30
- Mem: 40
- Nun: 50
- Samech: 60
- Ayin: 70
- Pe: 80
- Tsaddi: 90

## Third Ennead:

- Koph: 100
- Resh: 200
- Shin: 300
- Tau: 400

## Final Forms:

- Kaf: 500
- Mem: 600
- Nun: 700
- Peh: 800
- Tzadik: 900

Alternative methods for assigning value include the “*mispar siduri*,” or “ordinal value” method, the “*mispar katan*,” or “reduced value” system, and the “*mispar katan mispari*,” or “integral reduced value” method. Each system results in different symbolic relationships between words and letters and can therefore be compared to analyze different potential symbolic representations.

## Numerical Meaning in Hebrew Texts

The words and sentences in such Jewish holy texts as the Torah and the Sephir Yetsira are believed to have been delivered directly by God. Therefore, followers of gematria believe that numerical similarities and relationships found within the holy texts are not the result of coincidence or interpretation, but represent a hidden layer of meaning. In the school of Jewish mysticism called Kabbalah, gematria is believed to be the key to unlocking mystical messages hidden within the grammar and structure of the Torah and other holy books.

As with the calculation of value for each letter, there are different approaches to calculating the value of words and other techniques for the value of entire sentences and phrases. The most basic application of gematria has been to imbue



certain numbers with special significance because of their relationships to certain words. This has resulted in certain “lucky” or “sacred” numbers that have become significant in Jewish culture. More advanced applications of gematria can become much like complex mathematics, utilizing ever more complex equations to examine deeper and deeper levels of numerical meaning.

## Examples of Gematria

One of the most basic examples of gematria involves finding relationships between common words. For instance, it has been noted that the Hebrew word for “father” is “*ab*,” which has a numerical value of 3. The word for mother is “*em*,” which has a calculated value of 41. The Hebrew word “*yaeled*” means “child” and has a numerical value of 44, which is the sum of the numerical values for father and mother, just as a father and mother must combine to form a child.

Another more complex example of gematria can be found in the Parshat Re’eh (Deuteronomy 11:26–16:17) where it is written that Jewish people must give charity (*tzedakah*) to others. Utilizing gematria to analyze the concepts involved in charity, it has been noted that the word “*ashir*,” which means “wealthy person,” has a value of 580, while the word “*ani*,” for “poor person,” has a value of 130. The difference between 580 and 130 is 450, and this is the exact numerical value of the Hebrew word “*tein*,” which is translated as “to give.”

Another example is found in the Haggadah, a story that is traditionally read at the Passover seder (a ritual feast that marks the beginning of Passover). In the story, an allegorical lesson is presented through the behavior of four sons, the Wise Son, the Wicked Son, the Simple Son, and the Son Who Doesn’t Know How to Ask, each representing a behavioral virtue or vice. When the Wicked Son acts out at the table, the parents are instructed to “blunt his teeth.” This phrase is primarily interpreted to mean that the parents must smooth the hurtful, sharp edges of the boy’s personality to reveal the good child within. Students of gematria have noted that the word “*rasha*,” meaning “wicked person,” has a value of 570, while the word “*tzaddik*,” for “righteous person,” has a value of 204. Taking the difference in the two values reveals a value of 366, which is the same value as the word “*sheenev*,” which translates to “his teeth.” Thus, if “his teeth” are taken away, the wicked person becomes a good person.

The word “Torah” has a numerical value of 611, and this number has become significant in gematria with a number of interesting correlations. It has been noted, for instance, that the phrase “*gemilus chasadim*,” which translates as “deeds of loving kindness,” also has a value of 611. Within the Torah, it is said that deeds of kindness are one of the three pillars of the world, and they are considered as important as reading the Torah itself. Likewise, the phrase “His Kingdom Will

Come” has the same numerical value. Other gematria scholars have found additional relationships by adding, dividing, subtracting, and multiplying 611 and related numbers to create a network of numerical relationships.

## Numerical Significance

Critics of gematria have argued that the relationships between numbers and words may largely be the result of coincidence, creative interpretation, and, in some cases, design. Skeptics have noted that seemingly relevant numerical-linguistic relationships can be constructed by choosing alternate or unconventional phrases, altering the spelling or value of certain characters, or utilizing combinations of different methods of calculating value. In addition, it has been demonstrated that the historical formation of words, phrases, and translations can input numerical messages into texts that may not have originally had the same values. Some have argued that nearly any text could be shown to have symbolic meaning using a similar numerical system and creative interpretations of relationships between words and numbers.

Some individuals place significant faith in gematria and other forms of numerology, believing that the world is based on a system of mathematical and numeric relationships and that these relationships may be expressed through language the same way that they might be expressed through chemical or microphysical processes. It is impossible to prove or disprove the holy elements behind sacred religious texts, and no definitive guide for numerology has been dictated by those elements. So it is likely that followers of numerology will continue to interpret these texts through the lens of their own beliefs.

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## KABBALAH

### Mysticism of the Oral Torah

Kabbalah, or “cabala,” is an esoteric school of spiritual study derived from, and in most cases still connected to, ancient Jewish mysticism. Modern Kabbalah has become a popular facet of Western New Age spirituality, and the American form of Kabbalah has attracted a host of celebrity followers who have helped to stimulate modern interest in the subject. The term “Kabbalah” first came into usage

in the 11th century, and historians believe that the name derives from the term “Qof–Biet–Lamed,” translated as “receiving” or “something that is received.” The English term “cabal,” which refers to a hidden or secret group of conspirators, was derived from the Hebrew term “Kabbalah,” but the term has no sinister implications in the Jewish tradition.

While some modern Jewish adherents reject Kabbalah as an ancient and largely irrelevant form of mysticism, in some circles the primary Kabbalistic works are still studied by Jewish and occult scholars. As Kabbalah has grown in popularity as a facet of Western occultism, a number of theorists and writers on the subject have created links between Kabbalah and other forms of mysticism.

## History of Kabbalah

Traditional Kabbalah explores the mystical, esoteric aspects of the stories and philosophy contained within the holy texts of Judaism. Some Kabbalists and Jewish historians have argued that Kabbalah is based on certain interpretations of the Oral Talmud, which was communicated to Moses (according to Jewish lore) in the 13th century BCE. Kabbalist lore often holds that the essential teachings of the Kabbalah were transmitted directly to Adam (of garden of Eden fame) through visiting angels.

The term “Kabbalah” entered general usage in the 11th century and generally referred to esoteric mystics and scholars who studied the hidden or mystical meanings behind the primary holy Scriptures. One of the first texts that explored the mystical principles of Judaism was the *Sephir Yetzirah*, a collection of writings about Jewish mysticism believed to have been first written in the 3rd or 4th century CE, though there have been many versions of the book over the centuries. Kabbalah did not become popular until the 13th century, after Moses de Leon, a Spanish rabbi and mystic theorist, produced a collection of mystical writings from a variety of sources that came to be known as the *Zohar*. When the Jews were expelled from Spain in the late 15th century, the Spanish Jews carried the *Zohar* and Kabbalist teachings across Europe.

Major historical texts on Jewish Kabbalah have identified a slow development and growth in the study of Jewish mysticism over the centuries, much of which was grouped under the term “Kabbalah,” though they were distinct schools of mystical thought. Historians have also identified key figures, such as Issac Luria Arizal (ca. 1534–1572) and Abraham Azulai (1570–1643), who contributed to the classical and early foundations of Kabbalah and who were followed by modern contributors, including Yehuda Ashlag (1885–1954). The study of Kabbalah remains an important part of Hasidic Jewish spirituality but has lost ground with

the more mainstream Orthodox Jews, many of whom see it as an unnecessary way of approaching their faith.

## Central Beliefs

Traditionally, the study of Kabbalah was restricted to males over the age of 40 who were fluent in Hebrew and had already demonstrated knowledge of the Torah and Mosaic law. While some treat Kabbalah as its own unique school of thought, it can also be viewed as an expression of one of the Jewish “PaRDeS,” which can be defined as ways or methods of interpreting the primary Jewish biblical texts.

- Peshat—translates as “plain” or “simple” and generally refers to the most basic, literal interpretation of biblical text.
- Remez—translates as “hidden” and refers to the search for deeper allegory and symbolism within the Scriptures.
- Derash—translates as “seek” and refers to the comparative, interpretive, and often moral examination of the texts.
- Sod—translates as “secret” and involves the esoteric or mystical interpretation of texts, often revealed through revelations given to advanced scholars or teachers.

It is common within Kabbalistic teachings to refer to God using the term “Ein Sof,” which generally translates as “unending” or “without end.” This name is meant to express the idea that the very concept of God is transcendent and cannot be explained or comprehended through the normal avenues of reason used to investigate other phenomenon. The Kabbalists believe that Ein Sof cannot, in its pure form, interact with humanity but does so through 10 aspects or “emanations” known as the Ten Sephirot of the Tree of Life.

## New Age and Cult Kabbalah

The biggest thing to happen to Kabbalah in the last 30 years was the breaking news story that pop-music icon Madonna was a practicing member of the Los Angeles–based Kabbalah Center. Started by Rabbi Philip Berg, the Kabbalah Center has spread around the world, opening branches in many U.S. cities and a few overseas branches in London and other European cities. Some critics have accused the Kabbalah Center of diluting the original purpose of studying the Kabbalah and marketing the religion to the New Age spirituality consumer.

The official policy of the Kabbalah Center is that the Kabbalah serves as a supplement to any religious or spiritual system and is based on universal truths that transcend any particular religious system. Toward this end, the Kabbalah

Center does not require any previous knowledge of Hebrew or the Talmud to take the organization's courses. In addition to Madonna, a large number of celebrities have become members of the Kabbalah Center, including actress Demi Moore and her former husband Ashton Kutcher, socialite Paris Hilton, and singer Mick Jagger.

The Kabbalah Center promotes a number of methods that are not generally accepted among traditional Jewish scholars of the Kabbalistic works. Among a number of other controversial teachings, the Kabbalah Center actively promotes a belief in astrology and the spiritual practice of sex. Critics have also noted that the Kabbalah Center creates and sells Kabbalah-themed merchandise to fund their operations and has requested tithes, or donations, from members of as much as 10 percent of their income.

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Silver kiddush cup decorated with the Star of David and the words "Bar Mitzvah" in Hebrew. (David Iushewitz/Dreamstime.com)

### KIDDUSH CUP

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#### Drinking to Life

The kiddush cup is an ornamental goblet used in Judaism to symbolize the vessel that receives the blessings distributed to humanity. The kiddush, which translates as "sanctification," is the blessing recited in Jewish ceremonies and at celebratory meals. The kiddush cup, which is usually made of solid metal (traditionally silver) and engraved with Hebrew characters, has become one of the most recognizable symbols of Judaism. There are no standardized measurements or materials for the kiddush cup, but the cup must be able to hold the minimum amount of

wine (or symbolic wine) for saying the kiddush, called a “revi’it,” which is usually measured as between three and five fluid ounces.

## History and Meaning

Reciting the kiddush is part of the Oral Torah, which is a set of traditions and practices believed to have been part of the original revelation delivered from God to the prophet Moses. Kiddush is recited before a meal commemorating a holiday and before the meal that precedes the day of rest, or Shabbat. Generally, individuals drink from the same kiddush cup or pour the liquid into separate cups after the recitation of the kiddush, thereby making the kiddush a communal experience that symbolizes social unity.

Wine or ceremonial wine, sometimes in the form of grape juice, is the traditional liquid used in the kiddush. This originates from a period when drinking wine was a daily activity throughout most of Jewish society. References to the kiddush therefore refer to the use of sacramental wine, though other liquids may now be used. One of the purposes of the kiddush was to differentiate the drinking of wine as a sacrament from the drinking of wine in other situations, thus creating a symbolic distinction between profane and sacred consumption.

The red wine symbolizes the grace of God, and some people add a small amount of water to the wine, representing grace and love. The mixing of the water and wine might have started during a time when typical table wine was too strong to be consumed without dilution, so adding water to wine was a standard practice. Over the centuries, this practice was imbued with spiritual significance of its own.

In gematria, the system of Jewish numerology, the letters of the word “cup,” usually spelled “kos,” have the same numerical value as the word “God,” and this creates an additional level of significance to the use of a cup as a sacramental object. The word “wine” also has the same numerical equivalent as the words “Sabbath eve,” and this is seen as a further reflection of the sacred link between this blessing and the Shabbat ceremony.

A kiddush cup is traditionally made of silver and shaped like a goblet. This element of kiddush tradition has been altered significantly over time, so any cup

### Joy and Destruction

The Torah’s take on wine is a bit of a mixed bag of enthusiasm and caution. While the Torah calls wine the “king of beverages,” the famed Tree of Knowledge, whose fruit caused humanity’s fall from grace, is also described as a “grapevine.”

may now be used for the kiddush ceremony. Kiddush cups are often given as gifts, and many are elaborately decorated with various Jewish symbols or Hebrew words. One of the most common decorations for the kiddush cup is an inscription in Hebrew of the Brachot, or blessing, said before eating, often beginning, “*Baruch atah adonai elokeinu melech haolam,*” meaning, “Blessed are you God, our lord, king of the world.”

### Recitation of the Kiddush

The kiddush prayer is traditionally recited by the patriarch of the family, though some families or groups may share the honor of reciting the kiddush. Each family has its own Shabbat ceremony and recites the kiddush before the family meal, but the kiddush is also typically recited at the closing of Friday night services in Jewish temples. In general, kiddush prayers can be divided into several characteristic sections. The first part is taken directly from the Book of Genesis; this part may be left out when the kiddush is recited in the synagogue. The middle section thanks God for creating the fruit that was used to make the wine, and the final portion of the prayer gives thanks to God for the blessings of the special day being celebrated.

Many different religious traditions have adopted the cup as a spiritual symbol. It usually represents a vessel that holds spiritual wealth, power, or the blessings of a deity. The Holy Grail, eucharistic cup, and Tibetan skull cup are other examples of sacred cups found in other religions. The kiddush cup is unique because it is a symbol as well as an object that fills a role in Jewish daily life. For this reason, the kiddush cup not only represents the spiritual principles of Jewish life, but it also symbolizes the lived experience of Judaism.

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## MENORAH

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### Oldest Symbol of Judaism

The menorah is a seven- or nine-armed candelabrum used in certain Jewish ceremonies and rituals. While scholars disagree about the early history of the menorah,

the use of candelabra in Jewish culture is believed to derive from the seven-armed candelabrum (also called a “menorah”) used in the ancient Jewish temple, which was in turn inspired by the lamp mentioned in Jewish legend that was used by Moses during his time in the wilderness. The menorah—in both nine- and seven-armed varieties—has become a symbol of Judaism worldwide, and the seven-armed candelabrum is part of the state emblem of Israel.

## History of the Menorah

Some Jewish scholars claim that the menorah is the oldest extant symbol of the Jewish faith. The use of candelabra in rituals is not unique to Judaism; many different types of candelabra have been used as ritual objects in faiths around the world. Historians believe that candelabra were used as symbolic vessels among many Middle Eastern tribes before the formation of the modern lineage of Judaism. The modern symbol of the menorah is based on the ceremonial candelabrum of the legendary First Temple (Solomon’s Temple), believed to have been built around 950–60 BCE.

The seven-armed (or seven-branched) menorah is described in detail in Exodus 25:31–40, in which God tells Moses to build a lamp with a “main stem” and six additional branches. The destruction of the First Temple, in 70 CE, resulted in the loss of the original menorah. This loss is commemorated in the design of the Arch of Titus, a first-century monument constructed by Emperor Domitian to commemorate Roman military victories, including the capture of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The depiction of the menorah on the Arch of Titus was the inspiration for the version of the symbol incorporated into the official seal of Israel in 1948. For centuries, some have theorized that the Catholic Church may still have possession of the original menorah, though no significant evidence has been found to support this claim.

Depictions of the sacred candelabrum have not varied much since the end of the Roman period, and they are still represented with three branches in a semicircular shape connected to a central stem. Scholars are uncertain whether this was actually the design of the seven-branched menorah of the First Temple because the 486 different representations of the menorah from art and literature indicate a wide variety of shapes and sizes.

## Meaning of the Menorah

The seven-branch menorah represents the seven spirits of God, mentioned in Isaiah 11:2–3. These spirits include the spirit of the lord, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of counsel, the spirit of might, the spirit of power, the spirit of wisdom, and





Detail of a relief depicting the Spoils of Jerusalem from the inside of the Arch of Titus in Rome. The arch honors Titus' victorious conclusion to the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE. This relief, displaying the triumphal parade of 71 CE, features sacred objects including the menorah and silver trumpets from the Temple of Jerusalem. (Allan T. Kohl/Art Images for College Teaching)

the spirit of fear. There is some evidence that early Christians may also have used the symbol of the menorah to represent the seven aspects of God, and followers of Kaballah took the menorah as a symbol of the “sephirot,” or “emanations of God.”

The seven branches of the menorah also represent the six days of creation followed by the Sabbath, or “day of rest.” For those that share these religious beliefs, then, the number seven serves as a reminder of the origins of humanity and of God’s role in creation. The traditional menorah was also decorated with a variety of other meaningful symbols, including eleven bulbs that represent spiritual pleasure and nine flowers that represent growth.

The nine-branch menorah used at Hanukkah celebrations is also called a “hanukkiyah” and is a variation of the traditional seven-branch menorah that honors the First Temple. The design of the nine-branch hanukkiyah is usually explained through a fable about the Jewish recovery of the temple during the period when Israel was part of the Syrian-Greek Empire, which took control of the temple in 168 BCE. The Hellenists of the Syrian-Greek Empire wanted the

temple for worship of their pantheon of Greek gods, and so they made the practice of Judaism illegal.

The Jewish resistance to Syrian-Greek rule began in a village called Modiin, where a priest named Mattathias and his children attacked and killed a group of soldiers who were trying to force them to bow to an idol representing one of the Greek gods. Mattathias and his family took refuge in the mountains and were joined by other Jews interested in reclaiming their territory. The rebels, who came to be known as the Maccabees, eventually reclaimed control of the temple in Jerusalem after a series of brutal struggles with Syrian-Greek soldiers.

To purify the temple, which had been used for pagan rituals, the Maccabees decided to burn sacred oils in the temple menorah for eight days, but they found only one day's worth of oil within the temple. The Maccabees lit the remaining oil, which miraculously lasted for the entire eight days. The nine-armed menorah was designed to commemorate this miracle, with one candle for each of the days that the menorah was used to purify the temple. The ninth candle, known as the "shamash," is used to light the others each night during the eight-night celebration. The hanukkiyah is displayed to remind believers of the Hanukkah miracle, and it is forbidden to use the light of the hanukkiyah for any purpose other than the traditional Hanukkah ceremony.

Hanukkah is one of the least important holidays in the Jewish calendar, though the celebration has become popular in areas where Judaism coexists with Christianity and in the United States is often treated as the Jewish equivalent of Christmas. Traditionally, Jewish children were given small amounts of money on Hanukkah, called "gelt" in Yiddish. Over the years, as Christmas has become more commercialized, so has Hanukkah, and many parents now give presents to celebrate the holiday.

While the Star of David has become the most widely used symbol of Judaism in most of the Jewish world, the menorah is perhaps the most ancient Jewish symbol and the one that most represents Judaism's connection to its roots in the First Temple. While the Star of David has become the most widely recognized symbol of Judaism since the 20th century, the seven- and nine-branch menorahs may be the oldest and most lasting symbols of Judaism because they commemorate the First Temple and the birth of Jewish culture.

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## MEZUZAH

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### Door to the Sacred Home

The mezuzah (pluralized “mezuzot”), from the Hebrew word meaning “doorpost,” is a small cylindrical object, usually made of metal, filled with a rolled parchment that is inscribed with passages from Deuteronomy. Mezuzot are affixed to doorframes and sometimes hung in the doorways of public buildings to symbolize the oneness of God and God’s promises to followers. Mezuzot also separate the “sacred space” of the interior of the home from the “profane space” of the outside world.

### Origins of the Mezuzah

The mezuzah’s origins can be traced to the period when the Jews were still slaves in Egypt. Some followers of the faith inscribed part of the prayer that forms the center of morning and evening prayers, called the “shema yisrael” or simply “shema,” on their doors or the wooden posts of fences. Eventually this inscription evolved to contain a standard 22-line section of the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21, and individuals began using handwritten parchment instead of carving the inscription directly into the door. Over the centuries, it became standard to protect this scroll by housing it in a hollow, dried reed. This covering gradually evolved into the metal or plastic coverings most often used in the 21st century.

The Shema evolved directly from the Oral Torah, which are the lessons said to have been imparted to Moses on Mount Sinai that did not become part of the Written Torah. The Shema originally contained only Deuteronomy 6:4, the purpose of which is to declare that the Jewish God is “one,” and may be seen as the passage that reflects the monotheistic character of Judaism. The passage derives from the prophet Joseph’s concerns that his sons may be vulnerable to idol worship, and so he declares that there is only one true God. The Hebrew word “shema” means “hear” and refers to the opening line of Deuteronomy 6:4, which begins “Hear O Israel ....”

### Conventions of Display and Use

The halakhah, which is a collection of religious laws observed in the Jewish faith, requires that the Shema be recited every day in the morning and evening. This requirement comes directly from Deuteronomy 6:5–9 and was initially considered one of the central tenets of Jewish worship. The posting of the mezuzah is a requirement taken from Deuteronomy 11:20, where it is written about the words of God, “You shall write them on the doorposts of your house ....”

The scroll containing the section of the Shema must be handwritten on parchment, which is then rolled and inserted into a container. The back of the container usually contains the Hebrew letters “shin,” “daled,” and “yud,” forming “shaddai,” or “almighty,” which is one of the names used for God. The front of the container is usually decorative. Many mezuzot are inscribed with Hebrew characters, such as the word “chai,” which means “life,” or decorated with other Jewish symbols, such as the Star of David or menorah. Other mezuzot are decorated with images of Jewish prophets or mythical figures or with images recalling ancient Israel and the First Temple.

By convention, the mezuzah is generally affixed roughly one-third of the way from the top of the door and against one of the doorposts. The mezuzah is hung slanted as a 45-degree angle to the ground, and this position is also significant. According to Jewish lore, scholars once disagreed about whether to hang the mezuzah vertically or horizontally and eventually agreed upon hanging it at an angle, symbolizing compromise.

## Meaning of the Mezuzah

The mezuzah is one of a family of symbols and symbolic objects that separate profane and sacred spaces, a practice that is common in many religions and could be called a characteristic archetype of religious practice. Symbols denoting the entrance to sacred space are often inscribed on doors, gates, or plaques posted on entrances. Another example can be found in the torii gates of Japanese Shintoism, which are structural symbols that denote the entrance to a sacred area.

The mezuzah has become a symbol of the Jewish faith and culture in general, regardless of a person’s belief in the spiritual aspects of Judaism. Some individuals wear small mezuzot as jewelry, which is typically considered more a symbol of identity and has no specific religious significance. Historians have noted that the wearing of phylacteries—a type of protective amulet—was popular in many of the pagan cults that existed alongside ancient Judaism, and some have speculated that early Jews were inspired to utilize the mezuzah in a similar manner. The Jewish tefillin, a set of black boxes containing scrolls inscribed with passages from the Torah, provide another example of a Jewish phylactery that was once considered a talisman against evil.

In Jewish mysticism, especially the esoteric traditions of Kabbalah, the mezuzah is a talisman used to protect the home from evil. In the Middle Ages, individuals added the names or symbols of guardian angels to the mezuzah parchment to enhance the object’s utility as a protective talisman. Some also believe that the mezuzah provides the power to ward off illness and misfortune. The passage commanding the use of the mezuzah explains that the display of the object is for “long life.”



Mezuzot can be simple in design, but are often elaborately engraved with sections of Jewish prayers in Hebrew and images evoking central locations in Jewish history and culture. (Terry Wilson/iStockphoto.com)

The modern interpretation of the mezuzah is less religious and more historical and cultural. It serves as a reminder of one's connection to Jewish history rather than as a talisman of fortune or protection. However, it is still common for Jewish people to view the mezuzah with superstitious reverence and to believe, at least passively, that the object may help to keep their homes and families safe. Fewer modern Jews believe in a world filled with potentially malevolent spirits; this belief was far more common in the Middle Ages, when nearly every symbol of spiritual adherence was imbued with protective power to provide a psychological sense of safety in a world filled with unknown dangers.

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## SEPHIROT

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### Kabbalistic Tree of Life

The sephirot (also spelled sephiroth and seifrot) are qualities or emanations of God that constitute the substrate of creation. The sephirot symbol, also known as the tree of life, depicts ten sephirot that represent the descent of God into the material world. They are organized into levels that represent different facets of spiritual knowledge and layers of relationships between each individual sephirot.

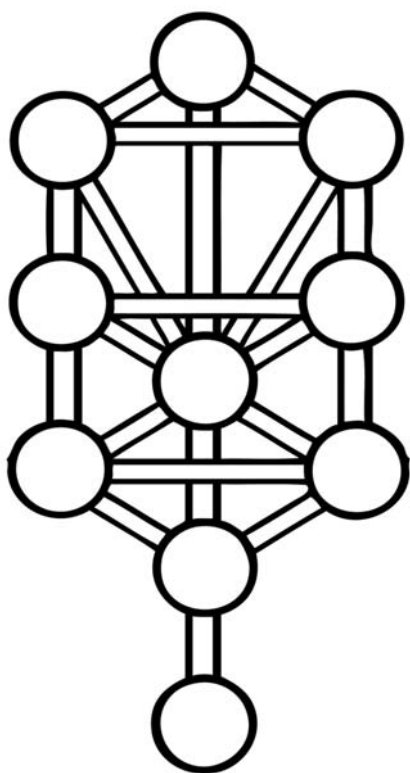
### The Tree of Life

The ten sephirot are both attributes of God and representations of the spiritual element within humanity, sometimes thought of as the essence of the soul. Together, the sephirot create the material world, but they also combine to create other realms of spiritual existence, such as justice or peace. Each sephirot also corresponds to a human attribute, usually an ethical quality. Behavior that is in keeping with proper moral principles creates harmony between the sephirot, while actions that are contrary to the will of God create discordance and prevent the attainment of a higher spiritual existence.

On the tree of life, each of the sephirot is contained within a circle, called a vessel or “kelim.” Each vessel contains a pure emanation of God and represents a continuation of God rather than separate phenomena or entities. The sephirot can be divided into groups that represent relationships between two or more of the kelim and relate to various levels of spiritual organization. For instance, at the top of the tree of life symbol are the supernals, consisting of Keter, Chokhmah, and Binah, which together symbolize the transition of God’s divine light through the rest of creation. The seven remaining kelim are grouped together as the “seven days of creation.” Each kelim of the tree of life is linked to others such that the entire tree is connected and represents a unified path toward spiritual enlightenment.

### Meaning of the Sephirot

The leading sephirot on the tree of life is Keter, usually translated as “crown.” Some versions of the sephirot substitute Da’at for Keter, reasoning that Keter is actually part of Ain Sof, which is envisioned as the primordial God, before God manifested creation. Keter is the root of the soul and the source of all compassion and empathy. It also represents the metaphysical or spiritual crown worn by Adam, the archetype of man. Keter is described as the most hidden of all that is hidden,



The organization of the sephirot in Jewish Kabbalah, often called the “tree of life” diagram. Each sephirot is connected to each of the others through a shifting set of spiritual relationships.

development of the others. Da’at is not considered one of the sephirot, but rather is a connecting point between all of the other sephirot, representing the knowledge that comes from connecting the various qualities together. Some versions of the tree of life, as mentioned above, substitute Da’at for Keter, thus making Da’at the tenth sephirot.

Beneath Binah is Gevurah, which translates as “judgment” or “limitation,” which is connected to Chesed, the principle of loving or kindness. Gevurah and Chesed are part of the seven days of creation and also metaphorically represent the right and left arms of Adam. The capacities for judgment and kindness limit each other, and the goal is to find a balance between these two qualities, represented by the third member of the sephirotic triad, tifferet, which is often translated as “beauty” but also means “balance” and “compassion.”

The next sephirotic triad consists of Hod, or “majesty,” which is beneath Gevurah, and Netzach, or “victory,” which is beneath Chesed. Hod and Netzach together represent the left and right legs of Adam. Hod is connected to prayer and

meaning that it is the principle beyond words or thought that humans cannot fully understand.

Keter is flanked on the tree of life by Binah on the left and Chochmah on the right. Binah is usually translated as “understanding” and signifies the quality of understanding that allows for the development of knowledge. Chochmah means “wisdom” and is the opposing force of Binah. When Binah is active, meaning that the soul, mind, or person is active in understanding, wisdom becomes receptive. At some point, wisdom becomes active and understanding becomes receptive. Thus, there is a cyclic relationship between Binah and Chochmah that is often described as the transition between active and passive, or male and female, modes of perception.

Chochmah and Binah are also linked to Da’at, the principle of knowledge, forming a sephirotic triad called “Sechel,” or “intellect.” Thus, understanding, wisdom, and knowledge are the key facilities of intellect, and each one of these potentialities or essences contributes to the

submission to God, while Netzach symbolizes victory in terms of contemplating and understanding the end goal of actions and thus working toward specific goals. The sephiroth Yesod, translated as “foundation,” is the third part of the triad with Hod and Netzach and represents the reproductive organs of Adam. Yesod is sometimes understood as the combination of traits and actions with regard to one’s God or spirituality that ultimately lead to spiritual enlightenment or realization.

The final sephiroth, Malkhut, sits beneath all of the others on the tree of life and is unique in that it does not directly represent the qualities of God but rather the qualities of God as they are reflected collectively by God’s creation. Malkhut is usually translated as “kingdom” and represents the expression of God’s cosmic energy from the nine other sephiroth through various aspects of God’s manifestation on earth. However, Malkhut also represents the passage of the unwanted from God’s creation and is therefore sometimes likened to the “cosmic anus,” through which waste is excreted.

## Dendriform Symbolism

The tree of life is an ancient and widespread spiritual symbol, versions of which appear in many different cultures and religions around the world. The image of a tree, with its branches extended and crossed over one another, provides an excellent visual representation of any complex system of components united by a single origin, hence the use of the tree as a model for genealogy, evolutionary diagrams, and many other complex phenomena. The world tree of Norse mythology (known as Yggdrasil) is another example of this tree of life archetype, though the cosmological symbolism of the Norse tree is very different from the sephiroth of Jewish mythology. The tree of life archetype also represents one of the most common forms of religious symbolism, using the qualities of nonhuman features of the environment to represent qualities of humanity or the spiritual realm.

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## STAR OF DAVID

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### Shield of Faith

The Star of David, also known as the “Magen David” or “Shield of David,” is one of the most recognizable and widespread symbols of Judaism around the world.



Historians believe that the six-sided star symbol was originally adopted as an emblem in Jewish mysticism, and it was also used in Christian and Islamic symbolism before it became primarily associated with Judaism.

## Origins in Mysticism

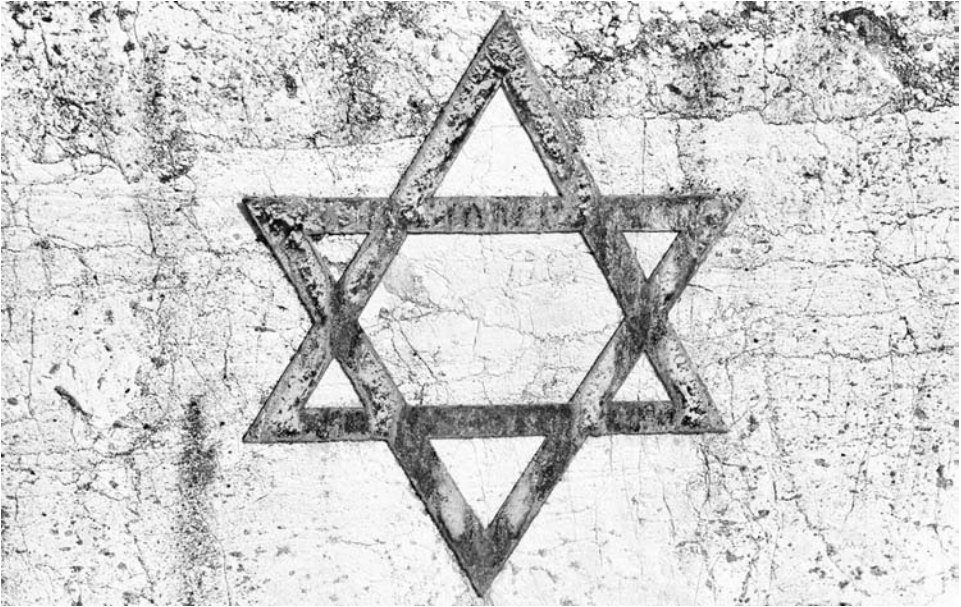
The star is one of the oldest symbols in the world and has appeared as a spiritual emblem in many world cultures. Like the pentagram, or five-pointed star, the hexagram, or six-pointed star, has a long history and has emerged independently in various Asian and European cultures. Geometric symbols, such as pentagrams and hexagrams, are simple shapes and easy to reproduce. This partially accounts for their popularity through the millennia.

Historians have noted that the hexagram may first have appeared in ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian art and been introduced to the Abrahamic faiths through Persian mysticism, where five- and six-sided rosettes were used to symbolize the cult of the Assyrian/Babylonian goddess Ishtar. These rosettes may have gradually evolved into the more stylized hexagram design. The rosette motif was used in the Hellenistic period (ca. 320–30 BCE) as a symbol of the sun, and this may be the origin of many later pentagram and hexagram symbols.

While the hexagram is called the “Magen David” in Jewish culture, the symbol’s origins have little to do with the reign of King David in the 10th century BCE. It is likely that Jewish usage of the star began with the reign of King Solomon (970–931 BCE); therefore, the star is often called “Solomon’s Seal.” Jewish historian Gershom Scholem believes that the symbol originated as a talisman to ward off evil and specifically to protect against demons. Scholem therefore concluded that the Star of David was not originally a Jewish symbol.

The Seal of Solomon is composed of two intersecting equilateral triangles that connect to form a six-pointed figure. Historians believe that the two triangles once represented the male and female principles, making the hexagram a bit like a Western version of the Chinese yin-yang symbol. In one interpretation of the symbol, the top and bottom points represent male and female, while the remaining four points correspond to the four elements: water, air, earth, and fire.

During the Middle Ages in Europe (476–1548 CE), the hexagram symbol appeared repeatedly in the art and architecture of Islam and Christianity. For instance, Coptic Christians commonly used the star in stamped seals, sometimes with a cross in the center. There are also a few artifacts that indicate early Jewish use of the symbol, including the Seal of Joshua ben Asayahu, from the sixth century BCE. This is often cited as the first known Jewish use of the symbol, though it is unknown what the hexagram symbolized for Jewish people in this era. Scholem



Carving of the Magen David, or “Shield of David,” more commonly known as the Star of David, from a headstone in Milan, Italy. (Marek Slusarczyk/Dreamstime.com)

has suggested that the star was reintroduced to Jewish culture through Islamic use, imported into Spain, and then incorporated into Spanish Kabbalah.

### Symbol of Jewish Culture

In 1357, Charles IV gave the Jews living in Prague permission to develop a flag to represent their community. This resulted in a red flag with the seal of the Magen David. Historians consider this the first use of the hexagram as a political symbol for Judaism. The adoption of the Magen David in Judaism mirrored, in many ways, the establishment of the Latin cross as the central symbol of Christianity. During the Middle Ages, Christians sometimes incorporated crosses into fences, conferring spiritual protection to their homes, and some Jews likewise began painting or carving hexagrams into fence posts and doorways, perhaps also using the symbol as a talisman for protection.

By the 1600s, the Magen David was firmly established as the Jewish equivalent of the Christian cross, largely replacing the image of the menorah, which is arguably the oldest symbol of Jewish culture. The hexagram can be found in a wide variety of Jewish art and artifacts from this period. In the 1880s, Mayer Rothschild, of the powerful German Rothschild family, adopted the hexagram into the family’s coat of arms. The Rothschilds had strong links to the Zionist movement,

which promoted the belief that Jews should control the Holy Land in what is now Israel. The Magen David became the official symbol of the European Zionist movement in 1897.

In the 1200s, Pope Innocent III decreed that Jews in Catholic Europe should wear some article of clothing that distinguished them from Catholics. At several points in history, Jews were required to wear badges, special hats, or other items to separate them from the rest of society. During the Nazi occupation of Europe, the Nazis revived this tradition, forcing Jews in occupied Europe to wear the six-pointed star symbol. While it was intended as a symbol of shame, forcing Jews to wear the star badge imbued the symbol with additional meaning: it acknowledges the martyrdom and heroism of those who suffered Nazi persecution during the Holocaust.

In 1948, upon the founding of Israel, the Magen David became the central symbol in the Israeli flag, a choice that embraced the symbol's historic use in the persecution of the Jewish people and transformed it into an emblem of empowerment and determination. Since the 1940s, the Magen David has become the most widespread and popular symbol of Judaism, especially in North America and parts of Europe that are dominated by Christianity and Catholicism. In these areas, the use of the Magen David still counters the symbolic use of the cross in Christianity.

## Meaning of the Star of David

The Star of David is not mentioned directly in Talmudic literature, but it has come to symbolize God's protection of David and the Davidic line that will eventually produce the Messiah. In the traditional prayers of the Shabbat (Sabbath), the verse "Blessed are you God, Shield of David" is now associated with this symbol. According to Jewish legend, David went into battle with a shield that either had the hexagram emblem on it or was constructed from two overlapping triangles. The Hebrew name of David can similarly be represented by two triangular symbols. This has been taken as further evidence of the relationship between David and the hexagram.

The dual triangles also have numerous associations in Kabbalah, including the dichotomy of male and female, good and evil, active and passive, and light and dark. Some sources also associate the hexagram with the six days of creation and with other multiples of six, including the 12 tribes of Israel. Jewish numerology has ascribed a host of other associations to the number, contributing to modern Jewish mysticism. Like many ancient symbols, the hexagram has been associated with a variety of concepts over the millennia and is now one of the world's most recognizable spiritual symbols.

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## ZIONIST CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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### Racism and the Formation of Israel

Zionist conspiracy theories are a family of historically misguided and sometimes dangerously delusional beliefs directed against Jewish people because of the belief that Jewish culture comprises a distinct political or ethnic group that has been or is still involved in a conspiracy to manipulate global society. Proponents of Zionist conspiracies tend to be members of opposing cultural groups (including white and black power movements) or religious groups (such as Christians, Catholics, and Muslims). Zionist conspiracies are generally anti-Semitic in origin and are also likely related to ancient tension and struggles for dominance between the Abrahamic religions.

### Zionism

Zionism is a nationalist movement that supports the existence of a Jewish state in the area generally called the “Holy Land,” which consists of territory now contained within Israel. The name “Zionist” is derived from “Zion,” the Hebrew term for Jerusalem. There are many separate and ideologically distinct movements within the larger Zionist fold, including political/secular Zionist organizations and religious/spiritual Zionist organizations.

Austrian journalist Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) was an important figure in the formation of political Zionism and, in 1897, became the first president of the Zionist Organization, later renamed the World Zionist Organization (WZO), a group of Jewish representatives from around the world who united to promote the creation of the Jewish state. In effect, the WZO began defining the principles and administrative structure that would be put into place following the British-led establishment of Israel in 1948.

The establishment of the State of Israel was the fulfillment of much of what the Zionist movement had hoped to achieve but came only after the suffering that the Jewish people experienced during the Nazi Holocaust of World War II. Since the formation of Israel, Zionist movements have worked to support the continued

existence and expansion of Israel and to maintain the nation as a home for all Jews worldwide who wish to relocate to or visit their ancestral territory.

## Zionist War Machines and the Holocaust

The document known as the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, often shortened to *Protocols*, is the seed behind a large number of European and American anti-Semitic theories. The document appeared in Russia around 1902 and was purported to be a written record of a meeting between members of a secret Jewish society in which the participants discuss their plans to destroy non-Jewish culture around the world. Historians have established that the original document was a hoax created by an anonymous individual whose ultimate motivations remain unknown.

American industrialist Henry Ford helped to popularize the *Protocols* in the 1920s, as he reprinted a copy of the document repeatedly in his newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, for seven years. Ford was one of a group of Americans who believed that a group of Jewish industrialists had plotted to instigate World War I so that they could profit by selling weapons and equipment to the world's armies. Between World War I and World War II, this concept of a military-industrial Zionist conspiracy became one of the most popular conspiracy theories in the United States. In Germany, Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party printed thousands of copies of the *Protocols* and used the document as proof of the Zionist, anti-Christian conspiracy that became part of the justification for the Jewish genocide.

American historian Harry Elmer Barnes spread the idea that anti-German propaganda had greatly distorted reports of the atrocities committed by the German armies during World War I. Some of Barnes' conclusions were proven correct, as the propaganda had in fact exaggerated the scope of war crimes attributed to Germany. However, Barnes' research helped to foster American skepticism when rumors and news reports began to describe war crimes committed by the Nazi Party. Fervent believers in the Zionist conspiracy theory adopted the belief that the Zionists, having been thwarted in their attempts at global domination, were now hoping to win global support by promoting false information regarding their treatment by the Nazis.

From the end of World War II into the 21st century, some have maintained that the Nazi Holocaust was exaggerated as part of a Zionist plot to increase global support for the Jewish nationalist agenda. Supporters of this theory point to the establishment of Israel as proof that the Zionist conspiracy was successful, manipulating sympathy of global powers to achieve control of the Holy Land. The continued military and financial support of Israel, from both the U.S. government and influential, financially dominant U.S. corporations, is another piece of "evidence" used

to support the theory that powerful Zionist conspirators have manipulated global politics.

Not surprisingly, Holocaust denial, sometimes called “revisionism,” became far more popular in the United States than in Europe, where the results of the Nazi Holocaust were more readily apparent. In the United States, separated by a great expanse of ocean from the direct evidence of the Holocaust, theorists were better able to reinterpret photos and media reports as having been altered by an alleged Zionist alliance. Holocaust denial takes a variety of forms but very rarely manifests as complete denial of the violence perpetrated by the Nazi military. Instead, most revisionists argue that the number of Jews killed by Nazis was far less than the 6 million accepted by mainstream historians, proposing numbers ranging from 300,000 to 2 million. Milder versions of revisionism hold that Nazis never targeted Jews directly, but simply targeted all non-Aryan ethnic groups, or that the Nazi Party never used gas chambers and other extreme methods of execution and that these stories are the result of Zionist propaganda.

Like the *Protocols* that fueled anti-Semitic propaganda before World War II, historians and researchers have criticized the literature and research that support Holocaust revisionism as being of little historical or factual merit. Nevertheless, dozens of books and articles have been published in support of the theory, and many fervent believers remain in the United States and around the world, some defending their research as a quest for “historical accuracy” and denying any anti-Semitic motivations.

### **The Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG)**

The Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG) is the modern manifestation of the conspiratorial theories of the early 1900s. According to believers, there is a secret Zionist organization that controls, first and foremost, the international banking industry. Through this powerful financial organ, they indirectly or directly control governments around the world, manipulating global industry in furtherance of a nationalist agenda and working against Christian and Islamic political, social, ethnic, and religious interests.

There are many varieties of ZOG-based theories that claim that secret Zionist organizations have participated in a plethora of plots and political machinations. For instance, one ZOG-esque theory, largely promoted through informal Internet postings, suggested that as many as 4,000 Jewish people were warned of the impending terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, thus indicating that a Jewish power was behind the attacks. Critics have pointed out the unlikelihood that not one of the 4,000 individuals warned of the attack would have let this information slip, either purposefully or accidentally.

In a more general sense, there is widespread speculation that ZOG-like forces manipulate U.S. foreign policy, as evidenced by the powerful pro-Israel lobby within the United States. Critics of theories in this vein have argued that pro-military and Christian lobbies exercise far more influence over U.S. spending than the pro-Israel lobby and have proposed that this suggests, if nothing else, a Christian conspiracy. Some theorists have suggested links between ZOG and the Freemasons, even suggesting that they are the same organization and have been working together to manipulate U.S. politics since the founding of the nation.

Though there are many manifestations of Zionist conspiracy theories, most involve some degree of Jewish dominance over finance or banking, even including a well-known conspiracy theory that a Zionist group controls the Federal Reserve. According to some historians, the Western Christian association between Jews and banking derives from the Middle Ages when church law prohibited Christian moneylenders from charging “excessive interest” on loans. Jewish merchants were not prohibited from raising interest and so became associated with exploitative lending practices. From this, a Western European stereotype developed of a “greedy Jewish merchant,” unscrupulous in taking advantage of those who were in debt. The stereotype was perpetuated through poems, plays, books, and films into the modern era. In some sense, the modern Zionist theories may be echoing these long-dead historical associations, which have passed into misconception and generality, but serve a renewed purpose for those who need to make sense of the complexities of global politics and cultural development and choose a handy scapegoat from among the stereotypes of history.

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# Christianity and Catholicism

Christianity is the general term for a family of monotheistic religions that emerged in the Middle East as offshoots of messianic Judaism. Since the third century CE, Christianity has dominated the religious landscape of the Western world and remained among the world's most widespread and influential religious traditions. Christianity involves the worship of Jesus Christ, who is believed to have been the son and earthly manifestation of God and the Messiah of the faith.

Catholicism is a denomination of Christianity and is one of many unique subsets of Jesus Christ worship, alongside such other prominent sects as Episcopalianism, Protestantism, Anglicanism, Mormonism, and Evangelical Christianity. Catholicism is one of the most ancient sects of Christianity and is considered unique because Catholics follow a specific hierarchical structure through the Catholic churches around the world, which are under the auspices of the succession of Catholic popes, the leaders of the faith, and the Catholic Church of the Vatican in Rome.

## Origins and Evolution

Christianity was one of a large number of messianic cults that developed within Judaism around the first century CE. It was inspired by prophetic messages contained within Jewish Scriptures that assert that God would send a Messiah to earth to end the captivity of the Jewish people and harken a new era for humanity. Given the oppressive environment of Roman-controlled Jerusalem, it is perhaps not surprising that there were many separate Jewish sects that believed they had identified the Messiah. The itinerant preacher Jesus of Nazareth became the focus of one of these groups, and the fame of this particular preacher became the focus of a veritable revolution in the years following Jesus's execution at the hands of Roman authorities.

According to Christian tradition, the birth of Jesus was a miraculous event, as Jesus's mother, Mary, was a virgin. Little is known of Jesus's life before the age of 30, which is around the time that he began preaching his views on religion.



According to Christian lore, Jesus performed a number of astonishing miracles during this period, thus cementing the belief among his followers that he was the prophesized Messiah. Jesus publically asserted that he was delivering the word of God, and this was controversial both to the Roman authorities and to Jewish people who did not believe in Jesus's alleged connection to God. As a result, Jesus was turned over to the authorities and executed for heresy. Christian Scripture then holds that Jesus was resurrected from the grave, appearing to several of his disciples over the following days until he rose into heaven.

Jesus's disciple Paul is credited with playing the most vital role in the development of Christianity after Jesus's death. According to one story, Paul converted from Judaism to Christianity during a trip from Jerusalem to Damascus (changing his name from Saul to Paul in the process) and thereafter preached the Christian message to hundreds of converts. Paul is credited with the innovation that access to God's glory was not restricted to followers of Jewish law, and this helped to create the schism that ultimately divided Christianity from Judaism.

Christianity and Judaism were both restricted under Roman law, and many early Christians were executed and became martyrs for their faith. The native Roman religion was a polytheistic state cult, but there were many other religions represented in Rome. It is believed that Romans were unaware of Christianity until around 30 CE, after the sect began to clearly emerge from Judaism. The Roman Empire did not attempt to force conversion to Roman polytheistic beliefs but made it a legal requirement for every citizen to engage in state rituals that honored the gods of Rome and the divine status of the emperor. Christians and Jews often refused to engage in these rituals, leading to conflicts. Christianity was declared an "illegal superstition" under Roman law as early as 30 CE, but the Romans did not actively attempt to suppress the religion until around 64 CE, after a devastating series of fires killed hundreds in the slum districts of Rome. Though some historians have suggested that the government caused the fires to cleanse the city of low-income residents, Emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the fires, and the Roman government actively persecuted and executed Christians when discovered.

### **Torture Witness**

The term "martyr" is used in Christianity for those who have died for their faith. It derived from the Latin and Persian terms meaning "witness" and "trouble," respectively. These sources of influence created the concept of a martyr as one who bears witness for his or her faith and consequently suffers the ultimate "trouble" in death.

The turning point in Christian history was the conversion of the Roman general Constantine, who, through the twists of history and personality, came to view his victories to unite the empire as the result of the will of the single God. Constantine converted to Christianity in 324–325 CE, and this led to the establishment of Christianity as the new focus of a state cult, continuing through the Byzantine Empire (330–1453 CE), which considered Constantine the Great its founder, and the Holy Roman Empire (962–1806 CE). In essence, Christianity and Catholicism have never ceased to be “state cults” from the time of Constantine, as a number of modern governments still consider Christianity the “religion of the state” and modern Catholics may still regard the Roman Catholic Church, and the pope, as the supreme authority, superseding civil and secular authorities.

The Council of Chalcedon, a famous gathering held in 451 CE, resulted in the division of Coptic Christianity from the faith, which was the first in a series of divisions that contributed to the modern character of Christianity. Coptic Christianity was Egyptian in origin and made major contributions to the faith in general, including the establishment, in Alexandria, of one of the first schools of Christian learning. The Copts also established the first schools of Christian monasticism, an organization of the faith that spread throughout Europe from the Egyptian example.

The next and most significant split in Christianity, often called the “Great Schism,” resulted in the division of the Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic Church in 1054 CE. The 16th-century Reformation resulted in the next major schism, with the emergence of Protestantism as a dominant new sect of Christianity, and one that would play a major role in the spread of Christianity into the New World. The schism is generally defined as a division according to particularities of faith and worship, but the historical division also had racial, political, and nationalistic motivations.

## **Christian Beliefs**

Christianity is a monotheistic religion, which is characterized by the belief in a single God. Monotheism differs from polytheism, a belief in multiple gods, and pantheism, the belief that God is essentially the same as the cosmos. While there are many types of monotheism, Christianity is marked by a belief in a single, “personal” God, meaning a God that can be related to as a person. The Abrahamic God speaks directly to followers of the faith and displays emotions characteristic of humanity, thus contrasting the Abrahamic God from other conceptions of God as a being utterly unfamiliar to the form and habits of humanity. This concept of the personal God is of vital importance to the Abrahamic conception of faith.

Another characteristic of Christianity is the belief that Jesus was the human manifestation of God, sent to earth in the form of God's son to bring the truth of faith to humanity. While Jews and Muslims also believe in the existence of Christ, neither faith considers Jesus to be a legitimate Messiah. Christians have developed a unique Trinitarian form of monotheism that is marked by the belief that God manifests himself in three forms: God the Father, Jesus the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. While each of these manifestations may behave independently and fill a unique role in Christian tradition, they are all considered to be emanations of a single God and therefore do not violate the essential monotheistic character of Christian worship.

In addition, Christians believe in the existence of nonphysical entities called "souls" that are possessed by all living beings and further believe that the souls of humans exist after the death of the physical body. The form that existence takes for these disembodied souls is believed to be related to the person's moral standing during life. Individuals who lived upstanding moral lives will reside with God in a heavenly realm, while individuals whose lives have been marked by sin, and who have failed to make amends, might be punished in the afterlife.

In the modern world, there are many different ways to be Christian or Catholic, and not all adherents hold the same core beliefs. Even facets of the faith once considered essential to Christian tradition are now subject to vast interpretation. Some modern Christians, for instance, reject the existence of hell altogether, while others believe firmly in the traditional interpretation of the afterlife. One of the most important divisions among modern Christians is between those who believe in a more or less literal interpretation of biblical scripture and those who favor a more liberal and interpretive approach to deciphering religious truth.

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## CHRIST-MYTH THEORY

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### Origins of a Messiah

The historical existence of Jesus is a debate among religious and secular scholars alike. Countless investigations have compared historical evidence to the

descriptions contained within biblical literature in an attempt to verify or disprove the accuracy of biblical texts about the existence of Jesus. Over the centuries, some scholars and alternative historians have argued against the historical re-creation of Jesus Christ produced by the majority of the scholars in the field and formed an alternative school of theories known collectively as “Christ-myth” theories. The basic theory comes in two varieties, the strongest of which suggests that Jesus Christ never existed as a historical person but was an invention of early Christian writers to serve as a vehicle for Christian teachings. The more moderate version of the theory holds that Christ did exist in Galilee during the early Christian period, but that the stories of his life may be a composite of several different individuals.

### History of the Christ-myth Theory

Secular scholars raised the first serious questions about the historical existence of Jesus Christ in the 1800s. At the time, Christianity was the norm throughout the Western world, and any scholarly refutation of biblical history was highly controversial. The search for evidence of the historical identity and life of Jesus during this period is sometimes called the “early quest” or the “first quest” to discover the history of Christ. This quest was also the origin of the first theories suggesting that Christ did not exist or that the traditional accounts of Christ’s life are inconsistent. Critics of these controversial theories argued that the historians were subject anti-Christian or antireligious motivations.

Scholar David F. Strauss was the first legitimate scholar to argue that the legend of Christ was more myth than reality in a controversial book published in 1835. Strauss argued that most of the details of Christ’s life and the stories of his miraculous deeds were the products of religious imagination and that much of what was believed about the history of Christ could not be proven. German philosopher Bruno Bauer (sometimes called the father of the Christ-myth theory) expanded on the doubt fostered by David Strauss to suggest that Jesus never existed and that the life of Christ described in the gospels had been compiled from the lives of many individuals that had been blended together to appeal to the common religious beliefs of the era.

British professor George Albert Wells’s 1971 book, *The Jesus of the Early Christians*, argues, in the same vein as Bauer, that Christ was essentially a mythological figure. Wells continued to publish on the subject through the 21st century and became one of the most respected proponents of the Christ-myth theory. In the 20th and 21st centuries, a number of other scholars have adapted the Christ-myth theory in new ways. Authors Robert M. Price, Timothy Freke, and Peter Gandy have written books in the 21st century that link the story of Jesus to the myths surrounding pagan deities in pre-Christian societies.

## Evidence for the Christ-myth Theory

Historical evidence for the existence of Christ is found primarily in religious documents and biblical texts that constitute the Catholic/Christian and Jewish canons. Supporters of the Christ-myth theory have argued that there is little independent evidence to support the existence of Christ and that the sources that do exist are often contradictory and therefore not reliable. There are only two non-Christian sources generally used by scholars to provide evidence of Christ's existence: the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote about Christ at the end of the first century BCE, and the Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote about Christ in the second century. Some scholars have argued that Josephus and Tacitus were not only historians but also folklorists who wrote about such mythological figures as Hercules. Given this, it has been argued that it is impossible to tell whether Josephus and Tacitus considered Christ an actual person or a mythological figure.

Other theorists have noted that the early religious cults of Rome and Greece, sometimes grouped together into the "Greco-Roman mysteries," harbored myths about heroes that closely mirror the life of Jesus Christ in important ways. According to Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, authors of the book *The Jesus Mysteries*, the legends of Osiris and Dionysus contain many of the same elements as the Jesus story, including the divine reincarnation. This suggests to Freke and Gandy that the myths about Jesus may have been co-opted from the pagan religions of the era and cobbled together with historical remnants to create a mythopoeic figure to symbolize Christian virtues.

## Arguments against the Christ-myth Theory

A majority of religious scholars and historians, whether secular or religious in their approach, agree that Christ was a historical person. These historians argue that Christ's existence is believable for the period and that there is sufficient data to reliably reconstruct some portions of Christ's life. Belief in the existence of Christ, the itinerant laborer who was the subject of a messianic Jewish cult and put to death by crucifixion, is quite different from the belief that Christ was the son of God and capable of miraculous healing and prophetic visions. In historic terms, the existence of Christ the person seems to make sense and fits the majority of what is known about the period. The more miraculous elements of Christ's story are not demonstrable through historical reconstruction and are therefore the subject of personal belief and philosophical debate.

The work of renowned German theologian Albert Schweitzer may be illustrative in examining both sides of the debate. Schweitzer believed in the historical existence of Christ but that it would be impossible to ever know the absolute truth about Christ's story. He cautioned that anyone studying the history of Christ is

clouded by his or her own suppositions and beliefs. Arguments that the Christ-myth theorists have invented elements of history to further personal agendas is equally applicable to the many dozens of theorists who have approached the history of Christ from the supposition that he existed and *was* the son of God. Ultimately, information surrounding the existence of Christ is incomplete and derived from nonobjective sources. Further, promoters of Christianity may have revised much of this “historical record” in the centuries after Christ’s death. While the belief in the historical Christ is accepted by the majority of historians, and at least partially supported by research, there remains an element of supposition on both sides of the debate.

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## COLLEGE OF CARDINALS

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### Inner Circle of the Vatican

The College of Cardinals is a group of men chosen by the pope to serve as his closest advisers. They are elevated from among the international members of the Catholic clergy to the rank of cardinal. Known as “princes of the church,” the cardinals have tremendous influence over the development of Catholic policy and lead the largest congregations in the Vatican. Among their most prominent duties, the College of Cardinals is charged with electing a new pope whenever a vacancy, called a “*sede vacante*,” occurs because of the death or retirement of the previous pope. In this role, the College of Cardinals is directly responsible for initiating a new era in papal leadership and a consequent development in the policies of the Catholic Church.

### History

The term “cardinal,” derived from the Latin word for “hinge,” was originally used to refer to the bishops in the seven territories, called the “suburbicarian diocese,” surrounding the Vatican. These “cardinal bishops” were close advisers to the pope for centuries and played a role in managing the Holy See, an organizational body

representing the Catholic Church in Rome. Because of their importance to the pope, the bishops occupying the suburbicarian diocese became highly influential.

After the death of Pope Stephen IX, in 1058, a discord emerged between reform and antireform factions within the church. A small but powerful group of aristocrats installed Benedict X as the new pope, though the election was illegal by canon law and Benedict X is considered a false or “anti-pope” in the history of the church. The reform party eventually chose their own leader, Nicholas II, who was installed with the aid of the French military. After his installation, Pope Nicholas II decreed that only cardinal bishops could participate in papal elections.

Pope Urban II (1088–1099) was largely responsible for reforming the administrative structure of the church during his reign, resulting in an aristocratic monarchical structure within the papacy. The College of Cardinals received official recognition in 1150, by which time it had come to its modern administrative structure. In addition to cardinal bishops, there are also, in order of decreasing seniority, cardinal priests and cardinal deacons. In 1179, Pope Alexander III decreed that only the pope is allowed to select new cardinals from among the clergy.

As the church expanded, so did the need for managers to oversee various duties required of the papacy; this led to the expansion of the College of Cardinals. In 1586, Pope Sixtus V set the maximum number of cardinals at 70, a number with significant spiritual symbolism, as there were 70 elders who assisted Moses in his march from Egypt and 70 men, excluding the apostles, who were part of the ministry of Jesus. In 1958, Pope John XXIII extended the number of cardinals to 75, largely in an effort to extend the honor to Catholic clergymen outside of Europe. John Paul II further increased the number of cardinals to 190, though the college is rarely filled to capacity at any given time.

## Controversies and Papal Elections

The process of electing a new pope requires the convening of a papal conclave that casts a secret ballot to elect the pope from among a list of candidates selected by the College of Cardinals. Historians have noted that the papal conclave is the oldest ongoing electoral process in the world. In general, the procedures of the papal conclave also involve conducting funerary services for a deceased pope; however, in 2013, Pope Benedict XVI became the first pope to resign from office since the 15th century. The rules for modern papal elections were formally adopted in 1996, though most of the rites and rituals of the ceremony can be traced back more than 1,000 years.

The popularity of conspiratorial fiction, such as that found in the 2005 book *The Da Vinci Code*, has given rise to the theory that the college of cardinals is a kind of secret society whose members represent political and spiritual interests. At

times, members of the college of cardinals have engaged in questionable political activities, trading their “spiritual” support to aristocrats and other political leaders in return for gifts and other benefits. For many centuries, German bishops were prohibited from membership in the college because of their close association to the Holy Roman Empire and out of a desire to separate the church from the political realm. Though some college rituals remain secret and the college continues to exert strong influence over millions of followers worldwide, the organization is one of bureaucratic, rather than clandestine, origin, and speculations of secrecy are very much fueled by fantasy rather than fact.

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## CROSS

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### Central Symbol of Christianity

The cross is the universal symbol of Christianity. It represents the faith by recalling the “passion of Christ,” which is the term used to refer to the arrest, conviction, and execution of Christ by Roman authorities. Over the centuries, the cross has appeared in many forms that represent different aspects of Christian worship and religion, and perhaps because of its simplicity and adaptability, the cross has remained the most enduring symbol of the faith.

### Ancient Origins

Many historians have noted that the cross symbol did not originate in Christianity but was present in many pre-Christian cultures, both as a decorative emblem and as a symbol of religious significance. The Greek cross, or “*crux quadrata*,” which has four arms of equal length that extend vertically and horizontally at 90-degree angles, is probably one of the most ancient cross-like symbols. Scholars have pointed to various potential interpretations of what this early symbol emulated, including the intersection of the heavenly and earthly spheres and the four cardinal directions. The *crux quadrata* may also represent various divine associations with the number four, or five if the point of intersection of the two arms is also considered symbolically significant.

Another variation of this theme is St. Andrew’s cross, or the “*crux decussata*,” which has the form of the letter X and is named for its resemblance to the Roman



numeral for 10. Early scholars have suggested that the crux quadrata and crux dessucata may once have symbolized the apparatus used to make fire by rubbing sticks together. Similarly, some historians have suggested that the crossed lines represent the sun, with the arms symbolizing radiant energy coming from the solar body.

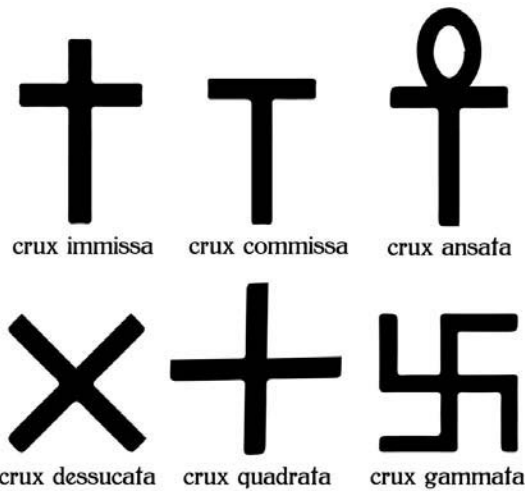
Another early cruciform symbol is the swastika, or “crux gammata,” named for its resemblance to a combination of four Greek gamma symbols. The swastika is an ancient symbol of the spiral or wheel and has been used in a number of different cultures to symbolize eternity, evolution, and the spiritual path. It is most often associated with Buddhism and Hinduism, though may also have played a role in inspiring the cross in Western culture. Another early symbol that may have inspired the cross was the Egyptian ankh, which is known as the “crux ansata” and features a T-shaped symbol with a loop at the top. The ankh was one of the most common and ubiquitous symbols in the native Egyptian religion, usually symbolizing life or eternity, and it was adopted as a variation of the Christian cross among the Coptic Christians of Egypt.

### Crucifixion and Adoption by Christianity

In general, the adoption of the cross as the symbol de rigueur of the Christian faith is related to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Crucifixion is the name used for an ancient method of execution in which a person was mounted (usually nailed) to a stake or a “cross” and then left to hang until death. Nails were driven into the victim’s feet and hands (or wrists), and individuals could survive for hours

or days after being placed on the stake. Crucifixion was meant to serve as a deterrent to crime and dissident behavior, and the victims were left on public display for this purpose.

This execution method was used from around the 500s BCE to the 400s CE and was practiced in the Roman Empire and among the Seleucid Empire in Syria. The shape of the device used to execute Jesus is classically described as a Latin cross, or “crux immissa,” which is now the most familiar cross shape in



A variety of common cross forms found in Christian history and other world religions.

the West, having a vertical arm that extends longer than the horizontal arm. However, descriptions from the period indicate that crucifixion was also carried out using St. Anthony's cross, also known as the "tau cross" or the "crux commissa," which is shaped like the Greek letter tau or the Roman capital T. In addition, crucifixions were also carried out using a crux simplex, which was a simple vertical post with no crossbar. Historical evidence suggests that Jesus was most likely executed on a crux commissa, despite the general belief that he was nailed to a crux immissa or Latin cross.

The adoption of the cross symbol is related to the legality of Christianity and persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. The crucifixion of Jesus is believed to have occurred between 30 and 36 CE, and historians believe that the cross slowly became a common Christian symbol to commemorate this event. Writings about Christianity from early critics of the religion indicate that the cross was becoming one of the central symbols of the faith by the second century CE. Because Christianity was illegal and actively persecuted during the latter half of the first century, Christians met and worshipped in secret. Though the cross was already becoming one of their symbols, they often used other images to symbolize the cross on tombs and in writing. These replacement symbols, such as the swastika or the X-shaped crux decussata, were less inflammatory as they had not been associated, in the eyes of Roman authorities, with the Christian sect. By the third century CE, Christian writings make it clear that the crux immissa had been generally adopted as the central symbol of the faith.

Emperor Constantine's conquest of the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE was a turning point for Christianity. Constantine believed that the Christian God played a role in his victory and adopted Christianity as his religion and the religion of the state. Constantine banned crucifixion as a method of execution, out of reverence for the suffering of Jesus, and granted all Christians living in exile freedom from persecution in the Roman Empire. From this point, the cross was openly used as a symbol of Christianity.

### **The Crucifix and the True Cross**

Over the centuries, Christian artists searched for new ways to reflect on the relationship between the cross and the death of Jesus, and this resulted in the development of the crucifix, an artistic representation of Jesus being crucified. Early depictions nearly always showed Jesus still alive on the cross and looking serene despite his condition. Gradually, after the ninth century, artists began to depict more of the imagined gruesome details of the event and used Jesus's face to express the agony and suffering of the moment. Over the centuries, the crucifix

became an important representation of the faith, and crucifixes became standard on church altars and as decorative talismans in Christian homes.

A controversial issue is the fate of the “true cross,” which is defined as the actual physical instrument used to crucify Jesus. According to Christian legend, Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, traveled to Jerusalem around 320–326 CE after having a dream that led her to believe that she would locate the hiding place of the true cross. Helena found the remnants of three crosses, which she believed were used to crucify Jesus and the two thieves crucified alongside him, known as Saint Dismas, or the “penitent thief,” and Gestas, or the “impenitent thief.” Helena then touched pieces of these three crosses to women who were gravely ill and found that one of the crosses was able to miraculously heal the women, thus establishing it as the true cross.

Gradually this legend was enhanced by further legends regarding the trees used to harvest the wood for the cross and the belief that the wood had earlier spiritual associations before it was used to fashion the cross. A number of military expeditions were partially based on the idea of recovering the cross, including the Byzantine Empire’s invasion of Persia in the early seventh century. Belief in the legend of the true cross expanded in the Middle Ages, and the Fourth Crusade, in 1204, which resulted in the capture of Constantinople, reputedly resulted in the recovery of a part of the true cross discovered earlier in Jerusalem by Saint Helena. From this point, pieces of the true cross were reportedly distributed across Christendom, with many churches claiming to have fragments of the cross in their altars.

After the Middle Ages, several prominent Christian commentators noted that the number of true cross fragments claimed to be in existence could not have originated from a single cross, and this skepticism regarding the remnants of the cross gradually spread. Despite some skepticism, worship of true cross fragments continued to be popular, and many Christian churches still claim to have actual fragments of the cross in the 21st century. Archaeological studies have failed to verify any of the fragments claimed to be from the original cross; therefore, the issue remains controversial.

## Universal Symbolism

The cross is the center of Christian and Catholic symbolism, but it was not always universally accepted as the most appropriate symbol of the faith. In some churches and traditions, the cross was rejected because of its association with the instrument of Jesus’s torture and death, so other symbols were venerated as more appropriate representations of the positive aspects of Christian history and myth. Objection to the cross gradually subsided in the 19th and 20th centuries as the overwhelming

popularity of the symbol gained momentum, and it eventually became ubiquitous across the Christian world.

Many Christian sects have developed unique crosses to represent their particular faiths within the larger field of cross symbolism. There are hundreds of different crosses and cross-like symbols in use in various religious and cultural sects, and this reflects the growing dominance and diversification of Christian ritual from the 1st to the 21st centuries. Some historians have argued that the cross may be the most recognizable religious symbol in the modern world.

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## DOVE

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### Messenger of Peace

The dove is most well-known as a sign of purity and peace. The symbol of the dove has been applied in many religious, political, and social contexts as a harbinger of peace in the face of conflict. This use of the dove symbol is often traced back to biblical roots, as the dove appeared several times in Christian texts.

### The Dove in the Bible

In the famous story of Noah and the great flood, Noah sends out a dove from the ark, and the dove returns with an olive branch in its beak, symbolizing that the floodwaters had receded and God had made peace with man. Through this story, the olive branch came to symbolize peace, even in modern vernacular with the common phrase “to offer an olive branch,” meaning to make peace after a conflict.

As an extension of the story of Noah, the dove has often been applied as a way to communicate with God or as a direct symbol of God. The latter is first seen in the story of the baptism of Christ, interpreted as a sign that the Holy Spirit was present at the baptism. John 1:32 says, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.” Thus, in the law of Moses, the dove was used as an offering for purification after the birth of a child. Again, it was thought that the release of a dove symbolized the presence and blessing of God, and its return signified God’s approval.

In Christian imagery, Joseph is often depicted carrying two white doves in a basket, symbolizing that he was chosen to be the husband of the Virgin Mary. Here again, the dove is seen as a symbol of God's approval or presence. Doves are also often depicted flying from the mouths of martyred saints, representing the purification of the soul. It was believed that doves could carry souls to the afterlife, so they are often associated with funeral rituals. Thus, doves are associated with both birth and death because, in the Christian faith, these are the two moments when it is essential to communicate with God.

In many cities throughout the world, rock doves are seen scavenging for food in large groups. In the biblical sense, doves pecking at bread or drinking from fountains represent the soul's being nourished by the Eucharistic bread and cup. In this usage, the dove represents man communicating with God rather than God himself.

### **The Working Dove**

Rock doves (pigeons) were used during World War I and World War II to carry messages. These messenger pigeons, or carrier pigeons, were specially trained to navigate back to a home base from as far as 100 miles away. It is ironic that this quintessential symbol of peace was used in the context of war.

Actually, pigeons do not need special training to perform this feat. All rock pigeons are capable of homing. Like many birds, they regularly navigate long distances by landmarks and have an excellent sense of direction. As recently as the 1980s, pigeons were still used in Europe to deliver medications between hospitals. Dove releases are also fairly common at modern Christian weddings. Dove trainers only need to establish a home base and then the doves can be released anywhere within 100 miles and they will return home. Doves released at weddings (or any ceremony) are not simply released; they return home and can perform this feat over and over again.

### **Dove Symbolism across the World**

The symbol of the dove is used widely across the world outside of the Christian faith. In Japan, the dove is depicted with a sword as an emblem of peace. In China, the dove is a symbol of long life. In Ancient Egypt, the dove was used as a symbol of innocence.

The symbolism of the dove is an extension of the general significance of birds. Part of the mystical qualities ascribed to birds concerns their ability to fly, which in a religious context is seen as bringing them closer to higher powers. With doves in particular, the ability to navigate long distances makes them an obvious symbol for the proverbial secrets to the universe, or the search for a

sense of purpose in life that causes many people to look to religion for answers or guidance.

The phrase “bird’s-eye view” refers to the wide perspective that birds enjoy while flying. To take a bird’s-eye view means to rise above and gain a fresh perspective on a situation. The mystery of what birds see and understand as they fly far above the earth has been an endless source of fascination for humans. This mystery has sparked people all over the world to revere doves for their ability to see further and understand more than land-bound humans. It is easy to imagine how birds, and doves in particular, carry with them such deep religious symbolism.

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## EYE OF GOD

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### Symbol of a Watchful Creator

The eye of God, also called the “all-seeing eye,” “eye of Providence,” or “third eye,” is another of the most omnipresent religious symbols connected to Christianity. The symbol is depicted in many forms, depending on the context, but generally can be described as a detached eyeball inside a triangle or pyramid. This symbol appears on the Great Seal of the United States and on American money.

The most universal interpretation of the eye symbol is the omnipresence of God surrounded by a triangle to represent the Trinity. In many renditions, the eye is surrounded by rays of light to symbolize the idea that the all-seeing eye is watching over humanity. One of the most well-known explanations for Christian eye imagery involves Proverbs 15:3 (English Standard Version), which says, “The eyes of the lord are in every place beholding the evil and the good.” The eye symbol, in its many variations, always incorporates some version of conscience, the idea that our actions have consequences and a motivation for acting with some sort of moral code, even when no one in the human realm is watching.

### History of the Symbol

The eye of God symbol’s first documented appearances in the West were in the 17th and 18th centuries, but its history traces back to ancient roots. In Egyptian



The eye of God or eye of Providence, sometimes called the "all-seeing eye," represents the watchful gaze of the creator, surrounded by emanations of divine energy.

mythology, the third eye is called the "Eye of Horus," a symbol of protection, power, and health. Ancient Egyptians, whose mythology often attempted to intertwine an understanding of celestial patterns with an explanation for life, saw the eye of God as solar *and* lunar, with the right eye of the god Ra associated with the sun and the left eye of the god Thoth associated with wisdom, knowledge, and hieroglyphs.

In Hinduism, the "eye of knowledge" corresponds with the sixth chakra in the middle of the forehead. It was used to represent the inner guru, with the idea that people can look to their internal wisdom for guidance. Throughout history, eye imagery has been used in countless contexts and been adapted for particular religious and secular implications.

In 1782, the eye of God was adopted as part of the Great Seal of the United States, which was based on a graphic created by artist William Barton of Philadelphia. This version of the symbol features a 13-stepped incomplete pyramid with a floating eye above it and rays of light coming out of the eye. The phrase "*Annuit Coeptis*" above the symbol is Latin for "He approves of our undertakings," and the phrase "*Novus Ordo Seclorum*" below the symbol translates to "New Order of the Ages."

## The One-dollar Bill

The Great Seal of the United States on the one-dollar bill shows an unfinished pyramid with 13 steps, above which is the image of the eye. The 13 steps of the pyramid are thought to represent the original 13 colonies, and the fact that the pyramid is unfinished signifies that America is incomplete and requires future growth. The three sides of the pyramid can also be interpreted as representative of the three branches of government.

At the time that the Great Seal was created, the United States was a young country that had only recently declared independence from Great Britain. European settlers in America brought with them Christian traditions, and as a young country the United States was not yet seen as a "melting pot" that would incorporate various religions and peoples. Even today, obvious references to Christianity

can be seen throughout traditional government symbols and seals, and even in outdated laws. Even though America has a long tradition of separation of church and state, vestiges of Christianity as an unofficial state religion remain, even in such ubiquitous places as the one-dollar bill, by far the most common paper currency.

## The Freemason Conspiracy

Versions of the eye of Providence are very often associated with the “secret” society of Freemasonry. The Freemason version of the eye is not depicted inside a pyramid but surrounded by clouds and a “glory” (a Christian term for a halo of light). As with Christian tradition, this eye of Providence in Freemasonry is used to represent God’s omnipresence and therefore implies that the moral code of Freemasonry is governed by Christian ideals and conscience.

The first known instance of the eye symbol’s being associated with Freemasonry was in 1797, with the publication of the *Freemasons Monitor* by Freemason Thomas Smith Webb. Thus, the inclusion of the eye of Providence in the Great Seal and its adoption by the Freemasons were relatively close events in history, but documents suggest that the Freemasons’ use of the symbol was *after* the Great Seal’s creation. While many conspiracy theorists suggest that the appearance of the eye in the Great Seal of the United States symbolizes the untold influence of the Freemasons on the U.S. government, that theory suffers when observing the timeline of the symbol’s usage. The conspiracy theory is fueled by the fact that many of America’s Founding Fathers were known to be involved in Freemasonry and is further complicated by the fact that Freemasonry is an alluring mystery to nonmembers.

The eye of God is not exclusively a Christian symbol but rather one with many religious and mythological associations. The Christian eye of God is just one version of a ubiquitous eye symbol that implies that all decisions have consequences and that we as humans must answer to some sort of higher moral authority. It may be considered ironic, therefore, that we use the symbol in the Great Seal to imply God’s approval of the development of the United States, even though it is now generally acknowledged that European settlers commandeered this land from native peoples by force, which would seem to contradict some of the most central tenets of Christianity.

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## FISH

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### Food of the Faith

The fish symbol is one of the most recognizable and widely used symbols of Christianity. In modern times, the symbol, properly called “ichthus,” is most frequently seen on car bumpers, but its ancient roots extend far into the past. Some agree that the fish symbol even predates the cross.

### Origins and Meaning

The most widely accepted explanation for the origin of the term “ichthus” reports that the word is derived from the acrostic of the Greek phrase “Iesous Christos THEou Uios Soter,” meaning “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior,” with the initial letters spelling out the Greek word “ichthus,” for fish. What is not certain is whether the co-opting of the term “ichthus” came before or after the fish was seen as a symbol of Christ. Was it coincidence that this Greek acronym spelled out ichthus, or was this a sign that the fish had intrinsic religious value before the language connection was made? This point has been argued in both directions.

It is also believed that Tertullian, the challenger of Marcionism in the third century CE, further extended the ichthus to have baptismal implications. In other words, because Christ was connected to the symbol of the fish, followers must remain in the water to be close to Christ. This is the meaning behind the symbolic baptismal ritual that is still widely used today.

### Evolution of the Symbol

Today, the Christian fish is sometimes interpreted as a symbol of the belief in divine creation or the belief that life on earth was created in its present form by God. Thus, those who believe in evolution have co-opted the symbol, adding feet and the name “Darwin” to symbolize a belief in Darwin’s theory of evolution. While some still believe in Immaculate Conception, in light of modern science, evolution has become widely accepted as fact. It is likely that the ichthus symbol, therefore, is used mostly as a gesture to indicate membership in the Christian community but is not necessarily denial of Darwin’s theory of evolution. In Darwin’s theory, all life on earth began in the ocean. Christianity, though contradictory to evolutionary theory in many ways, also supports the idea of life originating from water. The difference between the two ideologies is that in Christianity, water is imbued with mystical and spiritual significance, whereas the theory of evolution simply views water as an essential environment for the evolution of early organisms.

Fish appear as central elements in a number of key biblical stories, with a variety of different symbolic associations. The fish that swallows Jonah, for instance, is widely believed to symbolize Christ's incarceration in the tomb, while the story of Tobias, who survives an attack by a large fish and then uses the gall of the fish to restore his blind father's sight, symbolizes God's blessings. The restoration of Tobias's father's sight was an act of God in recognition of Tobias's piety, and the fish is merely a vehicle for this miracle. Similarly, in many fish legends, the fish is not the central character but merely serves as a vessel for God's power or blessings. In one of the most famous fish stories, Jesus prepares a miraculous dinner to feed thousands from only five loaves of bread and two fish. God's divine power somehow multiplied the fish and bread as it was being served, making it one of the most economically effective meals in history.

Some have argued that the meanings ascribed to the fish symbol are so numerous and varied that it is impossible to identify a central explanation. The biggest uncertainty is whether the symbol of the fish is meant to denote faith in Christ or Christ himself. The question that naturally follows, as referenced above, is whether the Greek acrostic spelling out "ichthus" was the cause or the result of the connection between fish and Christ. In other words, was it the fact that the Greek acrostic spelled out the word "fish" that fueled the connection or was this connection drawn from beliefs about the powers of Christ and traced in reverse? Again, this question can never be answered definitively because the origin of the fish symbol remains poorly understood.

Another common association between fish and Christianity is the abstinence from eating meat on Fridays in recognition of the day of crucifixion. In the Roman Catholic Church, it was specifically forbidden to eat "flesh meat" on Fridays until the mid-1960s, and many still observe this ancient tradition. Fish flesh, in many cultures, was once seen as an entirely different type of substance than the meat of mammals and therefore is not prohibited by the flesh meat convention. The fish on Fridays tradition has been furthered by restaurants aiming to please the Christian crowd by offering fish and seafood specials on Fridays. This began as an effort to attract more business on a day when many people abstained from meat and has



The ichthys or ichthus symbol, named for the Koine Greek term for fish, often includes an acrostic representation of the phrase "Jesus Christ, God's Son and Savior," within a symbolic representation of a fish, one of the earliest secret symbols of the Christian faith.

**Fishy Rodents**

In the Pantanal region of South America, Catholics eat a large rodent called a capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*) during lent in addition to fish. This custom arose because the capybara, which can grow to more than 100 pounds, was classified as a fish because of its semiaquatic lifestyle.

continued, not because restaurant chains adhere to Christian beliefs, but out of fiscal motivations. Today, abstaining from meat on Fridays is not as universally recognized as it once was, and many modern Catholics only observe this rule during Lent.

It is difficult to give an exact definition of the Christian fish symbol because it has been reinterpreted over so many centuries and co-opted into both religious and nonreligious imagery. On the most practical level, the fish is used as it was historically, as a way for Christians to identify one another, though this need would have been greater in the era when Christians needed to hide their affiliation from an oppressive government. It could be argued that today the symbolism is minimal and only serves as a distant vestige of ancient beliefs and traditions. The fact that so many people still choose to display the symbol on their car bumpers reminds us that, in modern times, the idea of belonging may be more central to religion than any specific belief or ritual. The most obvious and certain interpretation of the ichthus, like the cross, is that it symbolizes belief in the Christian God.

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**FREEMASONRY****Conspiracy Fantasies of the Founding Fathers**

The Freemasons are a fraternal organization that emerged between the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe and has since spread globally, becoming one of the largest in the world, with over 5 million worldwide members and over 2 million in the United States alone. Over the centuries, the Freemasons have attracted a host of powerful members from the politically and socially elite communities. The elite

membership of the group, coupled with unusual and secretive rituals and symbolism, has made the Freemasons a popular subject for various conspiracy theories.

According to the group's own description, the Freemasons host gatherings of like-minded individuals for the express purpose of spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. Critics of the organization have accused the Freemasons of a variety of more sinister and secretive activities, from supporting military factions, like the Nazis, and White Power organizations, like the Ku Klux Klan, to actively recruiting influential individuals and raising funds to forward a goal of global political machinations. Other critics have taken a different stance, alleging that the Freemasons are a satanic cult and a holdover from an ancient struggle between dark faiths in opposition to Christianity. Hundreds of scholars and journalists have investigated the symbols and rituals of the Freemasons and have found what they believe to be clues of a nefarious agenda.

## History

The history of Freemasonry has remained obscure despite hundreds of attempts to chronicle the group's origins. The stories recounted by members are not considered reliable by many scholars, while Freemason historians accuse nonmembers of being influenced by anti-Masonic groups. A generally accepted fact is that Freemasonry evolved out of a craftsmen's guild in medieval Europe.

The laborers' facet of Freemasonry, sometimes called the "operational" side of the guild, developed its rituals and traditions in part to aid each other in finding work as they traveled Europe as itinerant laborers. To this end, the masons gradually developed a system of elaborate symbols and rituals, including secret handshakes and the recitation of verbal codes, to signify membership. A member of the guild traveling to a new area might use these handshakes and other signals to prove his membership to locals, thus earning their support and assistance, similar to how modern labor unions favor fellow members in awarding labor contracts.

Sometime in the late 17th century, Freemasonry evolved to include a nonoperative or speculative component in the form of social clubs, called "lodges," where members of the guild met for socialization and networking. As the operative side of the guild declined, the social and intellectual function of the group took precedence and membership rapidly spread. In the first decades of the 18th century, Freemasonry began to take hold in the United States. The social aspects of the organization appealed to many major figures in the independence movement, in part because of the Masonic tradition of hosting gatherings for political and intellectual discourse. Here, the then radical sentiments shared by colonists such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin were fostered in meetings with other influential colonists of similar status.

## Symbolism and Mythology

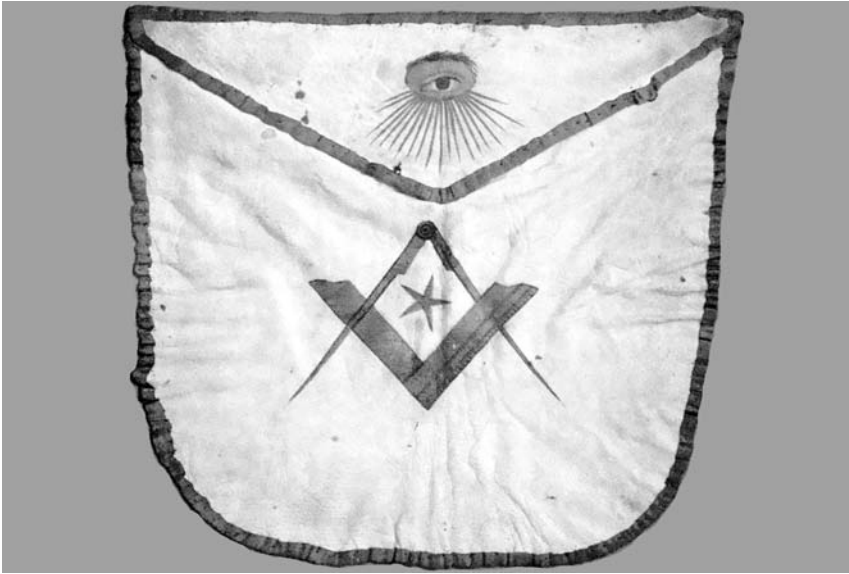
The mythology of Freemasonry centers around the legend of King Solomon and the First Temple, also known as “Solomon’s Temple,” which was believed to have been constructed around the 10th century BCE. King Solomon, whose controversial reign lasted from 970 to 930 BCE, was considered a major prophet in the Jewish and Islamic traditions, but he is also remembered as an apocryphal figure who dabbled in the occult. King Solomon is recognized as one of the original grand masters of the Masonic order, as is Hiram, king of Tyre, who was a friend of Solomon’s and assisted him in the construction of the First Temple. The third grand master of the masons was Hiram Abiff and is believed to have been the architect of Solomon’s Temple as well as a close adviser to both King Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre.

All modern Masonic symbolism and tradition is inspired directly or indirectly by the construction of Solomon’s Temple, and the buildings constructed by the modern Freemasons to host their meetings, known as Masonic lodges, utilize architectural elements believed to have been derived from the First Temple. Though no archeological evidence has been found of the First Temple, descriptions of its proportions and other architectural details were recorded as part of the mythology of Solomon and ancient Hebrew culture.

As Freemasonry spread in the United States, the guild’s symbols became popular motifs for decoration. Masonic symbols are among the most familiar decorative elements in American culture, alongside symbols relating to the American independence movement. The most well-known Masonic symbol in the United States is the Masonic compass, which represents balance, unity, and the spirit. It includes the letter *G*, which is often described as standing for “God.” Another common symbol is the ark of the covenant, which is the vessel used in biblical literature to transport the Ten Commandments that were brought down from Mt. Sinai.

The Freemason’s Guild has also been associated with the eye of God symbol and the pyramid, both elements found in the Great Seal of the United States and printed on all U.S. currency. Though it is widely known that George Washington was a practicing Mason who incorporated Masonic rituals into the ceremonies of the American republic, the Freemasons have denied that the U.S. seal is of Masonic origin, arguing that the eye of God and pyramid symbols are shared by many traditions.

The meaning behind Masonic symbolism is subject to widely divergent interpretation. Each symbol can be described in the tradition of Masonic scholars as representing the various principles and practices of the guild, all of which are intended to foster intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Over the long history of



Masonic apron from Douglas, Massachusetts, mid-19th century, featuring images of the "Masonic Compass" and the Eye of Providence. (Sean Svadilifari)

the guild, dozens of symbols and rituals have been adopted by members, including secret handshakes, the recitation of obscure prayers and rites, and a variety of other traditions thought to be linked to the tradition of Solomon and the guild's ancient Abrahamic roots. Others view the symbols of Freemasonry as having darker meanings, including the group's adherence to satanism and occult magic or their allegiance to an ancient pseudo-political/social order that attempts to control the global economic and political landscape.

### **Controversies and Mysteries**

The controversy over Freemasonry can be divided into two major schools: those that believe the Freemasons are a secret society formed to manipulate global politics and those that believe that the Freemasons are an anti-Christian cult. Because the early Freemasons in the United States supported the Enlightenment ideals regarding science and social theory, the organization gained significant popularity in the 18th century. This was especially true in the United States, where belonging to the Freemasons definitely conferred political and social advantages.

While the conspiratorial aspects of Freemasonry may be a matter of debate, by the 1700s, meetings involved a high level of secrecy, and the rituals and symbols

used by the Freemasons were purposefully hidden, though often in plain sight, while the Freemasons actively obscured the meanings of their traditions to hide them from outsiders. This tendency toward secrecy is also part of the mythological tradition of the organization. Masonic legend holds that Hiram Abiff was killed because he would not divulge the secrets of the Masons.

Regardless of their motivation for secrecy, this obfuscation deepened mistrust of the organization, and anti-Masonic movements emerged in the 1700s that opposed the various perceived dangers associated with the fraternity. Some believed that the secret meetings of the order involved sodomy and sexual rituals, while others believed that the Freemasons were involved in concocting nefarious plots. In 1738, Pope Clement XII issued a papal bull that denounced the Freemasons and excommunicated all group members. This was the beginning of the feud between Catholicism and Freemasonry that would last for more than a century and become the source of many theories claiming that Freemasonry is anti-Christian, or at least anti-Catholic.

In 1798, Scottish scientist John Robison's book *Proofs of a Conspiracy against All Religions and Governments of Europe* claimed that the Freemasons had been infiltrated and taken over by a secret atheist society known as the Illuminati, which was using the influence of prominent Masons to support a global conspiracy to control international trade. Robison's work is considered a foundational text by theorists who study the alleged Illuminati and by those who consider the Freemasons a secret society of similar purpose.

Concern over the presence of what were called "Illumized" Freemasons also spread in the United States, and prominent politicians, including George Washington, wrote about their concerns over a conspiratorial takeover of the country. Fear of the Freemasons in the United States led to the formation of the Anti-Masonic Party in 1827, which never managed to place a candidate in office during the nearly 20 years of its existence, providing fuel for those who believed the Freemasons exerted undue control over the union.

### **Luminous Fiction**

The famed Illuminati is a fictional secret society that has been invoked as the masterminds behind everything from hiding evidence of extraterrestrials to controlling the world's finances. The Illuminati is based on a real organization of the same name that was established in Bavaria in the 18th century and was dedicated to fighting class warfare, gender inequality, and religious oppression.

## Freemasons Today

In the modern era, Freemason conspiracy theories remain among the most popular themes in pseudo-historical and pop-mysticism literature. Various theories have linked the Freemasons to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the cover-up of information regarding UFOs, though few legitimate historians support these beliefs. Some Freemasons have occasionally encouraged conspiracy theories, fostering the idea that they are guardians of obscure traditions and earthshaking secrets. While some members might like to imagine that they are taking part in a secret society, little doubt remains that Freemasonry is generally a banal men's club that is unique primarily because of its association to the pop-mysticism of an earlier era.

The link between Freemasonry and the early power structure of the United States has been clearly demonstrated by historians, and belonging to the group once conferred significant advantages. The degree to which membership continues to represent a meaningful advantage remains unknown and is another reason why the group is repeatedly portrayed as potentially dangerous. Because Freemasonry continues to attract high-profile followers, the club could still potentially lead to alliances with major national implications. If one embraces the miniscule, almost imperceptible, chance that Freemasonry is an anti-Christian or atheist conspiracy, its success must be called into question, as two centuries of campaigning seem outwardly to have done little to shake the dominance of Christianity in the Western world.

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## THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

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### Holy Order of the Crusades

The Knights Templar, or the Order of Poor Fellow Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon, were a small religious order formed in the 12th century to protect Christian pilgrims traveling in Jerusalem after the First Crusade. The order amassed significant wealth and came to have thousands among their ranks, constituting a wealthy elite class that came to harbor significant economic and social



power. In the early 14th century, the rulers of European Christianity turned against the Knights Templar and ordered them to disband.

In the eyes of mainstream history, the story of the Knights Templar ends with the dissolution of the order in the 1300s, but the legend of the Knights Templar lived on in Christian lore. Some proponents of alternative history believe that the Knights Templar survived persecution at the hands of European religious leaders and managed to hide their wealth from their enemies for centuries, maneuvering just behind the veil of society and eventually constructing a powerful secret network capable of manipulating global politics. The Templars have been accused of everything from maintaining a secret library of occult knowledge to being the secret force behind the Illuminati and the New World Order.

## **History of the Order**

The Order of Poor Fellow Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon was founded in 1118 and consisted of eight or nine noble French soldiers who had sworn allegiance to the Crusader King Baldwin II in Jerusalem to protect Christian travelers as they migrated through or visited the Holy Land. A number of similar knight orders emerged during this same period, including the Teutonic Knights and the Knights Hospitalier, which were rivals of the Templars.

Members of the Knights Templar were required to take a vow of poverty, but this didn't stop the order itself from amassing wealth and property. Contributions from wealthy merchants and powerful Christian families soon made the Knights Templar into a very wealthy organization with a large catalogue of property at their disposal. The Knights grew from a handful of nobles to an organization with more than 400 knights and hundreds of subordinate employees, including laborers, middle managers, and minor aristocrats, all working for the organization and profiting from their wealth.

Much of the wealth accrued by the Templar order was by virtue of their involvement in the moneylending business; they provided private and business loans from their amassed fortune and collected significant profits from interest charges. The Knights Templar were banking pioneers, especially in their use of letters of credit for travelers, which functioned like a modern checking account, the funds for which were held by the Templars for their traveling customers. In addition, the Knights Templar were supported by the Catholic Church, and papal law held that the Templars were not subject to the local laws of the countries and territories they occupied. As a result, the order functioned like a nonprofit company and was immune to the taxation imposed by their resident countries or principalities.

Gradually, European powers lost ground during the Crusades. Encroaching Muslim forces and infighting among the knight orders for control of lucrative territories had forced the Knights Templar to move steadily away from the frontier of Christian territory by the late 1200s. In addition, the Vatican had begun to lose faith in the order, motivated by widespread rumors that the Templars had been infiltrated by occult worship and anti-Christian elements. Some historians have alleged that these rumors were the product of political enemies, such as King Philip IV of France, who owed vast sums to the Templars and may have been willing to slander the order to escape his debts.

Toward this end, the Templars were accused of heresy against the Catholic Church by way of a lengthy list of sins that included worshipping the occult. This led a papal commission to investigate the charges levied against the order in Italy, Portugal, Spain, and France, but it was only in France that the Templars were found guilty of the crimes levied against them. Historians believe that the influence of King Philip IV was essential to the persecution of the French knights. As legend has it, on Friday the 13th of October 1307, Philip IV sent soldiers to arrest all Templars living in France. A few were captured, but most of the Templars escaped and were forced to hide to evade French authorities.

In 1312, Pope Clement V issued a papal bill known as the *Vox in Excelsio*, which officially dissolved the Templar order. The remaining knights continued to hide, fleeing throughout Europe and, some speculate, to tropical islands to escape capture. In 1314, the last grand master of the Knights Templar, Jacques de Molay, was burned at the stake for his alleged heresy. Legend has it that Clement V and King Philip IV attended the execution and that Jacques de Molay cursed them from the stake. Both the king and the pope died within the year, accelerating the rumor that Jacques de Molay's curse was a prophesy that came true.



Burning of the Grand Master of the Templars, Jacques de Molay, and Geoffrey of Charney on the Ile-des-Javiaux, a small island in the Seine River, France. Illustration from the *Chroniques de France ou de St. Denis*, created between 1332 and 1350. (The British Library)

## Controversies and Conspiracies Surrounding the Knights Templar

For most mainstream historians, the Knights Templar effectively ended with the burning of Jacques de Molay in 1314. The remaining knights joined other orders or blended into the populace, abandoning their connection to the order. A few of the Templars living in Portugal avoided the authorities by rebranding themselves as the Order of Christ. With the exception of the Portuguese followers, the order disappeared from history and became a source of legend, lore, and conspiratorial myth.

The charges of heresy brought against the Templar order were successful in part because the Knights Templar were secretive about the inner workings of their order, never allowing outsiders to enter their meetings or visit their sanctuaries. For the public and the order's enemies, this secrecy left room for wild speculation about the types of activities that might go on behind closed doors. The list of accusations against the Templars was extensive, including things like kissing each other on the buttocks and penis during meetings and spitting on the cross. The Knights Templar was also accused of being a front for a cult that worshipped an occult god known as Baphomet. Some modern theorists continue this line of reasoning, believing that the descendants of the Templar order are still bound to the worship of satanic or occult gods.

Over the years, the recounted history of the Templars has evolved into hundreds of different theories. According to one theory, for instance, the Templars, in their flight from France, came to North America more than 200 years before the arrival of Columbus and deposited part of their treasure in what is now Canada. It has also been theorized, because of the fact that the Templars controlled the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, that the order took possession of the Holy Grail, the ark of the covenant, the head of John the Baptist, and one or more pieces of the "true cross." In writer Dan Brown's fictional history of the order, the Templars were a front for the Priory of Zion, an even more secretive organization that still exists and plays a dominant role in the New World Order.

## Templar Freemasonry

Some theorists have suggested that the Freemasons—a 17th-century trade organization that evolved into an influential 18th-century fraternal organization in the United States—was an offshoot of the Templars. The Freemasons came to incorporate symbols from the Temple of Solomon into their mythology and architectural designs, and this similarity has been treated as evidence of a meaningful connection.

The proposed links between the Masons and the Templars have given rise to a family of theories regarding the Templars' hiding secret religious relics in

the United States. Some believe that the Templars became the Freemasons and that the masons have continued the Templars' mission, which has been variously described as controlling the world's wealth, pursuing an atheist, anti-Christian, and anti-Catholic agenda, or secretly directing world affairs through the control of key political figures.

### Relevance in the 21st Century

The continued popularity of the Templars as the source of conspiracy theories is not surprising, considering their place in history. It is not a major leap for many conspiracy theorists to imagine that the Knights Templar in 12th-century Jerusalem might have come across sacred religious artifacts as they plundered the country. Similarly, the fact that the story of the Templars includes a rise and fall in the favor of the Catholic Church has imparted a stain of mystery to the history of the order. What was the real reason that the church turned against the Knights Templar, and did some of them manage to maintain the order after they fell into disfavor? The facts committed to historical record are incomplete, leaving the doors open for endless speculation.

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## LATTER-DAY SAINTS

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### American Christianity

In Christianity and Catholicism, God's revelation ends with the books of the New Testament, but a number of sects, collectively called the Latter-day Saints Movement, believe that God provided additional revelations after those recorded in the New Testament and the other writings of the standard Christian/Catholic canon.

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, which is the organizational arm of the religion known as Mormonism, has become the most influential of the Latter-day Saints religions, comprising some 13 million members around the world. Mormonism has evolved from a controversial cult at the fringes of Christianity to become a major facet of the conservative Christian community, and a significant political influence, evinced by the acceptance of a Mormon candidate (Mitt Romney) for the U.S. presidency in 2012.

## Mormonism and the New World

The Mormon Church was founded in New York City in 1830 by an American named Joseph Smith who claimed to have had numerous visions of angels and other Christian saints and prophets. In one of these visions, Smith said he was visited by an angel named Maroni, who told Smith about a set of golden plates containing further revelations of God delivered to the “prophets of the Americas.” He transcribed the information inscribed on golden plates, which was written in an ancient “Egyptian” dialect that Smith could magically understand, and created the Book of Mormon. Over the years, Smith said he was also visited by other saints, including John the Baptist, and incorporated further lessons from these visits into his religion.

Smith was persecuted for his heretical claims, jailed on several occasions, and at one point tarred and feathered. Joseph and his brother Hiram were eventually shot and killed by an angry mob in 1844, after being jailed for treason. When Smith died, he had built a congregation of dozens, but over time, because of the Mormon’s focus on reproducing as much as possible, and because of such crucial supporters as Brigham Young, the founder of Salt Lake City, Utah, Mormonism managed to expand into a community of millions.

The Book of Mormon tells the story of the Latter-day Saints, a group of prophets descended from an ancient migration from the Middle East to the Americas around 600 BCE. There, the people divided into warring tribes, including the dark-skinned Lamanites and the light-skinned Nephites. Jesus then appeared (post-crucifixion) and provided revelations to the American tribes, resulting in a temporary peace and a golden age. Eventually, warring between the tribes resumed, and Christianity disappeared from the New World. The Lamanites, whose dark skin was said to be the result of losing their adherence to the true faith, eventually killed the lighter-skinned Nephites and became a core part of the Polynesian and Native American ethnic groups.

Followers of Mormonism differ regarding how literally they interpret the Book of Mormon with regard to the Middle Eastern colonization. There is currently no reliable archaeological, genetic, or other evidence to support the idea that Native Americans or Polynesians are descended, even in some distant partial way, from an Israelite group that arrived in the seventh century BCE. Genetic evidence, for instance, suggests that Native Americans and Polynesians descended from waves of migrations from Asia that occurred much earlier in history, and there are no genetic markers to suggest Middle Eastern ancestry. Mormon researchers have proposed a number of potential solutions to explain this discrepancy, including the claim that the Middle Eastern DNA introduced by the 600’s immigration has been diluted after centuries of blending with other indigenous groups.

Similarly, descriptions of the Americas in the Book of Mormon include references to animals, plants, and technology that have not been confirmed through archaeological evidence. The use of swords and chariots by the native peoples of the Americas, for instance, is not considered historically accurate. Similarly, descriptions of cattle, goats, and sheep are not supported by studies of the wildlife of the New World in the pre-Columbian era. Mormons have attempted to address these discrepancies as the result of linguistic inaccuracy, claiming that Smith, in transcribing the lost dialect of the golden tablets, substituted familiar animals like cattle and sheep in place of similar native creatures, like llama and mountain goats. Similarly, references to chariots and scimitars (neither of which existed in the Americas before the Europeans' arrival) have been explained as inaccurate descriptions of similar native tools.

### **Beliefs and Controversies**

Like the relationship between Baha'i and Islam, Mormonism and the Latter-day Saints movements represent an expansion of Christian theory, but scholars differ as to whether Mormonism has diverged to a sufficient extent that it should be considered a separate religion, rather than a sect of Christianity. However, while followers of Baha'i identify themselves as followers of a separate religion, Mormons generally consider themselves followers of a purer, original form of Christian worship that is still under the umbrella of Christianity.

The refined Christian vision of the Latter-day Saints movement proposes significant reinterpretations of Christian theology, including the belief that God was married and has a physical body and that humans can become godlike in the afterlife, remaining distinct from God but achieving godlike omniscience and powers. Mormon spirituality derives from a belief that the later revelations of Jesus reveal information about the early church that was lost as Christianity was polluted through misconceptions. Many Mormon principles are therefore tied to the belief in ancient, lost wisdom and miraculous revelations. For instance, Mormons believe in the idea of speaking in tongues, which is also found in other Christian sects, and usually involves the channeling of ancient, lost languages from the biblical era.

Mormonism and other Latter-day Saints churches fall into the genre of conservative Christianity and oppose many behaviors that they consider immoral, such as homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, abortion, the use of pornography, and the consumption of narcotics, caffeine, and alcohol. These judgments have led to alliances between the Latter-day Saints faiths and advocates of conservative political policies. The family is one of the most distinct concepts in Mormonism, and Mormon Scripture holds that the family continues after death, but only for families united in and recognized by the official church. These couples can continue

to have “spirit children” after death while residing in one of the three cosmic kingdoms of the Mormon afterlife. The Mormon focus on family values is another factor that links Mormonism and other conservative Christian sects.

Mormonism initially promoted polygamy, or “plural marriage,” as a way of building their numbers and following “God’s will” that they should reproduce widely, but the church officially forbade this activity in the late 1800s. Some followers have continued to practice polygamy and believe it to be in keeping with the pure teachings of Joseph Smith, the first prophet of Mormonism. Polygamy has become one of the most famous and controversial aspects of Mormonism because the practice is illegal throughout the United States and considered immoral in some other sects of Christianity.

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## OLIVE BRANCH

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### Cultivation of Sacred Fruit

The olive branch is widely used as a Christian symbol, representing peace, salvation, and benediction. Symbolism associated with the olive branch can be traced to pre-Christian symbolism associated with the cultivated olive plant (*Olea europaea*), which has been an important crop in many Middle Eastern and European societies since antiquity.

### Olive Cultivation

Historians believe that Hamitic-Semitic societies surrounding modern-day Iran were the first to cultivate the olive plant around 6000 BCE, making the olive one of the earliest fruit trees in cultivation. Terms used to refer to the olive among these cultures are similar to words used in Northern Africa, indicating a historic link between the Arabic and North African societies and their use of the olive fruit.

The cultivation of the olive accompanies the establishment of the first societies in the Mediterranean Basin. There is evidence that olives were cultivated on the island of Crete during the Minoan Age, between 3000 and 1500 BCE. The Code of Hammurabi (written around 2500 BCE) references rules for the cultivation and sale of olive oil. Ancient papyri scripts from Egypt, dated to approximately 2300

BCE, also contain references to olive fruit and oil and the Harris papyri from the era of Ramses III, between 1198 and 1166 BCE, indicates that olive trees were planted ceremonially around tombs and temples.

The Greeks began cultivating olives between 3500 and 3000 BCE, and they brought their particular methods of olive production with them as they colonized vast portions of the Mediterranean in the sixth century BCE. Through Greece, the olive became a central crop in the Roman Empire, and this furthered the spread of the plant throughout Europe. The early Christian, Jewish, and Islamic societies emerged in the Middle East, where olive cultivation had already been an important part of agricultural society for thousands of years.

### **Cross Religious Symbolism**

The particularities of olive cultivation may have contributed to the plant's early symbolic associations in Middle Eastern and proto-European cultures. While some cultivars (varieties) of olives, such as Arbequina and Koroneiki, will produce fruit after about 3 years of growth, other cultivars do not fruit for 5 to 12 years. The slow rate of maturation prevents olives from being useful for wandering civilizations. Some historians have suggested that olives came to symbolize peace because only a peaceful and stable society could benefit from the growth of olives. This may also have contributed to early use of the olive as a political symbol, representing permanency and hegemony.

The olive tree was a sacred symbol in ancient Greece, associated with the goddess Athena and the city of Athens. One myth holds that Athena gave the first olive tree to the people of the city of Attica, in the form of a single branch, which she said would grow into a strong tree that would feed the people. The fact that Athena gives a "branch" rather than a "seed" has been interpreted as representing knowledge of grafting, whereby a plant is grown by connecting a branch to another growing plant rather than from a planted seed.

Olives were so central to Greek society that it was a serious legal offense to destroy an olive tree. Even the owners of the tree were only allowed to trim a certain portion each year. Special individuals were appointed to collect olive fruits and oils, and the oils were used for anointing in a variety of spiritual rituals. The olive became a symbol of leadership, with emperors seen as individuals who "cultivated" harmony among the populace. The Romans also adopted the spiritual and political symbolism of the olive tree, but in Roman mythology it was the goddess Minerva who was associated with the olive in place of the Greeks' Athena.

Greco-Roman olive symbolism was integrated into the Abrahamic faiths that emerged in the Middle East. The Old Testament contains several references to



olives as symbols of fecundity and abundance for the early Jewish tribes. In Deuteronomy, the olive symbolizes wisdom, but the most lasting symbolism of the olive is from Genesis 8:11, where the dove released by Noah returns with an olive branch in its mouth. The olive branch thus symbolizes the return of peace between God and man. Early Christians and Jews also used olive oil as an anointing agent, mimicking similar uses in the Greek and Roman religious temples.

The olive branch is one of many floral and botanical motifs that has been adopted and reinterpreted by cultures throughout the world. Today, the olive branch is most commonly associated with Christianity and the Abrahamic faiths, but the presence of the olive in the Bible represents the agricultural link to the far more ancient Middle Eastern societies that preceded Abrahamic traditions. The olive also represents the evolution of stable societies centered around the cultivation of key agricultural products and therefore symbolizes the transition from pastoral, nomadic cultures to the relatively stable agricultural settlements that came to dominate Europe in antiquity.

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## OPUS DEI

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### Controversial Cult of Catholicism

Opus Dei, Latin for “God’s Work,” is a catholic organization founded on October 2, 1928, by Spanish clergyman Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, who was canonized in 2002 by Pope John Paul II. The 90,000-member organization has the express purpose of demonstrating that work and the activities of daily life are themselves the best path for becoming closer to God.

The exact details of the organization’s founding were never recorded, and this apparent secrecy has created an image of Opus Dei as something of a secret society within the Catholic Church. According to official descriptions, the seeds of Opus Dei occurred to Escriva in a vision he received while on retreat. The organization was initially only open to men, but it began admitting women in the 1930s. Many of the principles of Opus Dei are contained in Escriva’s 1939 book *The Way*.

## Organizational Details and Practices

In terms of its structure, Opus Dei is a prelateure led by a church officer called a “prelate,” who oversees the activity of a clergy (church administration members) and a laity (nonclergy members) involved in specific pastoral activities. Most prelateures consist of a bishop, who is responsible for the clergy and laity of a specific diocese.

By contrast, Opus Dei was designated by the Catholic Church as the first “personal prelateure,” in 1982, which is a diocese without physical boundaries, in which the prelate is seen as having the responsibility for directing the pastoral activities of all individual members, wherever they may live.

The majority of Opus Dei members are called “supernumeraries” and live relatively normal lives while adhering to the principles established by the group’s leadership. About 20–30 percent of Opus Dei members become “numeraries” by living full-time in one of hundreds of Opus Dei centers around the world. These individuals take a vow of celibacy and agree to contribute as much as 50 percent of their salaries to Opus Dei. Numeraries also perform symbolic mortification rituals, which involve inflicting pain on oneself to atone for sins, repress desires, and reinforce dedication to the faith. These rituals may include whipping oneself during prayer or wearing a spiked metal band. Mortification rituals are not exclusive to Opus Dei, but they have been taken by some as proof of the organization’s cultlike inclinations.

## Reputation as a Secret Society

The Opus Dei controversy has a long history. In the early 1940s, a series of letters written to the pope by prominent Jesuits accused Escriva of fostering a secret society with tendencies toward domination and asked the pope to exercise greater control over the organization. The Italian Parliament investigated Opus Dei in the 1980s, as part of a broader investigation regarding the influence of secret religious societies in Italy. Investigations have also been conducted in France, Switzerland, and the United States, and in most cases have concluded that Opus Dei is not involved in clandestine activities. Still, some official reports continue to list Opus Dei as a “secret organization.” Opus Dei’s historic policies regarding the organization’s secrecy, such as refusing to divulge members’ names and preventing members from outwardly confirming their membership, have furthered public suspicion.

The Opus Dei controversy has been fueled by reports from ex-members who describe unusual activities within local chapters of the organization. In 2002, former Opus Dei member Tammy DiNicola brought the issue of Opus Dei’s cult status to national attention through a series of interviews and documentary appearances

investigating aspects of the organization. According to DiNicola and other former members, Opus Dei forces members to sever ties with family and nonmembers, monitors incoming and outgoing mail of all numeraries, and encourages members to actively recruit minors into the group. Author Dan Brown's 2005 best seller, *The Da Vinci Code*, also fueled the conspiratorial flame when he described the group as a secret cult.

In light of negative press, Opus Dei reversed many of its policies regarding secrecy in the 21st century and allowed members to speak openly about their experiences. Since this policy change, members and supporters have come forward to defend the group and refute speculations that Opus Dei is a cult that attempts to recruit children or brainwash members. Defenders argue that the experiences of such former members as DiNicola are the result of the policies of individual chapters and not representative of the group as a whole. Further, supporters argue that while numeraries are sometimes required to make extreme sacrifices as a symbol of their dedication, they do so freely and are allowed to leave the organization at any time.

## Opus Dei in the 21st Century

The net worth of Opus Dei has never been fully measured, but estimates taken from the net worth of the various nonprofit organizations owned by Opus Dei indicate a value of over \$2.8 billion. A popular allegation that Opus Dei has a large number of members among the elite in governmental and judicial organizations has proven to be untrue, though the organization does have some prominent supporters in government and the upper levels of the Catholic Church. Opus Dei refutes the allegation that these individuals are working to further the organization's agenda, simply explaining that Opus Dei appeals to people from many levels of society.

Analysis of the organization indicates that the realities of Opus Dei lie in between the image portrayed by the group's public relations campaign and the accusations of former members and other critics. Dan Brown's depiction of the group as a sinister society with global machinations is fictional, but the organization does engage in questionable recruitment practices and exercises a level of control over initiates that many consider a legitimate cause for concern.

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## SECRETS OF FATIMA

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### Visions of the Virgin Mary

In 1917, three young children from the town of Fatima, Portugal, reported three prophetic visions from the spirit of the Virgin Mary. Word of this spread throughout the global Catholic community, making the town of Fatima internationally famous and transforming the site where the alleged visions occurred into a holy site, known as Our Lady of Fatima. Perceived prophetic messages in these visions became a major Catholic controversy and, to some, proof of an as yet unrealized future.

### History of the Fatima Visions

Ten-year-old Lucia Santos and her two younger cousins, Francisco and Jacinta Marto, reported seeing the spirit of Mary four times, on the 13th day of each month, from May to October of 1917. On July 13, when Mary's spirit reappeared, she shared a prophetic vision with the girls. The girls reported the event to their local priest and from there word spread throughout the Portuguese Catholic community, eventually reaching the Vatican.

Most of what is known about the visions comes from Santos, as her younger cousins both died in the influenza epidemic of 1919. Santos became a nun and spent the rest of her life trying to understand her childhood visions. Initially, Santos refused to reveal the prophecies, saying she was sworn to secrecy. But the Bishop Jose da Silva, of the Leiria-Fatima Diocese, convinced Santos to reveal the first and second secrets in 1941 as part of the documentation needed for the canonization of her deceased cousins. Santos revealed that the first vision was of hell, with humans burning in a lake of fire.

The second secret reportedly revealed that the world would experience a global war unless men ceased activities that were "offending God" and the Russian communists converted to Catholicism. When this secret was revealed in 1941, some believed that the prophecy correctly predicted that start of World War II.

#### Ghostly Charm

The apparition of the Virgin Mary has appeared again and again to Catholics around the world, usually in poor neighborhoods during periods of political upheaval. In one such vision, reported in the 1200s, Mary gave Saint Dominic a rosary, a string of beads used as a sacramental focus for prayer, and this spectral gift has become central to Marian reverence and Catholic material culture.

Numerous skeptics called attention to the fact that the secret was revealed only after World War II had begun and that the content of the prophecy revealed a clear anti-Communist political agenda that seemed unlikely to have issued forth from God. For these reasons, many doubted the reliability of the second secret, or at least the form in which it was revealed.

In 1947, while Santos was gravely ill, Bishop da Silva convinced her to write down the third prophecy. A letter containing the third secret was sent to the Vatican in 1957 and seen only by the standing pope before being filed in the Vatican's Secret Archives. Santos claimed she had been told (by Mary) that it would be safe to reveal the third secret in 1960, at which time the public would be better able to understand it. The Vatican, for reasons known only to the church leaders, swore Santos to secrecy and did not make the contents of the letter public until 2000.

### **Controversy of the Third Secret**

The third secret of Fatima became one of the most popular Catholic conspiracies of the 20th century, largely because of the Vatican's intense secrecy. The secret was revealed in its entirety, according to the Vatican, in 2000 and contained a vision of a pope and surrounding priests being killed by soldiers armed with guns and arrows.

After the third secret was revealed, countless religious scholars examined the vision's potential meaning. Many believed that the prophecy referred to the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in 1981. Opponents have argued that if the prophecy concerned the 1981 assassination attempt, there would have been no reason not to release the secret after the attempt failed. Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) reported in 1984 his belief that the prophecy concerned the biblical end of days.

A variety of theories have been promulgated regarding the Fatima secrets, and a few ardent believers have dedicated significant portions of their lives to investigating the alleged mysteries behind the third secret. Some believe that the Vatican never truly revealed the third secret because the true information might produce a panic or because it contains some apocalyptic message that the Vatican is hiding from the public. Catholic priest Nicolas Gruner has been one of the most outspoken supporters of the third secret conspiracy theory. Among the more extreme theories supported by Gruner is the idea that Lucia Santos died in 1950 and was replaced by an imposter working in league with Communists attempting to infiltrate the Vatican. Supporters of these theories have also suggested that various popes have also been replaced by Communist doppelgangers.

Like many conspiracy theories, the alleged secrets of Fatima are tied to the politics of the era. The residents of Fatima were suffering under the oppression of World War I when the girls received their visions and Communist panic was becoming the most pressing political issue throughout the democracies of the

West. The second secret, as it was reported by Santos, directly links Communism with the threat of biblical apocalypse. It is not surprising that conspiracy theorists during the World Wars and the Cold War were eager to interpret the secrets of Fatima as revealing the impending threat of communism.

Since the end of the Cold War, theories regarding the secrets of Fatima rarely focus on the plots of Communist conspirators but have shifted toward such clandestine organizations as the hypothetical Illuminati. Other theories have argued that the real content of the third secret has been obscured to hide a satanist or at least anti-Catholic agenda. Theories about the rise of anti-Catholic and anti-Christian organizations have been a source of fear for Christians and Catholics for centuries, though the proposed villains behind the conspiracies have changed through history. Since the Cold War era has passed, various theories have alleged that the secrets of Fatima may reveal anything from the truth behind the Templar order to extraterrestrial visitation mistakenly thought to be visions of God.

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## VATICAN SECRET ARCHIVES

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### The Written History of the Church

The Secret Archives of the Vatican are a collection of documents contained within the Vatican that are only accessible to those who receive direct permission from the head of the Holy See or the standing pope. The archives are known to contain the record of all decrees issued by all former popes as well as papal correspondence and a variety of other documents. The archives have not been fully documented by historians, and some believe that the secret archives contain documents relating to various secretive activities engaged in by the Catholic hierarchy over the centuries.

### History and Scope of the Collection

The Vatican Secret Archives were first established under Innocent III in 1198, so records from before this period are therefore scarce. Since the establishment of the archives, it is estimated that over 60,000 distinct collections of documents have been added. Each collection may contain from 100 to more than 2000 individual documents. It has been estimated that the Vatican archival collection occupies more than 80 kilometers of shelving, distributed throughout more than 50



Inquisition documents on display at the Vatican Archive, September 18, 2006. (AP Photo/Arturo Mari, *L'Osservatore Romano*)

rooms, many of which are extensive halls. Vatican archivists say the oldest known document in the collection dates back to the eighth century. An attempt to document the collection in the 1700s revealed as least 1.5 million categories of documents.

The Vatican also maintains a general archive library, which is regularly made available to religious scholars and researchers. The Secret Archives were separated from this collection in the 17th century, under the leadership of Pope Paul V. The archives are seen as the property of the current pope, with ownership transferred to each new pope elected by the College of Cardinals. The administration of the Secret Archives is supervised by a cardinal bishop appointed by the pope and given the title “archivist.” This individual, in

turn, appoints an assistant archivist who handles the daily management of the archive with the help of a small staff.

### Controversial Documents

Scholars were not allowed access to the Secret Archives until 1883, when Pope Leo XIII decided to grant access to any documents originating before 1815. In general, Vatican policy has been to allow access to documents dating approximately 70 years after the death of a certain pope. As the Vatican slowly released new parts of the collection, speculation spread about the secret documents still hidden, and some still believe that the Vatican has reserved especially controversial documents from various eras. Theories range from the belief that the Vatican is hiding documents related to church involvement in sensitive political issues to more extreme theories that the Vatican archives contain records of the church’s involvement in such secret societies as the Illuminati or Freemasons.

Some World War II scholars have questioned whether the archives contain proof that the Catholic Church aided the Nazis during the war. The controversy partially centers on Bernadino Nogara, a financial adviser to the Catholic Church under Popes Pius XI and Pius XII. Investigations indicate that Nogara invested in both Axis and Allied projects and may have therefore directly or indirectly supported the Nazi regime. While the Vatican allowed Jewish historians to utilize portions of the archives from this period, the controversy over hidden documents deepened in 2000 after the Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission was denied requests for unrestricted access to the archives from that era. As of 2013, files from the ascension of Pope Pius XII, in 1939, remained restricted. The Vatican reported that the records would likely be released in 2014.

Historians have speculated that the Vatican is reluctant to release the records from Pope Pius XII because these records may indicate that Pius XII did little to protest the Nazi movement. The few documents that have been released from the period suggest that Pius XII attempted to maintain diplomatic relations with Hitler. Scholars studying the issue have noted that the policy of releasing documents approximately 70 years after a pope's death seems designed to reduce controversy regarding the more questionable decisions of each pope.

### Public Display and Important Documents

In 2012, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the archives, the Vatican placed 100 historical documents on display at the Capitoline Museum in Rome. The exhibit was called “Lux in Arcana—The Vatican Secret Archives Reveals Itself” and was held from February to September. While not especially controversial, the exhibit did reveal some of the wealth of historical data that has been preserved through the church's archive and led to much speculation about what other treasures remain.

Among the more notable pieces in the collection was a letter by Mary Queen of Scots shortly before she was executed for her suspected role in a plot to execute Queen Elizabeth I. The display also contained documents from a court case involving the Knights Templar in which several of the knights were tried for heresy. Another document of particular historical interest is a letter written to request Pope Clement VII's permission for the annulment of Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. The pope's refusal is well-known in history, as it led to the formation of the Church of England and thereby the birth of the Anglican movement.

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# Gnosticism

Gnosticism is a term used to refer to a loosely defined group of esoteric religious sects that existed alongside early Christianity and to a family of modern spiritual and philosophical beliefs derived from these ancient sects. Gnosticism existed in a wide variety of forms, some overlapping with Christianity and some having no significant relationship to the other Abrahamic faiths and operating as completely religious schools. Gnosticism has a more or less negligible impact as a modern religion, but it plays an important role in the analysis of early Christian development as a competing philosophical strain that affected the spread and evolution of Christian beliefs.

## Origins and Evolution

Information on the history of Gnostic thought is often contradictory and difficult to decipher. Christianity developed around the first century CE out of messianic Jewish cults that existed in the Middle East. Writings from Christian scholars in subsequent centuries describe a number of alternative forms of Christianity that also emerged during this period, some of which integrated elements of Egyptian and Greek spirituality as well. These schools of thought became known as “Gnostic Christianity” and seem to have focused on obscure texts written by Christian theorists that were not accepted as part of the mainstream Christian canon.

One of the best-known schools of Gnosticism has been linked to a Roman philosopher known as Valentinus, who developed a complex theory about the creation of the universe and other facets of spiritual reality in the second century CE. Information about the Valentinus school of Gnosticism can be found in the works of later Christian “heresiologists” who criticized Valentinus’s spiritual beliefs in defense of mainstream Christian theology. Valentinus was a prominent member of the Christian community during this period and may have been a candidate for election as a bishop in Rome. Other ancient Gnostic sects, such as the Naasenes and the Ophites, have also become known through criticisms written by such Christian scholars as Hippolytus of Rome.

In 1945, researchers working in a library in Egypt discovered a number of early Gnostic texts written between the second and fourth centuries CE. Now known as

### **The Dan Brown Factor**

*The Da Vinci Code* and other historical fictions by author Dan Brown have done more to fuel conspiracy theories in the 21st century than any other single influence. The Gnostic alternative history of Christianity was a major inspiration for Brown's fictional secret societies.

the Nag Hammadi library, this collection of fragmentary texts and commentaries contains alternative Christian gospels and heretical writings that propose alternatives to standard Christian theory. For instance, one of the Gnostic texts claims that the Apostle Thomas was the “twin brother” of Jesus. Another of the Gnostic texts indicates that Jesus was secretly married to Mary Magdalene.

The writings of Gnostic Christian sects are controversial, and over the centuries, ancient Gnosticism has become a favorite study for occultists and followers of alternative spiritual systems. Gnosticism was an inspiration for the founders of Theosophy, a pseudo-spiritual movement of the late 19th century that sought to synthesize the wisdom of obscure spiritual thought from around the world. Leaders of the Theosophists, such as the Russian occultist Helena “Madame” Blavatsky, wrote extensive analyses of Gnostic texts as part of an exploration of obscure philosophy and spiritualism. Psychoanalyst Carl Jung and English occultist Aleister Crowley also utilized Gnostic texts in their explorations of Western esoteric spirituality.

### **Gnostic Beliefs**

Descriptions of Gnostic beliefs are problematic because the range of beliefs associated with Gnosticism represents a variety of sometimes conflicting traditions, rather than a single spiritual system or religion. In general, Gnosticism can be described as a belief that spiritual salvation is dependent on obtaining secret knowledge from both ancient wisdom and introspection. This focus on knowledge, or “gnosis,” from the Greek term meaning “knowing,” is both the source of the name used for this approach and one of the defining characteristics of Gnostic philosophy.

Within some Gnostic traditions, the cosmology of the universe is attributed to a duality between the purely spiritual force known as the Godhead and an intermediary force known as the “demiurge.” The form that the demiurge takes ranges from a nearly polytheistic interpretation of “dual gods” to a more nuanced approach that sees the demiurge as a manifestation of a single god. For this reason, Gnostic philosophy ranges the entire gamut from polytheism to monotheism and each step in-between.

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## EIGHT-ARMED CROSS

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### Eightfold Divinity

The eight-armed cross is one of the ancient symbols that has been adopted by neo-Gnosticism and represents the eight Aeons of Gnosticism and the resurrection of Christ. The eight-armed cross is also used in Catholicism, where it is called a "baptismal cross" and represents the eight days between Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem and his resurrection. The eight-armed cross likely originated in ancient Egypt and therefore represents an essential link between the mysterious Egyptian cults and early Christian development.

### The Egyptian Ogdoad

The symbol that inspired the eight-armed cross may have been developed in the Old Kingdom period of Egypt (2649–2150 BCE), in or near the ancient city of Khmun (also spelled "Khmunu"), which was called "Hermopolis" by the ancient Greeks, meaning "City of Hermes." The Egyptian name for the city Khmun translates as "City of Eight" or "City of the Eight," in reference to the eight gods and goddesses who were considered the patrons and spiritual center of the city. Historians believe that the eight gods of Khmun constituted one of the oldest of the *pesedjets*, or genealogical groups of gods worshipped in Egypt, the most famous of which was the Ennead of Heliopolis.

The eight deities of Khmun, collectively known as the "Ogdoad," consisted of four pairs of male and female deities, representing the four male and four female creative powers or sources of generative energy. The pair of Nun and Naunet represented the primordial water that gave birth to life. Heh and Hauhet represented the concept of eternity and everlasting existence. Kuk and Kuaket represented darkness and the unknown. Amun and Amaunet represented the air and the hidden reality of the world. And the principle god of Khmun was Thoth, who was often depicted with the head of a Baboon or an Ibis.

Together the Ogdoad created a mound of earth that emerged from the primeval water, containing an egg from which the sun god "Re," or "Ra," was born. This cosmology therefore praises the Ogdoad as the origin of the sun but also with the primordial creative power of water. This association is also reflected in the symbolism of the Ogdoad, which often depicts the various gods with the heads of frogs or snakes, indicating their link to the waters of life.

## The Gnostic Ogdoad

The second century Gnostic scholar Valentinus is credited with adopting the idea of the Ogdoad to fit with Gnostic theology. As with all early Gnostic philosophy, Valentinus's conception of the Ogdoad was complex and involved a blend of cosmological theory and esoteric mysticism. The Gnostic mythology begins with a single god known as "Bythos," or the "Monad," who is the single entity from which all phenomena are ultimately created. The universe arises from this Bythos, or deep abyss, giving rise to seven realms and an eighth realm that encapsulates all the others. This is one of the original eightfold systems of Gnostic thought represented by the eight-armed cross. The division of the heavens into a system of eight might also reflect early knowledge of the eight celestial bodies that were then thought to orbit the earth.

The Ogdoad was used as a symbol of the "Eight Emanations" and the "Eight Aeons," ultimately seen as aspects of the original emanation from God. Valentinus first divided the emanations of god into a system of two principle deities, the male principle of Bythos and the female principle of Sige or Ennoea. From these came two additional manifestations, Nous and Aletheia, also known as "Mind" and "Truth," who were depicted as brother and sister. Nous and Aletheia mated and gave birth to a male called "Word" or "Logos" and a female called "Life" or "Zoe." The mating of Logos and Zoe then produced "Anthropos," or "Man," and "Ecclesia," who is also known as "Assembly" or "Church." These eight emanations are the Eight Aeons of Gnosticism and one of the foundations of Gnostic mythology. Further mating between these pairs gave rise to additional Aeons, with more than 30 listed in some versions of Gnostic mythology.

## Sacred Eights

In Catholicism, the baptismal cross represents the importance of the number eight in Christian mythology and philosophy. This convention arises from the fact that Christ rose from the dead on Sunday, the eighth day from his death. The number eight has therefore become a sacred number in Christian mythology, and the baptismal cross was adopted to reflect this association. The importance of the number eight in Christianity was likely inherited from earlier mystical cults and the Persian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman traditions that preceded Christianity in the same region. Symbols similar to the eight-armed cross have been found associated with a number of Western pagan religions dating back to the Neolithic era.

The eight-sided symbol also developed independently in Asia. In China, for example, the "Bagua," or "Eight Trigrams" provides a distinctly Eastern example of an eight-sided cosmological symbol. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism share the ancient Eight Auspicious Symbols, one of which is the "Dharmachakra," or "Eight-spoked Wheel."

The eight-sided symbol is most likely an extension of the four-armed cross, an ancient symbol of the sun or the earth that developed independently in many cultures around the world and is found in Western paganism, Asian, Near Eastern, and Native American spiritual symbolism, like the so-called “Medicine Wheel.” The four-armed symbol is sometimes seen as representing the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west) and the eight-armed symbol may be a further extrapolation from this idea, representing further divisions or gradations between the principal divisions of the cosmos.

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## OUROBOROS

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### Serpentine Symbol of Eternity

The term “ouroboros” is the name given to the Gnostic symbol of a snake eating its own tail, a symbolic archetype that appeared in ancient Egyptian, Grecian, Roman, and Norse mythology and was later adopted by Gnostic sects as a symbol of knowledge and eternity. Historians believe that the snake eating its own tail symbol is a manifestation of the broader world serpent archetype that appears in many cultures around the world, utilizing the serpent to represent Earth or the holistic view of the universe. The term “ouroboros” is taken from archaic Greek, meaning “tail eating.”

### The Ouroboros in Egypt

The earliest known appearance of the ouroboros comes from the Book of the Netherworld, which is the name given to an ancient esoteric text buried in the tomb of the Egyptian king Tutankhamen in the fourth century BCE. The text describes the origin of the sun god, Re, through a union with Osiris and contains a carved inscription of a snake biting its tail, a symbol known to the Egyptians as “tail-in-mouth.” In the Amduat, the oldest of the Egyptian Books of the Afterlife, there is a related symbol, known as “many-faced,” of a multiheaded serpent or dragon curled up to rest its heads on its own tail. This may have been the original predecessor of the ouroboros symbol.

The snake seems to have been a common symbol of femininity in ancient Egypt, and the hieroglyph used to represent the word “goddess” was modeled after the image of a cobra or snake. During the Hellenistic period in Egypt, between the fourth and first centuries BCE, Egyptian spiritual concepts blended with Greek mythology, resulting in a plethora of new Greco-Roman cults that reinterpreted many ancient Egyptian symbols. In Hellenistic Egyptian philosophy, the ouroboros became a symbol of the unity of the spirit.

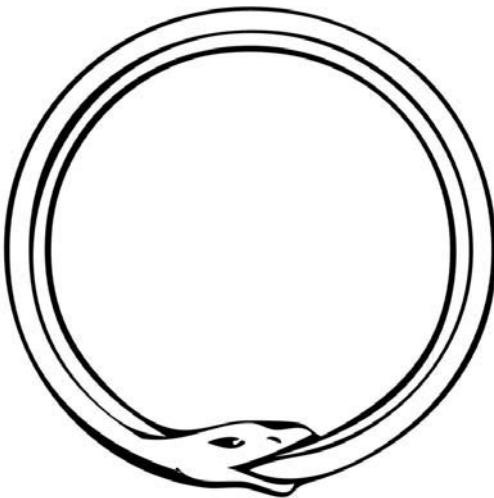
The ouroboros was also used in Egyptian Hermeticism, a tradition that emerged between the third and second centuries BCE, and theorized a single, true spiritual reality from which all other religions ultimately derived. Within the Hermetic tradition, the serpent symbolized the cyclic nature of time and was sometimes used to represent the theoretical barrier separating the world of the sun from the perceived chaos of the outside universe.

### Ouroboros in Gnosticism

The philosophy of Gnosticism evolved out of the Hermetic philosophy of Egypt and Europe and borrowed many of its symbols from earlier traditions. The early Gnostics, such as the Hermetics, believed the world to be located at the center of the universe, and the ouroboros was therefore seen as a symbol for the boundary between the world and the plemora, which can be seen as the Gnostic view of heaven. This view of the ouroboros may also have been influenced by

the Greco-Roman mysticism that was popular at the time of Gnosticism’s emergence in the second century CE.

The Ouroboros had special meaning to the obscure Gnostic sects known as the Ophite Gnostics and the Naassenes, who were described in the writings of Hippolytus of Rome. According to Hippolytus, both groups developed heretical views regarding the serpent in the garden of Eden, hence the name “Ophite,” which is derived from the Greek root meaning “snake.” Hippolytus reported that these sects regarded the serpent of the garden of Eden, who



The ouroboros or “self eating” symbol represents continuity by combining the beginning and end into an eternal loop.

they called the “Demiurge,” as a hero rather than a villain because it was this serpent that first introduced Adam to “gnosis” or “knowledge,” by influencing Adam to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Some historians of Gnosticism believe that the ouroboros was seen as a guardian of knowledge in the Gnostic philosophy of the Naassenes and Ophites.

## Alchemy and Secret Societies

The 11th-century Codex Marcianus, a tome of collected knowledge on alchemy named for the Marcianus library in Venice, contains one of the most famous versions of the ouroboros symbol in the West. According to the alchemical theories explored in the text, the serpent symbolized the unity of matter that underlies the appearance of variety in the universe. Again, the ouroboros represents eternity, as it eats its own tail, becoming a ring without a beginning or end. A unique feature of the Codex Marcianus ouroboros is that the serpent is depicted as being half white and half black, thus representing the unity of opposites in the formation of reality. Some historians have thus described this ouroboros as being equivalent of a Western version of the yin and yang symbol of Chinese spirituality.

Over the centuries, the ouroboros was incorporated into the symbolism associated with the Greco-Roman mystery cults, obscure religious groups known for their secret rituals and initiation methods from the Hellenistic period until after the decline of the Roman Empire. The ouroboros appears in writing and art attributed to the cult of Hecate, the Roman cult of Mithras, and the cult of Isis.

The mystery cults existed alongside Christianity from the second century until the dissolution of most of the remaining cults in the fourth century, and because these cults were early competitors with Christianity, Christian scholars often accused cultists of participating in evil or satanic rituals. Partially as a result of these associations, the ouroboros and many other symbols associated with the mystery cults were misconstrued as representing hidden satanic cult affiliation. In some ways, this misconception has endured into the modern era, and some modern conspiracy theorists have listed the ouroboros as a symbol of extant secret societies.

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## SECRETS OF THE NAASSENES

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### Legendary Sect of Gnostic Christianity

The Naassenes were a sect of Gnostic Christians known primarily through the writings of the theologian Saint Hippolytus of Rome, who described the sect in his seminal third-century-CE book *Refutation of All Heresies*. The Naassenes take their name from the Hebrew word “nashah,” which translates to “serpent,” and the Naassenes used the serpent symbol to represent self-creation.

According to Hippolytus, the Naassenes studied Asian, Greek, Persian, and Roman mysticism, searching for spiritual truths that transcended religious affiliation. The extant teachings and sermons attributed to the Naassenes are generally considered syncretic texts, in that they attempt to merge or compare different schools of mystical thought in an effort to find inclusive, universal principles. Later Christian and Catholic scholars often considered Gnosticism and the teachings of the Naassenes to be an attempt to blend Christianity and the polytheistic traditions of the era into a pantheistic, unified religion.

### Saint Hippolytus of Rome (died ca. 236 CE)

Hippolytus was one of the most important theologians of the third century and was later canonized by the church for his work as a “heresiologist,” or individual who studies Christian heresy, which is defined as beliefs or theories that contradict or oppose Christian doctrine. Heresiologists are typically involved in the refutation of heresies so as to defend the established beliefs of Christianity.

Hippolytus’s seminal work, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, was a collection of ten books that addressed various heretical beliefs. Some of the books have never been recovered, though historians have found references to them in other works. The first of the ten books is called the *Philosophumena*. It contained a record of numerous pagan religious systems considered heretical. Hippolytus’s writings are important to scholars attempting to understand the religious systems of the era and are one of the only sources of knowledge about early Gnostic beliefs.

### Central Beliefs of Naassenes

According to Hippolytus, the Naassenes claimed to follow the teachings of James the Just, a controversial figure believed by some to be the brother of Jesus. Gnostic traditions revolve around a principle of salvation through knowledge, following from the etymology of the word “gnosis,” meaning “knowledge.” This focus

differentiates Gnosticism from other Christian spiritual systems, as the Gnostics believed that knowledge of the mysteries *underlying* the spiritual reality are the key to attaining unity with God. By contrast, mainstream Christian doctrine holds that the mind and soul must be obedient to the supreme power and will attain salvation through faith and “good works.”

Among the fragments of Gnostic texts collected by Hippolytus is a work known as the *Naassene Sermon*, which concerns the origin of man, and the *Psalms of the Naassenes*, which also discusses the nature of creation. According to Naassene tradition, the universe has a threefold nature that manifests in a number of separate, yet interrelated, spiritual trinities. One manifestation of the threefold nature can be expressed in God, Man, and the Son of Man, together constituting the most basic divine trinity. The Naassenes distinguished between an unknowable God and a “demiurge,” or “creative god,” responsible for the formation of all matter. Therefore, the Naassenes recognized the “Son,” whom they called “Adamas,” as a self-generated being standing midway between God and matter. The Son is also called a “serpent” who is perpetually in a state of moving toward God (the Father) and moving (creating) matter (the world and the sons of man).

Another manifestation of the threefold philosophy can be seen in the three classes of men on earth, as developed by the theologian Valentinus. The material class, also called the “bound” or “hylics,” consists of those individuals who are mired in the material world and cannot attain salvation. The psychic class, also known as the “called,” consists of individuals who can attain salvation through the ministry of spiritual leaders and adherence to spiritual principles. Followers of Christianity and Catholicism are often considered to be members of the psychic class. The pneumatics, also called the “spirituals” or “elect,” are individuals born with a “divine spark” and thus guaranteed salvation by their nature.

The Naassenes symbolized the spirit world as a stream of divine influence flowing downward toward the material realm. The Naassenes therefore talk about “reversing the flow” and creating an “upward flowing river” that can make human beings more like God. This philosophy is similar to ideas found in Hindu and Buddhist tradition concerning reversing the flow of energy in the human body, which generally flows from the crown of the head to the feet, to flow in the opposite direction, thereby flowing toward enlightenment. It is possible that Buddhism influenced the views of the Naassenes, as Buddhism was present in the Middle East and Europe in the first century CE as the result of some of the earliest Buddhist migrations from India. The Naassenes believed that only through spiritual realization and effort could humans reverse the natural pull of the material realm and thereby achieve a spiritual awakening in the form of salvation.

## The Secret Sermon

Some modern writings about Gnosticism, including *Gnostic Secrets of the Naassenes* (2004) by Mark Gaffney, have refuted the common approach to Gnosticism, which views Gnostics as heretical sects that historically posed an early challenge to orthodox Christianity through their syncretic approach to spirituality. According to Gaffney's line of reasoning, the *Naassene Sermon*, also called the "hidden sermon," was delivered by Jesus to his followers at the Last Supper and contained the secrets of the inner tradition (sometimes explained as mature spiritual realizations) that Jesus achieved later in his life and just before his death.

This interpretation of the Naassene teachings establishes Gnosticism as a branch of Christianity, and specifically as an inner branch focused on the secret, mystical knowledge at the heart of Christian teachings. The theory that the Naassene teachings can be attributed to Jesus is not supported by the majority of Christian or Gnostic scholars, but it can be seen as part of a new wave of interest in Gnosticism based on the theory that the teachings of Gnosticism represented a lost wisdom that was repressed because it was considered heretical.

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# Islam

Islam is the world's second-largest religion and also one of the fastest-growing religious traditions, eclipsing the growth of Christianity in the 21st century. Islam arose from the confluence of Judeo-Christian spirituality and the traditional practices of Middle Eastern tribal cultures. In Christian-dominant societies, Islam is often unfairly regarded as a more primitive or warlike representation of the Abrahamic religious motif, but this view is largely based on misconceptions and prejudice. As with most religions, Islam is practiced in a variety of ways, from conservative orthodoxy to esoteric mysticism and progressive reinterpretations of the faith.

## Origins and Evolution

Historians trace Islam back to the seventh century CE in Mecca, a city in what is now Saudi Arabia. There, the burgeoning spiritual philosophy of the Judeo-Christian traditions blended with Bedouin tribal practices to create a unique *mélange* of cultural characteristics. The Bedouin were then, and remain, a collection of nomadic tribes. In the period known as the Age of Muhammad, the Bedouin tribes often warred with one another, but they also developed a complex network of intertribal political alliances with specific laws and ethics that are mirrored in the original texts of Islam.

Though Muslims believed that earlier prophets, such as Abraham (called "Ibrahim" in Islam), received revelations from God, Muhammad is the final prophet (called the "Seal of the Prophets") in Islamic tradition, who received the complete final revelation from God. According to legend, Muhammad, a former merchant, received this revelation from the angel Jibreel (Gabriel), who appeared to Muhammad in a cave and revealed the truth of Allah. Muhammad continued to have revelatory visions throughout his life, and these revelations, taken together, constitute the text of the Islamic holy book, the Koran.

Muhammad began preaching in Mecca but was forced to migrate to Yathrib, an area north of Mecca that became Medina, the "city of the Prophet." Muhammad's migration to Medina became known as the "hijrah," and it marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. After Muhammad's death (632 CE), leadership of

the Islamic community transferred to a system of leaders known as caliphs or khalifahs, who were charged with leading according to Muhammad's example. The caliphs transformed Islam into a major global power, capturing territories in North Africa and from the former Byzantine Empire.

The first Islamic civil war (656–661 CE) resulted in the division of Islam into two major sects, Sunni and Shia. The Sunni sect represents the original strain of Islam, with an emphasis on tradition and continuity. The Shiites, by contrast, represent the later evolution of the faith and hold the characteristic belief that Allah communicates through specially chosen guides or teachers, known as imams.

In 680 CE, a powerful coalition known as the Umayyad Caliphates took control of the Islamic world, expanding the influence of their dynasty before internal struggles and the growth of rival factions led to a second civil war (744–750 CE), which saw the end of the Umayyad dynasty and the ascension of the Abbasid Caliphates. The Abbasid period is known as a golden age, as Islam spread broadly around the world and developed vast centers of intellectual, artistic, and literary development. By the eighth century, the Abbasid dynasty controlled parts of the Iberian Peninsula and portions of Asia, including Indonesia, where Muslim communities still live. The caliph system ended in 1258, when Mongolian armies captured Baghdad on their way to Europe.

Islam survived the Mongol period and continued to thrive in some parts of the world, eventually forming the Ottoman Empire in the 1450s, which became a major global power. Though Islamic forces lost the Iberian Peninsula to Christian invaders in 1492, the Mughal Empire formed soon afterward in 1526, bringing much of the Indian subcontinent under Islamic control. The 19th century brought about the end of the major Islamic political powers. The Mughal dynasty fell in the 1800s, weakened by a revolution led by the Indian Sikhs and finally collapsing under the British invasion of India. The Ottoman Empire suffered from political and economic instability during the later decades of the 1800s and again fell to allied forces after aligning with Germany during World War I.

### **Racist Genealogy**

For centuries, it was believed that the darker skin color of populations in Spain, Portugal, and Italy resulted from interbreeding with Moors, who were often seen as "Black" or "Arab" in ethnicity. Subsequent investigations indicate that Arab and African genetic influence is limited in Europe and that the darker skin of certain populations results from genetic adjustment to higher levels of ambient sunlight.

While Islam remains one of the world's most popular faiths, the political hold of Islam has remained relatively limited in the 20th and 21st centuries, and Islamic majorities have become concentrated in the Middle East, where the cultural and religious traditions first developed.

## Islamic Beliefs

Islam is a monotheistic faith, defined by the belief in a single god called "Allah" in Islam. Islamic law places a strong emphasis on avoiding idolatry, or the worship of entities other than Allah. The Koran is the most important of the Islamic holy texts as it recounts the revelations delivered to Muhammad through Allah's messengers. The Hadith, a scholarly account of Muhammad's life, is another text central to Islamic beliefs and serves as one of the sources of sharia, or Islamic law, a set of guidelines for living according to the principles established by Allah and Muhammad.

Islamic tradition views Allah as a being of unimaginable complexity and strictly prohibits any physical depiction of Allah. In addition, Islam rejects the Christian concept of the Trinity and believes instead that Allah is indivisible. Islam teaches that there are nonphysical souls that continue to exist after death and that the souls of righteous, faithful humans may be rewarded with deliverance to a celestial paradise. The Koran mentions a Day of Reckoning, which is expected to be the final day of life on Earth. At this time, the souls of those who have failed to observe Allah's laws will be punished in hell, and the remaining righteous will be taken to heaven.

One variation of the Islamic faith that is popular in the west is the Nation of Islam, a new religious movement that began in Detroit, Michigan, in the 1930s. The Nation of Islam combines traditional Islamic practice with radical black-empowerment philosophy and elements of other New Age spiritual practices. For instance, the Nation of Islam currently supports using the Dianetics system that is also used by Scientology, an organization formed on pseudo-spiritual principles that exploits followers for profit. Because of its alterations of Islamic law and acceptance of other mystical theories, some Islamic organizations do not recognize the legitimacy of the Nation of Islam.

Followers of Islam place a significant emphasis on law and ethics. Sharia derives from the Koran and the Sunnah, which describes the practices of Muhammad recorded in the Hadith and elsewhere. However, Muhammad's example and teachings indicate that Islam must also look elsewhere for sources of sharia, including the consensus of the community (Ijma), public interest, and reason. The debate over acceptable sources of law has become a major rift in Islam, dividing the faith into relatively conservative scripturalist factions and those that favor more liberal interpretations of Scripture.

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## ISMAILI ASSASSINS

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### Political Murder in Ancient Islam

The term “Ismaili Assassins” is sometimes used to refer to a sect of Shia Islam, also known as the “Nizari Ismailis,” that arose in the 9th century CE and held considerable influence in the Islamic world from the 11th to the 13th centuries. During the Crusades, European knights and travelers who had contact with Islamic cultures of the era spread stories of the Ismaili “Hashshashin” throughout Europe. It was widely rumored at the time that the soldiers of the Nizari Ismailis used secretive tactics to murder political rivals, thus the term “Hashshashin” became the origin of the English word “assassin.”

Historians believe that rumors surrounding the Nizari Ismaili’s assassinations were greatly exaggerated, but the group left a lasting mark on the Western imagination and has become the source of many theories regarding the existence of secret Islamic societies. Some have speculated that the Ismaili Assassins still exist, having passed down their traditions to a modern generation of followers still seeking to erect a powerful Ismaili kingdom.

### History of the Nizari Ismailis

The Ismailis became a distinct branch of the Shias sometime in the ninth century. As in the historic split between the Shia and the Sunni, the issue that caused the Ismailis to break away from the Shia concerned the succession of imams representing the lineage of Muhammad. Specifically, the two groups disagreed about the appointment of the eighth imam in the line, with the Shia supporting Musa, while the Ismailis supported Musa’s brother Ismail, from whom the name of the sect is derived. The Shia objected to the rule of the Abbasid Caliphs, who were favored by the Sunni sect.

In 909, the Ismaili leader Ubaydulla captured part of North Africa, where he founded the Fatimid dynasty, claiming to be a descendant of Ali and Fatima (Muhammad’s daughter), and thus a rightful caliph of the Muhammadian lineage. The Fatimid dynasty continued to grow over the next century. In 969, the Fatimids captured Egypt and made it their capital, stretching along a large portion of North Africa. Here, the Fatimids founded the city known as Al Kahira, later called

“Cairo” in the English language. In 970, the Fatimids established the University Mosque in Cairo, which became the leading center of Islamic education.

At the height of the Fatimid dynasty, the kingdom ruled over much of the Mediterranean, including the coast of Italy. As the Fatimid kingdom grew, the Ismaili sect began to splinter into several oppositional groups. During the Second and Third Crusades, together spanning from 1147 to 1192, the fortunes of the Fatimid dynasty turned as Sunni leaders united to mount a collective resistance to the encroaching Christian armies. Saladin, the son of Sunni leader Ayub, then governor of Damascus, deposed the last of the Fatimid leaders in Egypt in 1171, establishing the Ayubid dynasty, while the larger Muslim Empire came under control of the Abbasid Caliphs. The Nizari Ismailis fled Egypt and captured territory in northern Persia, where they declared themselves independent and opposed Abbasid Caliph rule.

### **Legend of the Ismaili Assassins**

It is in the 13th century that the line between history and legend regarding the Ismaili sect begins to blur. Because they opposed the Abbasid Caliphs and were competitors for control of the Muslim world, the Nizari Ismailis were hated by other Muslim groups, and rumors about the sect became widespread. It has been difficult for historians to disentangle myth from reality, and many of the historical texts regarding the period may have been heavily influenced by anti-Nizari or anti-Islamic propaganda.

In their efforts to capture territory, the Nizari Ismailis utilized tactics that were common at the time, including what is now called “political assassination” of rival political leaders. The Nizari Ismailis reportedly used assassination to help capture the fortress of Almut in Persia, which had been thought immune to any direct military attack. The Nizari Ismaili soldiers, known as “fida’i,” a name derived from the Arabic term for “sacrifice” and used to refer to one who will give his or her life for a cause. According to some historical accounts, the fida’i were responsible for a number of prominent assassinations during the period, and they twice engaged in failed attempts to assassinate the Abbasid caliph, Saladin.

A less biased look at the history of the period indicates that all of the warring armies, including the Christian Crusaders, utilized the services of assassins and engaged in political killings. It is perhaps because the Nizari Ismailis were opposed by virtually all the other groups of the era that they came to be the scapegoat for many of these deeds and a symbol of assassination in general. Historians have noted that it appears the Nizari Ismailis were comparatively zealous in their execution of military strategy than many of their competitors, and, for this reason, they have often been compared to modern radical terrorist groups.



## Legends Regarding the Nizari Ismailis

Much of the folklore surrounding the Nizari sect regards the ways in which the sect's soldiers were trained. In Europe, it was rumored that the fida'is were kept cloistered in a secret training grounds and fed hashish in a bizarre ritual intended to make the assassins more vicious. In Marco Polo's history of the era, he wrote of fida'is' being taken to a secret garden and told it was the paradise described in the Koran. Historians have begun to dispel many of these legends in favor of a more realistic depiction of the sect. After the fall of the Fatimid dynasty, Crusading Europeans, Sunnis, and even other Shia Muslims despised the Nizari Ismailis, and, as a result, any murder or heinous act might be blamed on the Nizaris, whether or not there was truth in the accusation.

The Nizari Ismaili sect is still active in parts of Syria, Pakistan, India, Iran, and several other countries. Some in the Nizari Ismaili sect still claim to be descendants of Nizar, one of the Fatimid Caliphs believed to be a descendent of Ali and Ismail. The fact that the Nizari sect still exists has only fueled the continuation of rumors that they constitute an extant secret society. Some have even suggested that the Nizari Ismailis still have possession of secret texts from the University Mosque in Cairo that were taken before Cairo fell to Sunni armies and perhaps also have hidden treasures from this period, including art and caches of gold. It has been suggested by some radical conspiracy theorists that the Nizari Ismailis invented terrorism as it has become known today and were the first to use terrorist tactics against their enemies. Legitimate historians have argued that there is no historic precedent for this belief and assert that this, like many of the other anti-Nizari legends, are representative of the broad anti-Islamic sentiment that rapidly spread through the West after the Crusades.

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## RUB-EL-HIZB

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### Geometric Symbolism

The Islamic rub-el-hizb symbol is essentially an Islamic version of the eight-pointed star found in many different spiritual traditions. The Islamic version consists of two overlapping, offset squares forming a geometric figure with eight points. The most familiar use of the symbol is within the Koran, where the rub-el-hizb is used to divide the text into passages. The term "rub-el-hizb" is from the

Arabic term meaning “divided into quarters.” Other eight-pointed designs, known in geometry as “octagrams,” also appear in Islamic art and architecture.

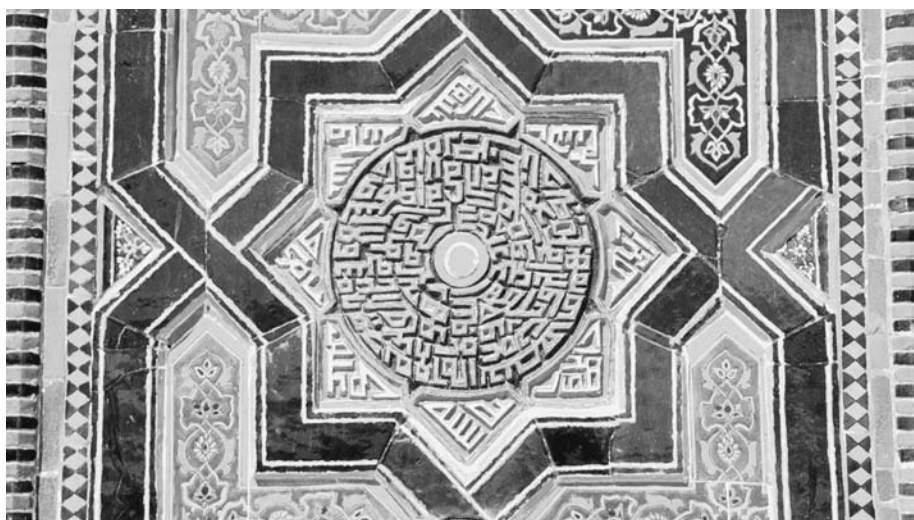
## Andalusian Symbol

Andalusia (also Andalucía) is a region of Spain located at the southern end of the Iberian Peninsula. Today, it is considered the largest of the autonomous territories of Spain, and it is the most populous region of the country, containing the major cities of Seville and Granada. The name “Andalusia” derives from the Arabic name for the region, “Al-Andalus,” which was used by the Umayyad Empire after the conquest of the southern Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century CE.

Andalusia sits along the Strait of Gibraltar, a narrow seaway that divides Europe from the North African country of Morocco and its capital city of Casablanca. Historically, this 7.7-nautical-mile stretch of ocean has been one of the primary routes for cross-continental travel between Europe and Africa, and both Andalusia and Morocco have come to reflect a blending of European and African cultural characteristics.

The eight-pointed star has been called the unofficial symbol of Andalusia because of the many buildings and architectural elements in the region that are decorated with versions of this ancient symbol. Some archaeologists have noted that the eight-pointed star was part of Spanish architecture before the Muslim period and consider it an early solar symbol of unknown origin. A few historians have suggested that the eight-pointed star was a symbol of Tartessos, an ancient civilization that existed in Andalusia from approximately the 11th to the 6th centuries BCE. Gold and other precious objects found among Tartessian remains indicate that the culture was rich in resources and artistic expression. The ultimate fate of Tartessos is unknown, and some have speculated that Tartessos is the same as the wealthy culture of Tarshish mentioned in the Bible. Other more sensationalized accounts have speculated that Tartessos was the legendary city of Atlantis. These speculations, while perhaps romantic, have not been confirmed by archaeological evidence.

In 712, following the Umayyad conquest of Andalusia, the eight-pointed star symbol was printed on coins representing the autonomous region. From this point, the star motifs already present in Andalusia were co-opted by Islamic artists and architects, and the eight-pointed figure became a popular motif in Moorish Islamic architecture. The eight-pointed motif is also common in Umayyad architecture in Jerusalem, especially in the Dome of the Rock, an Umayyad shrine that is built in the shape of an octagon. The eight-pointed star shape is incorporated into many aspects of the dome, reflecting the widespread decorative use of this symbol within the empire.



A rub-el-hizb, or eight-pointed star motif found in decorations on the Usto Ali Neseft Mausoleum in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. (Robas Broek/iStockphoto.com)

## Islamic Geometric Art

According to the Hadith, an Islamic holy scripture believed to record the direct teachings of Muhammad, Islam forbids artists from creating depictions of humans or even nonhuman animals. This prohibition is especially stringent with regard to the depiction of Allah, Muhammad, and other important spiritual icons. This facet of Islam played a major role in influencing the development of artistic traditions and led to a proliferation of art based on three elements: calligraphy, vegetal patterns, and geometric designs.

During the Umayyad Empire's rule of Iberia, which lasted from 711 to 1492 CE, Islamic artists created a wealth of artistic and architectural monuments using repeated geometric designs. A prime example of this theme can be seen in the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain, an Islamic building known for its beautiful decorative tiles that feature complex geometric designs. Art historians note that the designs were based on Euclidian geometry and created from a combination of simple polygons.

Islamic artists developed geometric art to a high level of sophistication, producing intricate designs that were imbued with multiple layers of spiritual meaning. In general, the use of geometric patterns symbolized precision and harmony and therefore was seen as a representation of the complex mathematical perfection characteristic of Allah and the underlying the universe. The designs also represent the natural order and the concept that Allah has created the universe so that every being and every object has a distinct place and role in the overall order of

the cosmos. Islamic artists sometimes purposefully introduced “errors” into their designs to represent the fallibility of the human mind and the idea that only Allah can create perfection.

The eight-pointed star, whether used as a pointed octagram or in the rub-el-hizb design, is one of the common motifs in Islamic geometric art and may therefore have similar symbolic associations with divine order and perfection. Both the rub-el-hizb and other Islamic octagrams are not primarily spiritual symbols by design, but represent the confluence of art and architecture as reflected and influenced by spiritual traditions in Islamic history. Today, these motifs remain in parts of the world once controlled by Islamic empires, representing a lasting trace of the history of Islam.

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## SHAHADATAIN

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### Proclamation of Belief

“Shahadatain” is an Arabic term meaning “two acknowledgements” or “two acts of bearing witness,” which represents faith and devotion to the single God of Islam, Allah. The word is a plural form of the term “shahada,” meaning “testimony” or “acknowledgement.” Calligraphic representations of the Arabic shahadatain have become common symbols in Islam, having been inscribed on buildings and Islamic artistic representations for hundreds of years.

### Meaning of the Shahadatain

The Arabic shahadatain can be written in the Roman alphabet as

*Ashhadu an la illaha illal’lah.*

I testify that there is no deity worthy of worship other than Allah.

*Ashhadu anna Muhammadar Rasulullah.*

I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.

The first shahada represents the Islamic belief that there is a single God, called Allah, and that there are no other gods and no other icons worthy of worship.

Muslims recognize that some other faiths allow the worship of intermediary spirits, which may be minor gods or prophets. The first shahada represents Islam's rejection of this idea, declaring that any and all worship must be directed solely at Allah and that any social or societal aspect that detracts from the worship of Allah should be avoided.

The second shahada states that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah, but it is usually also interpreted to mean that the follower swears to obey the rules, principles, and prohibitions attributed to Muhammad. The distinction between "prophet" and "messenger" is important in Islam. Many of the figures of the Old Testament, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jonah, Jacob, Adam, and Micah, are considered prophets in that they were given a divine purpose to remind humanity of its duty to Allah. A smaller number of individuals are messengers, in that they brought to Earth a message directly from Allah. Moses brought the Torah, Jesus brought the Gospel, and Muhammad brought the Koran. The second shahada therefore also acknowledges the truth of the Koran because it symbolizes the idea that Allah delivered this sacred text to humanity through Muhammad.

The shahadain are foundational and fundamental to Islamic beliefs, and it is believed that an individual can convert to Islam simply by embracing and stating the shahadain from a position of deep commitment. Muslims acknowledge that their faith overlaps with Judaism and Christianity and that the sacred books and scriptures of those faiths also represent the work of God on Earth. The belief in the Koran and Muhammad's role as a messenger of God is the central element that sets Islam apart from the other Abrahamic faiths. The shahadain, therefore, is a declaration of separation from the other Abrahamic traditions and an acknowledgement of unique faith in Islam.

The image of the shahadain also serves as one of Islam's most important symbolic representations because Islam prohibits the depiction of Allah and of human and animal figures in religious iconography. This prohibition has resulted in a proliferation of noniconographic representations in Islamic symbolism, such as geometric shapes, floral or vegetal figures, and calligraphy. The shahadain image is an example of calligraphic symbolism in Islam; it uses highly stylized Arabic letters to form a complex design. The shahadain emblem can be found on many Islamic architectural and artistic artifacts from the classical period, and the symbol is still widely used in Islam.

## The Five Pillars of Islam

The Five Pillars of Islam are the five principles that underlie the Muslim faith, known as "arkan" in Arabic, and they are also a guide to the practice of Islam, providing a set of goals that together constitute the appropriate way to live one's life in dedication to Allah. Shahada is the first pillar and the most basic principle of

Muslim life and worship. The shahada may be said at any time, and Muslims are encouraged to repeat this aspect of their faith whenever possible.

The second pillar is salah, or “prayer,” and involves five daily prayers that are said at specific points in the day. The five prayers are fajr (said before sunrise), zuhr (said after midday), asr (said in the afternoon), maghrib (said after sunset), and isha (said during the night before midnight). Each of the prayers has a standard set of actions, called a “rak’ah,” which must be completed while reciting the prayer. The rak’ahs include sequences of standing, bowing, prostrating, and sitting, and each of the daily prayers has a certain number of rak’ahs that must be performed to accompany the prayer.

The third pillar, zakah, is the pillar of charity and involves giving a certain percentage of one’s salary to the poor and needy. Many Muslims donate money at the end of the central holiday of Ramadan, but they may give at any time of the year as well. Only individuals earning enough to set aside savings are required to commit zakah and then 2.5 percent of one’s savings is the expected gift. Many Muslims choose to donate money to poor international communities around that world, and this is seen as a demonstration of the unity of the Islamic community worldwide.

The fourth pillar, sawm, involves fasting during the daylight hours for the month of Ramadan, the holiest month in the Islamic calendar. This fasting symbolizes the period when Muhammad went into the wilderness to meditate. Only adult Muslims are required to observe sawm, and pregnant or menstruating women, the elderly, and other individuals who cannot safely fast are exempt from observance. Parents are encouraged to introduce their children to sawm by having the children give up certain foods for a portion of the day. Sawm not only involves refraining from food, it also entails a spiritual fasting, which includes avoiding sexual intercourse. Observing sawm is also intended to serve as a reminder of one’s faith and devotion to Allah and to help Muslims identify with those who experience hunger.

The fifth pillar, hajj, involves the pilgrimage to Mecca (a city in the Hejaz region of Saudi Arabia) that takes place once per year. Hajj occurs in the 12th month of the Islamic calendar, Dhul-Hijjah, over a period of five to six days. During hajj, thousands of Muslims travel to Mecca, which is believed to have been Muhammad’s birthplace and the site where Muhammad received his first revelation from Allah, which ultimately resulted in the Koran. All able Muslims, meaning those with sufficient economic resources and without hardships that would prevent the journey, are required to undertake the pilgrimage at least once during their adult lives. There are a variety of specific ceremonies that accompany parts of the hajj and are also considered essential to the proper observance of the tradition.

The Five Pillars are named for the architectural elements that support a building because these basic principles and activities are seen as the structure of Islam. While the Muslim faith involves many types of worship and ceremony,

the Five Pillars are essential and basic to the faith, supporting all higher-order manifestations.

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## STAR AND CRESCENT

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### Symbol of Political Islam

Throughout most of the world, the star and crescent moon symbol has become the most recognizable and widespread emblem of Islam. Historians are currently uncertain how the symbol originally became associated with Islam, and the discovery of architectural and artistic relics indicate that the symbol derived from ancient mystical, celestial symbolism that predates the birth of the faith. While the star and crescent *together* may not be of purely Islamic origin, evidence suggests that Muslims used the crescent moon symbol for many centuries before combining it with the star. There is no universally accepted Islamic meaning to the star and crescent symbol, but it has been widely used as a political icon by Islamic leaders.



The star and crescent, an ancient symbol with astronomical origins, became a popular symbol of political and military organization before it was adopted as the most common representation of the Islamic faith.

### Pagan Origins

The star and crescent may initially have been inspired by the conjunction of the crescent moon and the planet Venus (one of the brightest objects in the sky), which is a rare but highly visible phenomenon, even in areas where ambient light obscures most of the stars. Ancient petroglyphs (rock paintings) indicate that cultures around the world imbued the moon-Venus confluence as a significant and perhaps spiritual phenomenon early in prehistory. The introduction of the star and crescent

symbol in Islam likely came by way of the animist tribal societies in Central Asia and Siberia, who predated Islam by several thousand years.

Some historians have suggested that the star and crescent entered Islam through Persia, where it was the chosen symbol of an ancient moon goddess cult. Evidence also suggests that the symbol was associated with the kingdom of Pontus, a Persian dynasty of Greek and Persian origin that existed from 281 to 63 BCE. The crescent and star may also have been associated with the cults of Mithras, syncretic Roman religions inspired by Persian spirituality.

Archaeologists have found the star and crescent symbol on stamped coins from the ancient Greek city of Byzantium (present-day Istanbul), dating to around 341 BCE. This symbol may have been used to represent the goddess Hecate, often associated with the moon, who was one of the patron goddesses of Byzantium. According to legend, Hecate intervened when Macedonians attacked Byzantium, revealing the approaching enemy by exposing the crescent moon, and this led to the adoption of the moon symbol to represent the city. Historians have also suggested that the crescent moon might have been a symbol of the Greek goddess Diana, who was worshipped as a moon goddess in certain cultic societies.

The star and crescent symbol does not appear in Islamic art or architecture from the early Middle Ages, and most historians believe that the symbol was not associated with Islam during this period. During Muhammad's life (570–632 CE) and throughout the reign of the first several generations of Islamic rulers, Islamic groups used solid-colored flags, usually in black, green, or white, to represent their adherence to Islam. Each sect or subset of Islam utilized certain colors and a variety of other symbols to represent their membership.

The star and crescent symbol is also absent from Islamic artifacts during the Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE), when many of the now famous Islamic monuments were built throughout the Middle East and Islamic-occupied Europe. In 1453, the Ottoman Empire, an Islamic empire originating from present-day Turkey, captured Byzantium, which was then called Constantinople. Some historians believe that this was the origin of the Islamic use of the star and crescent, speculating that the capturing Ottomans continued using the symbolism associated with Constantinople after the city's capture.

During the late Crusades and the Ottoman-Hungarian Wars, Islamic armies began using the star and crescent as a counterpoint to the cross emblem used by invading Christian armies. At this point, the star and crescent became a symbol of political and nationalistic Islam more than as a representation of the Islamic faith. A number of predominantly Islamic nations use or have used the star and crescent as a national emblem, including Turkey, Libya, Tunisia, and the Asian nation of Malaysia.



### Ancient Astronomy

Historians have speculated that miraculous celestial events described in ancient religious texts may have resulted from sightings of eclipses and comets before these phenomena were understood. A clay tablet found in the city of Ugarit, Syria, records the earliest known solar eclipse, which occurred on March 5, 1223.

## Acceptance and Symbolism

Celestial phenomena, including eclipses, lunar cycles, supernovas, and the movement of stars and planets, have inspired spiritual cosmology and symbolism around the world. In the prehistoric era, the light from the moon and stars allowed early humans to navigate the nocturnal environment and to detect approaching predators and other potential dangers. The comforting light of the moon and stars might have been reimagined through the millennia as the protective influence of divine powers or deities watching over the earth. Islam evolved within the desert cultures and nomadic tribes of the Middle East, which were still intimately linked to their natural environments, and early Islam may therefore have absorbed some elements of these earlier strains of celestial symbolism. Amid the nearly featureless desert plains of Arabia, the stars and moon were also essential for navigation, and this may have been another inspiration for lunar and stellar symbolism in Islam and other desert cultures.

Though the star and crescent emblem is one of the most widespread symbols of Islam, not all Muslims embrace the symbol. Some see the image as having pagan or foreign influences and believe that Muslims should only utilize symbols that originated within Islam. While this distinction is important to some, most spiritual symbols were inspired by or adopted from earlier cultures, and this process appears to be a relatively common pattern in the evolution of symbolism. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for military and political groups to adopt and adapt ancient symbols that once had purely spiritual meaning, partly because so many conflicts throughout world history have been at least partially inspired by the clashing of different religious beliefs.

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## SUFISM

### Islamic Mysticism

Sufism, known as “Tasawouf” in Arabic, is a subdiscipline of Islam that emerged in the late 7th or early 8th century CE and has played a major role in the development and spread of Islam. Adherents of Sufism place emphasis on personal, private worship and the direct experience of God (Allah), and they generally reject the importance of physical pleasures and personal property and wealth. Some writers and theologians have called Sufism the “inner path” of Islam, as contrasted with the mainstream modes of study, which are seen as more external in their focus. Prominent Sufi teachers such as Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207–1273) and theologian Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) are respected and often studied in Western philosophy and theology.

Followers of Sufism express their faith in a variety of ways, from those who study Islam as wandering ascetics to the ecstatic dances of the whirling dervishes whose characteristic spinning has become famous around the world. Within Islam and in the West, the Sufis are sometimes believed to have knowledge of esoteric spiritual secrets or even magical abilities because of their immersion in the meditative study of the universe. This perception has made Sufism a popular focus for those interested in New Age, pseudo-religious spirituality from the 1960s through the 21st century.

### History of Sufism

Scholars and historians have debated the origin of the terms “Sufism” and “Tasawouf.” Some have suggested that “Sufi” may have derived from “sufateh,” which refers to a thin plant, in reference to the physical frailty of the early Sufis because of their fasting. Others have suggested that the term may have been influenced by the Greek word “soph,” meaning “wisdom” or “knowledge.” A majority of Western authors writing on the subject have held that “Sufi” is a derivative of the Arabic term for wool, “suf,” and that it refers to the simple woolen robes and garments that the early ascetic Sufis preferred as part of their vow of poverty and disinterest in possessions.

The earliest forms of Sufism are believed to have emerged during the Umayyad dynasty, which lasted from 661 to 749 CE, less than a century after the founding of Islam. The Rashidun conquests, during which Islam extended its control into Jerusalem, Egypt, and Syria, brought a large number of Christians and representatives of other religious traditions under Islamic rule. It is believed that the early Sufis absorbed and imitated elements of the mystical spiritual traditions displayed by cults in Syria, Jerusalem, and Egypt.

From the inception of the Sufi tradition, followers believed that it was possible, through meditation, inner reflection, and deep commitment, for an individual to have a profound, personal experience with God. Many Sufis believe that the seventh chapter of the Koran describes the prophet Muhammad having a profound mystical revelation during his “night journey” from Mecca to Jerusalem. The earliest followers of Sufi principles were sometimes treated as outcasts and shunned by those who followed the more mainstream tenets of the faith.

During the period of “classical Sufism,” during the 9th and 10th centuries, the discipline shifted toward a different set of beliefs. Over the years, Sufism came to embody love as a central focus and a metaphor for one’s relationship with God. Rabi’a al-Addawyya (713–801) was a Sufi woman credited with introducing the idea that one should act always and only from love for God, rather than out of fear or hope for reward. Over the centuries, Sufism remained accepting of women as prominent scholars and teachers in the faith, a fact that sometimes clashed with the more patriarchic hierarchy of orthodox Islam.

The 13th century was the height of Sufism’s prominence. Following the flowering of Islamic art and philosophy during the classical period, Sufis began expressing their faith and devotion through poetry, and this innovative artistic movement brought Sufism to the world stage. Sufi philosophers and poets such as Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207–1273) of Persia and Najmuddin Kubra (1145–1220) of Egypt became the primary voices in the discipline and helped to popularize Sufi ideas throughout the broader framework of Islam. Romantic Sufi poetry was also the path through which Sufism became known and respected throughout the world for the artistic and philosophical inventiveness of the movement’s leading artists.

## Beliefs and Practices

All Sufi beliefs are centered on the principles contained within the Koran, though the Sufi differ from orthodox Islam in their focus on various esoteric ways of becoming closer to their faith. Sufis share with other Muslims a focus on *tawakkul*, often translated as an “absolute trust in God,” and in the principles of the *sharia*, or “holy law” of the Koran. Sufism has a strong tendency toward pacifism, and followers have often opposed military and violent action within Islam. As mentioned, Sufism also accepts women as spiritual leaders, and this sets the discipline apart from some orthodox strains of the faith.

The expression of Sufism varies widely between different schools, called “*Tariqas*.” Some practices are common among many of the schools, including participation in various forms of charity and public service. Within some *Tariqas*, Sufis engage in practices aimed at facilitating the ecstatic experience of God. One such practice, known as the “*dhikr*,” involves the repeated chanting of one

of the names of God. Sufis may chant for hours on end in an effort to bring themselves closer to God by producing an intense awareness of God's presence. Some Sufis use a tasbeih, a set of prayer beads generally called an "Islamic rosary," for this ritual, which helps them to count the hundreds or thousands of repetitions of a specific chant. Like other sects of Islam, Sufis also follow many standard principles of Muslim practice, including observing the Five Pillars of Islam.

Another practice common to many Sufis is to engage in meditative prayer accompanied by music or poetry. These mystical poetic and musical meetings, called "sama," emerged in the ninth century, and the ritual is still practiced within some Sufi Tariqas. Historians have noted that some Sufi groups occasionally used narcotics to enhance their immersion during the sama, but this practice is not generally accepted among the majority of Sufis and is sometimes considered a perversion of their more legitimate methods.

In some Sufi sects, individuals engaged in dance as an expression of their ecstatic spiritual experience. The famous Sufi teacher Rumi founded an order of Sufism known as the "Mevlevi" that practice a unique spinning dance to accompany their sama. The spinning dance of the Mevlevi's gave rise to their nickname, "the whirling dervishes." Participants in the Mevlevi sama, known as "samazens," spin around with their hands held aloft. As they spin, they are seen as representing the moon, and they rotate around a central leader who represents the sun.

The Mevlevi dervishes wear unique clothing, including tall camel-hair hats and traditional white robes, though other colors are sometimes worn for performances. The hat is meant as a symbol of the ego, while the cloak represents the shroud of the ego. The entire ritual of the Mevlevi sama is meant to bring about an emotional and ecstatic experience of closeness with God, as the samazen's spinning dance symbolizes the individual's journey to transcend ego and arrive at perfection.



The Whirling Dervish Festival held each December in Konya, Turkey, honors Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, the 13th-century poet and Islamic philosopher who founded the Mevlevi Order of Whirling Dervishes. (Corel)

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## WOMEN IN ISLAM

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### Femininity in a Patriarchic Faith

The status and treatment of women in Islam has become one of the most controversial aspects of the faith in Europe and the Americas, resulting both from the disparate concepts of womanhood in Islam and Christianity and conflict between traditional Islamic familial roles and the tenets of Western feminism. Islamic scripture holds that women and men are equal before Allah but that each has a different role to play in both religion and society. Various Islamic societies have developed different ways of approaching gender roles, including through laws, social customs, and the interpretation of gender-based norms in scripture.

### Reform and Scripture

The culture of pre-Islamic Arabia was highly restrictive with regard to gender roles, and the arrival of Islam in the seventh century CE significantly increased the freedoms afforded to women. Islamic law prohibited many female-targeted practices common in the pre-Islamic pagan culture of Arabia, including killing unwanted female children and denying women the right to hold public office, serve as spiritual leaders, or own property. Under Islamic law, women were given property rights, the right to marry *and* divorce, and the sacred right to receive an education. Women were allowed to serve in political office and in the leadership of the Islamic clergy, and Islam opened many occupations to women that had previously been forbidden.

The roles of women in Islamic societies are distinct from the roles of women in the religion of Islam. The Koran and Hadith (Islam's unique sacred scriptures) were written during a period when most of the world's cultures were patriarchal societies, and the roles of women were sharply constrained. In many societies, women were treated like property and could be traded like other types of resources. Women often had no property or inheritance rights, and spousal abuse was customary and ingrained in the culture.

The Old Testament, New Testament, and Koran all contain passages that can be interpreted to support the superiority of the male and the duty of the female to obey her husband and male family members. However, all three holy books also grant women sacred rights and a degree of freedom that was progressive for the periods in which they were written. Passages in the Koran saying that men are the “overseers” and a “degree above” women have been used to maintain oppressive hierarchical social systems that curtail the rights of women, but these customs do not generally derive from Islam. Rather, they are part of older customs that were integrated into Islam.

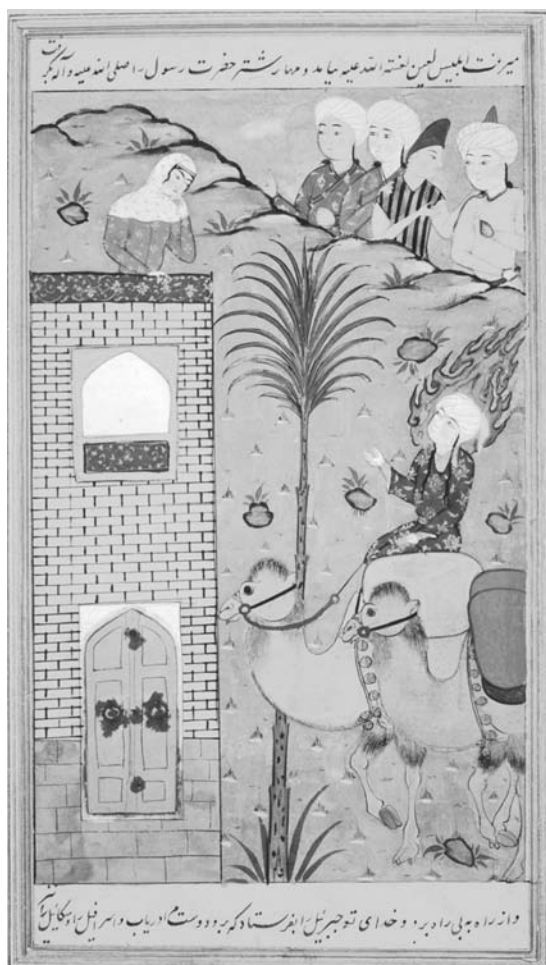
The Old and New Testaments can and have also been used as justification of misogynistic practices in predominantly Christian cultures. One example is found in the phenomenon of “honor killings,” which are today most common in Islamic societies. They involve cases where members of a family have killed female relatives for violating cultural mores. Critics of Islam have claimed that honor killing represents the oppressive attitude of Islam toward women, but the Koran explicitly forbids killing a woman for adultery or immoral behavior. The roots of honor killings in Middle Eastern culture can be traced to ancient Assyria (2400 to 500 BCE) and the Code of Assura or even to the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which condone the execution of adulterers.

Similarly, female genital mutilation, practiced predominantly in Islamic cultures, is not mentioned in the Koran and not sanctioned by Islamic law. It is a holdover from pre-Islamic traditions in North Africa, parts of Asia, and the Middle East. Genital mutilation is the result of an ancient belief that removing the temptation of sexual pleasure from a woman will enhance the woman’s fidelity. In many cultures, mothers or grandmothers are the ones who “circumcise” their daughters, hoping to prevent young women from succumbing to impure or immoral desires. While Islamic cultures have integrated this custom, it is not derived directly from Islamic teachings.

## **Barriers of Modesty**

The Koran contains passages holding that women should “not display their beauty except to their husbands,” by “drawing a veil over their bosoms.” Early Islam was a religion of chastity and modesty, and both men and women were supposed to dress conservatively and take measures to avoid such immoral sexual behavior as extramarital sex. These conventions developed into the belief that it was improper for women to display themselves in public and led to the establishment of a dress code for Muslim women.

The Arabic term “hijab,” meaning “barrier,” is the general term for the cloth coverings that Islamic women wear to cover their bodies. It is similar to a scarf



Muhammad on his camel visits his future bride, Khadija. Persian miniature in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France. (Snark/Art Resource, NY)

that covers the head and neck but not the face. Islamic scripture is not specific on how the body should be hidden, and various interpretations have resulted in a number of different body coverings worn by Islamic women. While the hijab is considered obligatory in a majority of Islamic societies, in some cultures, such as Egypt, wearing the hijab is optional, and laws have been established to prevent women from being forced to adopt the custom. Some Islamic scholars have argued that references in the Koran to “veils” and “covering” the body could be interpreted as metaphor, and this has been used as justification for abandoning the practice in certain Islamic groups.

In a minority of Islamic communities, additional coverings are also required by custom, including a partial veil called a “niqab” that covers the face but has an opening for the eyes. The niqab is most popular in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and among the

Muslim communities in the West, but Islamic scholars differ on whether the niqab should be considered optional or mandatory. The burqa is a full covering that conceals the entire body and face, with a mesh screen that allows the woman to see. Some Islamic sects in Afghanistan, Syria, and Israel require the burqa, though it remains one of the less popular types of covering. Several other types of coverings may be worn by Islamic women, differing according to region, religious sect, and other local customs.

In some Islamic societies, men also cover their heads and sometimes their faces in scarves, especially when in public. The male veil has developed separately in several different cultures, especially among the nomadic tribes of the desert,

where the headscarf also protects the lungs from sand and the skin from environmental hazards. The practical use of body and head coverings in desert environments might have also played a role in early clothing conventions for women, which were later spiritualized within Islam.

Common modern justifications for the Islamic dress codes include preventing women from inspiring sexual feelings in men and protecting women from unwanted sexual attention. Rules for covering the body therefore differ according to a woman's age and sexual maturity, with young girls and women past their sexual age being excused from the custom in some cultures.

Ultimately, women's rights are correlated with the degree to which a culture maintains or discards ancient attitudes about gender roles. In some Islamic societies, such as Egypt or Bangladesh, Islamic philosophy and scripture have been reinterpreted to support modern cultural attitudes toward equal rights and equal standing for women. Similarly, the misogynistic passages in the scriptures of Christianity and Judaism have been ignored or reinterpreted to support women's rights and gender equality in Europe and North America. The oppression of women in many modern Islamic societies may therefore be eliminated through the reinterpretation and modernization of both ancient customs and Islamic scriptures.

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# Baha'i

Baha'i is a monotheistic faith that developed out of the Shia branch of Islam in the 19th century CE. Baha'i developed in Iran, largely through the teacher Siyyid Ali Muhammad, called "the Bab" in Baha'i tradition, who is believed to have conceived the Baha'i faith following a revelation from God. In the 21st century, Baha'i has more than 6 million adherents around the world, with many still living in the Middle East where the faith first developed.

## Origins and Evolution

The Baha'i faith arose out of Babism, a monotheistic cult built around the teachings of the Bab (Siyyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi) in Iran. The Bab is believed to have been a direct descendant of Muhammad, who is considered the final prophet of Islam. The Bab preached that Muhammad was not the final prophet and that God would deliver another messenger, bringing a further revelation. The Bab was executed for heresy in 1850, an event that has become shrouded in legendary accounts within Baha'i. It is said, for instance, that the first firing squad, which included hundreds of guns, somehow failed to hit him, forcing authorities to call a second regiment.

Mizra Husayn Ali (born 1817 in Persia) was one of the Bab's followers, and he was imprisoned for his alleged role in an attempted coup to assassinate the Shah of Persia. While imprisoned, Ali reportedly had a vision, constituting a new revelation from God. The Babists transitioned their allegiance to Ali, who became known as "Baha'u'llah," meaning "Glory of God." Baha'u'llah is considered by followers to be the next manifestation of God, the divine messenger in the tradition of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, as predicted by the Bab.

Baha'u'llah was the son of a wealthy, influential family, and consequently the Islamic authorities were reluctant to execute him. Instead, Baha'u'llah and his family were repeatedly banished, first from Iraq and then from other nations, and they spent years wandering in exile, where Baha'u'llah slowly gathered followers. Baha'u'llah died in 1892. Just before his death, he prophesized that there would not be another legitimate messenger from God for 1,000 years. For this reason, his son, Abdu'l-Baha, who gained the leadership of the faith, was not considered

a messenger of God as his father had been, though some followers still considered him a divine being, as an extension of his father.

Following the death of Abdu'l-Baha, leadership of the faith passed to his grandson Shoghi Effendi, who had received a modern education in Europe. Effendi even married an American woman, who converted to the faith. Though he was considered something of an outsider, Effendi's education and greater global experience helped him to create an administrative system for the Baha'i faith that included the establishment of the Spiritual Assemblies, which are used to govern the international and national bodies of Baha'i. Effendi died without naming a successor and is therefore the final Guardian of the Baha'i faith. In the wake of his death, in 1957, authority over the religion passed directly to the National and Spiritual Assemblies that Effendi worked to create during his life.

### **Baha'i Beliefs**

Baha'i is a monotheistic religion, which is characterized by the belief in a single God. Unlike the personal God characteristic of Christianity, Baha'i characterizes God as an unimaginably complex being whose full nature cannot be understood by humans. Baha'i mirrors Islam in prohibiting the depiction of God and also in the belief that God is not divisible, thereby rejecting the Trinitarian division of God in Christianity.

The Baha'i faith holds that all religions contain some element of truth and that all conceptions of God are based on the same limitless entity. God revealed the truth of his existence through a series of messengers that included the prophets of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, but the Baha'i tradition includes the belief that Baha'u'llah was the most recent prophet to be given a revelatory vision from God. Further, the Baha'is believe, as Baha'u'llah preached, that there will be further messengers from God in the future. This concept of progressive revelation is central to the Baha'i conception of the universe.

Social justice is a major focus of Baha'i ethics, including addressing the wealth gap between the rich and the poor and ensuring that persons of all races, creeds, and genders receive equal treatment. Baha'u'llah's teachings sometimes focused on the goal of unifying mankind in a state of harmony and peace, and this remains one of the stated goals of Baha'i practice. While equality and equal treatment are central to the Baha'i faith, homosexuality and extramarital sex are forbidden. In prayer and social customs, Baha'i bears the closest resemblance to Shia Islam.

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## BAHA'I CALENDAR

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### Redefining Time in Faith

The Baha'i calendar, called the “Badi” or “Wonderful” calendar in Arabic, is a unique calendar system that was developed in the 19th century by the followers of the Baha'i faith. In addition to providing a way to chart the passage of time, the Baha'i calendar is also intended to provide a model for spiritual growth. The Baha'i calendar has been synchronized with the Gregorian calendar, but it begins in the year 1844 CE (called 1 BE in the Baha'i chronology). While not used outside of the Baha'i faith, the Badi calendar is interesting in that it provides an excellent example of the tendency, in religion, to reorganize the concept of time according to spiritual principles and is also one of the few extant examples of unique religious calendars developed in the modern era.

### History of the Badi calendar

The Badi calendar was invented by Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819–1850), one of the founders of the Baha'i faith. In 1844, Shirazi declared himself to be the “Bab,” meaning “gate,” a symbolic expression of his self-proclaimed position as the vehicle for a new faith. Shirazi's Babism movement was extremely controversial throughout Persia, and the religion was quickly outlawed by the ruling Islamic elite. The Badi calendar starts in 1844, the year that Shirazi allegedly received a heavenly mandate to create his religion and is considered the first year of the “Babi Era,” (now called “Baha'i Era” or “BE”). The Bab divided the solar year should into 19 months, each consisting of 19 days, with a number of intercalary days to allow the Badi Calendar to conform to the solar year.

The Bab was executed in 1850, but the faith lingered on until the charismatic teacher Mirza Husayn Ali-Nuri, known to his followers as “Baha'u'llah,” became the next leader of the faith, with believers claiming he was a messenger sent by God. Baha'u'llah reorganized the calendar, establishing the beginning of the year at the vernal equinox, between March 20 and March 22, and reorganizing the intercalary days to make the Badi calendar align with the Gregorian calendar. Baha'u'llah's grandson, Shoghi Effendi, further refined the calendar by establishing sundown on March 21 as the beginning of the year, even if the actual vernal equinox occurs on the day before or after.

### Days and Months of the Badi Calendar

Each month of the Badi calendar is named for one of God's attributes, beginning with Baha (Splendor) and ending in Ala (Loftiness). Between the month of Mulk

(Dominion) and the final month are the intercalary days, known as the “Ayyam-i-Ha” (Days of Ha). Taken as a whole, the calendar represents the quest for spiritual perfection by attempting to live according to each attribute. The numbers “9” and “19” are significant because of the Baha’i numerological system, called the “abjad,” that assigns a numerical value to each letter in the alphabet. The word “vahid,” meaning “unity,” has a numerical value of 19; thus 19 symbolizes “unity with God.” Similarly, the word “baha,” meaning “splendor,” has a numerical equivalent of 9, making 9 another sacred number to Baha’i.

Few Baha’i use the Badi calendar exclusively. Most adhere to the common Gregorian calendar to measure the passage of days, weeks, and months, while using the Badi calendar for the organization of holy days and religious rituals. For instance, the first day of each month in the Badi calendar is supposed to be marked with a feast among the Baha’is of a certain community. Traditionally, the monthly festival is supposed to last for 19 days, a further dedication to the importance of this number in the faith.

## Holy Days and Celebrations

The final month of the Badi calendar, Ala, is the month of fasting for the Baha’is, similar to the Islamic celebration of Ramadan. During this month, Baha’i adherents between 15 and 70 years of age fast from sunrise to sundown and then gather together for a shared meal after sunset. The fast is supposed to be a time to reflect on the past year and to recharge one’s spiritual vitality to prepare for the coming year.

The Baha’i New Year, known as “Naw-Ruz,” coincides with the spring equinox and is related to an ancient Persian celebration of spring. Faithful Baha’is are prohibited from working on Naw-Ruz and begin the celebration at sundown on March 20, generally by gathering for prayers with family or members of the community, followed by a communal meal. The Naw-Ruz celebration ends on sundown on March 21, which is the beginning of the new year of the Badi calendar.

On the third Sunday of January, the Baha’is celebrate World Religion Day, a holiday established in 1950 by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is in the United States. The celebration honors the Baha’i belief that all religions ultimately seek the same goals: to promote unity, bring about peace, and ease suffering. Baha’is gather together on World Religion Day to share prayers and have a communal meal. Characteristic prayers from the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Book of Laws) are usually read at World Religion Day celebrations, focusing on those that call for unity and solidarity among believers from different faiths and traditions.

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## NINE-POINTED STAR

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### Ninefold Concepts of the Divine

The nine-pointed star is one of the central symbols of the Baha’i faith. It represents the sacred numerological associations with the number “nine” in Baha’i cosmology. There is no standardized depiction of the nine-pointed star symbol. Some versions have overlapping arms, similar to the Star of David, while others have solid arms. Geometrically, the nine-pointed star is called an “enneagon” or “enneagram,” which is a nine-sided shape constructed from overlapping five- or four-armed polygons.

### Importance of the Number Nine

The number nine is considered one of the sacred numbers of Baha’i, deriving from an ancient tradition of assigning numerical value to Arabic letters and words. This ancient Arabic numerology, called the “Abjad System,” begins by assigning a decimal numerical value to each of the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet. The term “Abjad,” used for the numerological system is itself an acronym derived from the first four numbers of the Arabic alphabet, usually said Alif, Ba, Jim, Dal or 1, 2, 3, and 4.

The invention of Arabic numerals can be traced to India, around 600 CE, but the system developed to its current manifestation in the Middle East between 800 and 900 CE. The Arabic numerals did not come into general use in Europe until the 13th century. Before then, mathematicians used letters to represent numbers, and the abjad numerical system derived from this earlier system, before the origin of Arabic numerals.

The abjad system and other alphanumeric systems allow for the establishment of representational and symbolic relationships between words and numbers. For instance, two different words with the same numeric values may be associated, such as the words “silence” and “license,” which have the same letters and thus the same values. Words with related numerical values may also be seen as connected, such as a word that has the numerical value of 8 and is therefore associated with words or phrases with associated values: 16, 24, 40, and so on.

In Baha’i, the word “Baha” is calculated by adding B(2) + A(1) + H(5) + A(1) for a total of 9. Thus, the number nine became a sacred numeral in Baha’i, and this association extended to symbols representing the holy number and even to natural phenomena that come in groups of nine or multiples of nine. The fact that nine is

### The Ninth Planetoid

Modern mysticism sometimes relates the supernatural significance of the number 9 to the 9 planets in the solar system. This would not have occurred to ancient astronomers, however, because the 9th planet, Pluto, was not discovered until 1930. In 2006, Pluto was downgraded to a “dwarf planet” because of a refinement of the characteristics required for planethood; thus, the solar system now has the pre-1930’s arrangement of 8 planets.

the highest single-digit number also makes the number a symbol of completion and perfection in both Baha’i and Hinduism. Because of this numerological association, Baha’i temples are nine-sided buildings with nine separate entrances. The nine sides and nine entrances also symbolize the idea that there are many ways to approach God, all leading to the same destination.

Followers of Baha’i also note that Baha’u’llah, one of the founders of the faith, received a divine revelation precisely nine years after a similar vision was given to the Bab, the Iranian mystic who predicted that God would grant the earth a new messenger in the form of Baha’u’llah. In addition, the Baha’i administrative order is divided into a set of elected institutions, each of which elects nine leaders. This includes the highest body of law and administration in the Baha’i faith, the Universal House of Justice. Lesser bodies, including the National Spiritual Assemblies and Local Spiritual Assemblies, are likewise led by groups of nine elected leaders.

### Cosmic Symbolism

The star is one of the oldest spiritual symbols in the world and has been utilized as a religious symbol by a diverse variety of traditions. Many other faiths use five-, six-, and eight-pointed versions of the star symbol. Originally, star symbols most likely referred to the celestial realm, where many faiths believe gods or mythical creatures or heroes reside. Over the centuries, the vague celestial associations of the star have enabled the symbol to take on a variety of new and specific meanings for many religious schools. Because of its graphical simplicity and layered meaning, the nine-pointed star symbol has become the most widely used symbol of the Baha’i faith around the world.

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## RINGSTONE SYMBOL

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### Accessorizing Spirituality

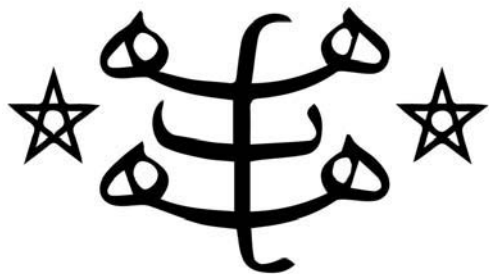
The ringstone symbol, as its name implies, is often printed onto rings and other jewelry as a symbol of the Baha'i faith. The symbol is described as a reminder to the wearer about God's purpose for humanity. Some Baha'is also believe that by wearing the symbol on jewelry, others may notice it and become curious, leading to conversations that may ultimately spread the word of God through Baha'i.

The lines used to form the ringstone symbol are stylized versions of the Arabic letters B-A-H-A, the name of the Baha'i faith. The letter beh (B) is represented by three horizontal lines, and the letter heh (H) is represented by the rounded marks at the ends of the first and last horizontal line. The vertical line that intersects with the three horizontal lines represents the letter alef (A). On each side of this design are two five-pointed stars, another symbol commonly used to represent Baha'i. Each element of the symbol has its own meaning, and the symbol that is made from all of them together represents the purpose of following God. The three horizontal lines represent the world of God (hahut), the manifestation of God (lahut), and the physical world of man.

### The Three Levels

The world of God, or hahut, is described as a realm formed from the essence of God. This realm is unknowable both to laypeople and even to the prophets of Baha'i, who can know of the existence of hahut but are incapable of understanding its transcendent complexity. All of the various attributes, archetypes, and essences of all phenomena exist in hahut in an inchoate state, blended into God's essence. A metaphor used to describe it is the sun, which emanates light to the rest of the world but remains separate from this emanated light.

God's will and emanations take the form of a realm of command, kingdom, or will called the "lahut." This level of emanation is knowable to humanity through the manifestation of God, which takes the form of a small number of messengers or prophets, who appear on earth and represent the will and teachings of God. According to Baha'i philosophy, God's unknowable essence and will can only be understood by



The ringstone symbol is named because it is most commonly used on totemic rings worn by Baha'i adherents to symbolize their belonging in the faith.



humans because of the intervening level of the manifestation, or prophets, of the faith, and without these extraordinary individuals, humanity would have no knowledge of God.

The metaphor commonly used for the realm of lahut, or God's will, is of a mirror reflecting the light of the sun and thus showing the nature of God while remaining part of the human realm. Baha'i leader Shoghi Effendi claimed in his writings that manifestations might appear on earth once per millennium and that each one would deepen the understanding of God by creating a linear progression of knowledge or revelation regarding the nature of the universe and God's will for humanity.

The third level of the ringstone symbol represents the world of man or the physical world. This level not only contains the material world but also many of the nonphysical phenomena that result from God's emanation. The physical world can be divided into an infinite number of worlds, each a subdivision of reality. The purpose of the physical realm is to serve as a home for humanity, and the purpose of humanity is to fulfill the will of God. The ringstone symbol also uses a single vertical line to join the three horizontal lines together, representing the link between the world of God, the world of the manifestation, and the world of man and God's creation.

## Representation of Baha'i Teachings

The ringstone symbol was designed by Abdu'l-Baha, the successor of the prominent Baha'i teacher Baha'u'llah. Abdu'l-Baha asked his friend Mishkin-Qalam, then considered one of the best calligraphers in Persia, to design what became the ringstone symbol. This original design and many subsequent versions were found on jewelry and other Baha'i artifacts from Abdu'l-Baha's era. In recognition of the lineage of teachers in Baha'i, Abdu'l-Baha also used two five-pointed stars, a commonly used symbol in Baha'i, to represent the Bab and Baha'u'llah, who were Abdu'l-Baha's predecessors. Together, Abdu'l-Baha, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah are considered the three central teachers and founders of the modern Baha'i faith.

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# Rastafarianism

Rastafarianism is often considered an offshoot of Christianity, but its central beliefs are equally tied to early Judaism. Rastafarianism is a monotheistic Afrocentric religion that developed in the 1930s in Jamaica. In the 21st century, there are around 1 million Rastafarians worldwide, most residing in Jamaica.

## Origins and Evolution

Rastafarianism began as a spiritualized offshoot of the African independence movement of political activist Marcus Garvey. The Rastafarians integrated elements of Garvey's philosophy with Christian and Jewish theology to form a new religious movement, later called Rastafarianism. Though the movement began in the 1930s, the height of Rastafarian influence came in the 1960s, when it was fueled by political and social changes within Jamaica.

Garvey predicted that a new Black power would arise in Africa and that this would harken a period when the descendants of African slaves would be repatriated to Africa to take part in a new golden age of African culture. This belief became the core of the Rastafarian movement. The Rastafarians came to believe that Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia was the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament, rather than Jesus Christ of Christian tradition, who is considered a lesser prophet in Rastafarianism. This belief was also based on Haile Selassie and his lineage of Ethiopian kings' claim to be the direct descendants of King Solomon, who allegedly had illegitimate children with the Queen of Sheba.

Preacher Leonard P. Howell is often considered the father of the Rastafarian movement. Howell started a cult in 1935 that eventually developed into an island-wide political movement. Rastafarianism gained ground during the political and social upheaval that gripped Jamaica from the 1930s through the end of the century. Awareness of the Jamaican faith spread primarily through its unique (now globally famous) music, including ska, reggae, and rocksteady. In the 1960s, Rastafarians dominated the Jamaican music industry, and a small number of innovative artists, such as Bob Marley, became internationally known and, consequently, spread awareness of Rastafarianism around the world. Many now associate Jamaican culture with Rastafarianism, though only 5 percent of the population adheres to the faith.

## Rastafarian Beliefs

In the 1930s, Rastafarian culture was very conservative and socially restrictive. It was based on the idea of the absolute superiority of the Black race and operated on the assumption that women should be subordinate and subservient to men. Some of the restrictions on female behavior derived from obscure passages in biblical Scriptures, such as the prohibition that women must not cook while menstruating and that women must cover their heads during prayer. Rastafarian women are prohibited from taking leadership positions and are also prohibited from dressing or behaving in a promiscuous manner. Prohibitions on female behavior have become one of the most controversial aspects of Rastafarianism, and some modern adherents to the faith (especially in Europe and North America) no longer recognize or practice the religion's traditional gender roles.

Since the 1970s, Rastafarians have modernized their approach to the faith, removing or reducing focus on some of the more controversial aspects of traditional practice. Modern Rastafarians still hold a belief that the end of times is near and that this period will result in an upheaval that will destroy existing hierarchies of financial and social dominance. Rastafarians believe in a single, personal God who can manifest human characteristics. This results from the belief that Haile Selassie was the incarnation of God on earth. Rastafarians simultaneously believe that all humans have a spark of divinity, representing the soul given by God. Since the death of Selassie, in 1975, many Rastafarians have begun to move away from a focus on the divinity of Selassie toward other aspects of the faith.

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## HAILE SELASSIE

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### A Living God

Haile Selassie I (born Tafari Makonnen) was the 225th and last emperor of Ethiopia, from 1930 until his overthrow at the hands of the Marxist government in 1974. Among followers of Rastafarianism in Jamaica, Haile Selassie is often believed to have been a messiah whose ascendancy to the throne of Ethiopia was the beginning of events that would eventually see all African descendants repatriated to

Africa. In the years since his death, in 1975, Selassie has remained a major figure in Rastafarian culture.

### Life of Haile Selassie

Tafari Makonnen, born in Ethiopia in 1892, was the son of Ras Makonnen. The term “Ras” represented the highest noble rank in Ethiopian imperial society and the belief that the Ethiopian noble families were members of the Solomonic line, or descendants of King Solomon. When Ras Makonnen died, in 1906, his son was taken under the wing of Emperor Menelik II, who had no male heirs of his own. Upon the emperor’s death, the empire passed to Lij Yasu, who was a follower of Islam. Gaining the support of the nation’s majority Christian population, Tafari Makonnen (now using the title Ras Tafari Makonnen) staged an uprising in 1916 that removed Yasu from power. Menelik II’s daughter Zauditu became the empress, and Ras Makonnen became regent of Ethiopia. Empress Zauditu died in 1928, and two years later, Tafari Makonnen was officially appointed emperor and renamed “Haile Selassie,” translating as “Might of the Trinity.”

During the second Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–1936, Selassie was forced to flee the country, but with the help of the Allied forces’ East Africa Campaign, he reclaimed his position in 1941. However, the Ethiopian famine of the 1970s and infighting with the nation that became Eritrea undermined Selassie’s government. Rebel forces, representing a Marxist regime, launched a coup in 1974 that removed Selassie from power. The former emperor was held under house arrest until his death in 1975. The official cause of death was ruled as complications from a previous surgery, though some suspected that political enemies had murdered Selassie.

### Messiah of Rastafarianism

Many consider Jamaican political leader Marcus Garvey to be the father of Rastafarianism. Garvey believed that Black people, the descendants of African slaves,



The modernization of Ethiopia began in the 19th century under emperors Tewodros IV and Menelik II. As the last emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie continued this development, bringing his country into the mainstream of modern African politics. (Library of Congress)

should return to Africa, and he promoted this agenda through the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the early 1900s. Rastafarians credit Garvey with having said, “Look to Africa, for the crowning of a Black King; He shall be the Redeemer,” around 1920. Historians doubt whether Garvey actually made this statement, and some have suggested that the statement was actually made by Reverend James Morris Webb, a radical Black empowerment leader who preached that Jesus was African and favored the idea of African repatriation.

In the mid-1930s, charismatic Jamaican cult leader Leonard P. Howell drew upon the teachings of Garvey and Webb, and began preaching that Haile Selassie was the prophesized “Black King” of Africa. This claim was based on the idea that the Ethiopian kings were descended from an affair between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and were therefore part of the Solomonic and Davidic lineages mentioned in the Old Testament. Old Testament prophecy claims that the Messiah will be a member of the Davidic Line, and the Rastafarians connected these dots, seeing Haile Selassie as the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies and Garvey’s prophetic vision of the new African King. The date of Selassie’s coronation as emperor, November 2, became the most important holiday in Rastafarianism, now known as Coronation Day.

### **Impact on Rastafarianism**

Historians are uncertain when Haile Selassie first learned that he had been named the messiah of a Jamaican religious movement, but his curiosity convinced him to meet with a delegation from Jamaica in 1961 with whom he discussed repatriation, though a timetable was never set. Selassie never denied the Rastafarians the right to repatriate to Ethiopia, and he did allow a small number of Rastafarians to relocate to imperial land about 150 miles from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa.

On April 21, 1966, Selassie decided to visit Jamaica, where he met with both Rastafarian and non-Rastafarian leaders to honor their support of his government. Thousands of Rastafarians greeted Selassie at the airport in Kingston, and Selassie later reported amazement at the reaction from the throngs of admirers that followed his motorcade through the nation. Selassie reportedly told witnesses later that he did not question the Rastafarian conviction that he was the Messiah because it was not his place to question their beliefs. The date of Selassie’s visit became one of the most important Rastafarian holidays, now known as Grounation Day.

On his visit to Jamaica, Selassie reportedly agreed to further consider the repatriation issue, but he told the attending leaders that they must “liberate” their own people before returning to Africa. This meeting is thought to have originated the “Liberation before Repatriation” principle of Rastafarianism, which caused

an overall change in the movement's focus. From this point, a larger portion of Rastafarians focused on improving social and political conditions on the island, believing this to be the key to eventually returning to Africa.

In the 21st century, Rastafarians have begun to move away from the belief that Haile Selassie was a messianic figure, though recognition of his historical significance remains in the language of the religious tradition. In addition, many modern Rastafarians no longer focus on the idea of African repatriation and have come to see Rastafarianism as a form of Christian thought that focuses on the rights and advancement of Black people, recognizing the contributions of such individuals as Haile Selassie, one of the last African rulers to hold out against European rule.

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## LION OF JUDAH

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### King of Animal Symbolism

The Lion of Judah is one of the primary symbols of Rastafarianism. It was taken from the symbol of the tribe of Judah in the Book of Genesis. The use of the lion represents the belief that Haile Selassie is a descendent of King Solomon, who is considered to be part of the genealogical line of Judah, the son of Jacob. The symbol of a lion wearing a crown and holding a scepter has been incorporated into Ethiopian flags and is the emblem of Rastafarianism.

### The Royal Lineage of Judah

The biblical line of Judah is central to the beliefs of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In the Book of Genesis, Judah is the fourth son of Jacob, the patriarch, and the father of King David of the Israelites. In the Book of Genesis, Jacob refers to his son Judah as a "lion whelp," and so the lion was taken as a symbol for Judah's descendants, known as the tribe of Judah. According to Jewish interpretation, the tribe of Judah was one of the historic Tribes of Israel, a group of twelve tribes who occupied part of Canaan, a territory that now forms part of Israel, Palestine, Syria, Libya, and Jordan. Since the fifth century BCE, the term "Israelite" has



The Lion of Judah, among the most recognizable symbols of Rastafarianism around the world, is one of many symbols representing ancient associations between lions and the concepts of royalty and leadership.

one of the 48 prophets of Judaism and a prophet in both Christian and Islamic tradition as well.

Since the fifth century CE, the kings of Axum in Ethiopia had claimed to be representatives of the lineage of Judah through King Solomon, who they said mated with Makeda, the legendary Queen of Sheba, to give rise to Menelik I. According to one of the oldest sacred documents of Ethiopia, known as the “Kebrā Negast,” or “Glory of Kings,” Makeda visited Solomon in Israel and converted to Judaism, becoming pregnant on her journey. Makeda’s son, Menelik, which means “son of the king,” returned to his father when he reached adulthood and was given the original Ark of the Covenant, which Menelik hid within Ethiopia.

The lineage of Solomon came to power in Ethiopia in 1270 and remained in power until 1974, with each emperor receiving the honorific title of the “Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, King of Kings of Ethiopia.” The Ethiopian Empire claimed the lion as the symbol of the imperial lineage, and the lion was part of the national coat of arms until 1996, when the secular government removed the lion from official state symbols. According to the Rastafarian cults that emerged between the 1930s and the 1960s, Haile Selassie I was the Messiah of the line of David whose arrival was prophesized in the Old Testament. The Rastafarians therefore adopted the symbol of the Lion of Judah as one of the central spiritual symbols of their faith, representing Haile Selassie and his divine status as the messiah of God and ruler of Africa.

been used to refer to the Jewish tribes, which includes the tribes of Benjamin, Simeon, Levi, and Judah.

According to the Old Testament, the Messiah will be descended from David and thus will be of the tribe of Judah. In Christian tradition, the Messiah is Jesus Christ, who is described as the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah” in the Book of Revelations. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus Christ is described as a descendant of Solomon, who was the son of David and the king of Israel. Solomon is one of the most important figures in Abrahamic mythology. He is

### Evolutionary Understanding

Humans have an instinctual ability to understand the body language of certain nonhuman mammals, for instance, cats, dogs, and bears, because they were humanity's chief predators in the ancient world. This ability allowed prehistoric humans to avoid being eaten and now (through millennia of selective breeding) gives us an advantage when trying to understand our canine and feline pets.

### Leonine Symbolism in History

The lion (*Panthera leo*) is a large cat species that ranges throughout Africa and parts of the Middle East and India. Historically, the lion had a much broader range that extended into Eastern Asia. A related species, the Eurasian cave lion (*Panthera leo spelaea*), lived in Europe until 10,000–12,000 years ago and was familiar to the prehistoric tribes of Europe, as evidenced by ancient cave drawings and carvings that depict lions and mythological creatures with leonine features.

Like many animals capable of killing humans, the lion has been both admired and feared throughout human history. Ancient artistic remnants suggest that prehistoric humans had already claimed the lion as a spiritual symbol and that the associations between lions and leadership were also present in ancient societies. The common description of the lion as the “king of the beasts” reflects this prehistoric association between lions and royalty. In part, lion symbolism may derive from lions living in packs of related females that are dominated by one or a few males. Early humans may have recognized the sociobiology of the lion as similar to the power structure of tribal leaders and their followers.

In ancient Egypt, lion imagery was used to represent a variety of major and minor deities. The lion was often associated with goddesses in Egypt and was also part of the inspiration for the sphinx, a mythological creature that was part human, part lion, a defender of kings, and an emblem of royal temples and tombs. In India, the lion became a powerful emblem in both Buddhism and Hinduism, where it symbolizes power and wisdom. Buddhist texts describe Buddha as having the power and wisdom of a lion, and Hindu texts associate the lion as a symbol of Vishnu and Parvati. Elsewhere in Asia, the lion was also depicted as a guardian and a symbol of leadership. The lion dance of Chinese culture pays homage to the symbolism of the lion, where it is a representation of the Han Empire and of strength and nobility.

The early Tribes of Israel encountered lions in the Middle East and developed their own symbolic associations with the species in addition to adopting symbolism from Egypt, Persia, and Greece. The lion was one of the earliest symbols of



Judaism, representing the divine right of rule in Israel. In Christianity, the lion is used as both a positive and negative symbol. For instance, though Jesus is considered the Lion of Judah, the Romans also used lions as weapons in their persecution of Christians. Throughout Europe, the lion took on a multifaceted symbolic existence, embodying bravery and nobility as well as savagery and brutality. Likewise, many religious traditions have adopted the symbolism of the lion as both an honored leader and a dangerous beast, which is an apt metaphor for the dual role of any political or religious leader.

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## MARIJUANA

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### Spiritual Smoking

Marijuana (family Cannabaceae) is a psychoactive flowering plant native to Central and Southern Asia. Consumption of the plant's leaves, either through combustion and inhalation or digestion, brings about intoxication and feelings of euphoria. It is now used around the world as a recreational intoxicant, but marijuana has historically been used for healing and spiritual rituals. The cannabis plant can also be used to make hemp, the common term for a variety of industrial products that can be extracted or produced from the plant. Hemp fibers have been used around the world to produce paper, rope, cloth, wax, and many other products.

Marijuana use has been an important part of the Rastafarian religion since the 1940s. It is primarily used in a spiritual context to enhance contemplation. The global celebrity of such Jamaican celebrities as Bob Marley and the popularization of Rastafarian reggae music created a link, in the popular imagination, between Jamaican culture and the use of marijuana. Though recreational use of marijuana is common in Jamaica, the Rastafarian religion does not recommend or explicitly condone using marijuana outside of religious rituals.

### Marijuana as a Medicinal and Spiritual Agent

Historians believe that marijuana cultivation may have begun as early as 10,000 years ago in parts of Asia, though it is unknown exactly when the plant's

psychoactive effects were discovered. Texts attributed to the Chinese emperor Shen-Nung (also Shennong), dated to 2737 BCE, mention the use of marijuana to treat rheumatism, gout, and malaria. The texts also mention that the plant can produce intoxication.

Spiritual use of marijuana most likely began in China, and texts from around the first century CE mention the use of marijuana to facilitate communication with spiritual entities. Taoist priests used the drug in the fifth and sixth centuries to cultivate spiritual communion and even to facilitate what they believed were visions of the future.

Marijuana spread into the Middle East in the form of industrial hemp, a variety of plant-based products made from the leaves, stems, seeds, oils, and other materials from the marijuana plant. Historians believe recreational marijuana use may have become popular with Muslims in part because the Koran forbids alcohol consumption. A number of Islamic spiritual societies used marijuana as a spiritual aid, including certain sects of Sufism. References to marijuana use have also been found among the artifacts linked to pagan religious sects in Europe, where the drug was used both as a spiritual aid and as a medicinal herb to treat a variety of medical disorders.

## **Marijuana in Jamaica**

Jamaica was a British plantation colony from 1655 until the island gained its independence in 1962. Slavery on the island was abolished in 1838, and a new wave of immigration ensued as the island was in need of laborers to develop the local agricultural industry. By 1900, more than 33,000 immigrants from India and 5,000 immigrants from China relocated to Jamaica, and these groups exerted a strong influence on Jamaican culture. Linguistic evidence suggests that Indian immigrants may have first introduced marijuana smoking to the Jamaicans, and many marijuana-related terms used in Jamaica have Hindi roots.

The British first brought marijuana to Jamaica as a cash crop, but the plant soon grew wild in the highlands, transplanted naturally and by local farmers. Before the plant was used as an intoxicant, it was widely used as a medicinal herb across the island. Marijuana was an ideal crop for many Jamaican farmers, who were only able to afford small plots of land, because the plants need little space for cultivation and grow rapidly given sufficient care. The Jamaican climate is also ideal for marijuana growth, allowing for two harvests per year.

Rastafarianism emerged in the 1930s, an outgrowth of the Black nationalism, or pan-African, movement. The movement is largely attributed to Jamaican native Marcus Garvey and initially focused on the divinity of the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie and to the idea that all former African slaves should seek to be

repatriated to Africa. Jamaican native Leonard Howell, sometimes known as the founder of the Rastafarian movement, was among the first to preach the ceremonial use of marijuana.

Howell and other pioneers of the movement have often justified their use of the substance with references to biblical scriptures that they believe condone the use of the herb, such as Psalm 104:14, which says, “He causeth grass for the cattle, and herb for the services of man,” or Exodus 10:12, where it is written that humans should “eat every herb of the land.”

Rastafarians used marijuana as part of their weekly meetings, often called “reasoning sessions.” Here, the gathered individuals read prayers and discussed spiritual issues, using marijuana to produce heightened spiritual states and create a sense of love and unity among the practitioners. Both of the major orders of Rastafarianism, known as the “Bobo” and the “Nayabingi,” developed a number of marijuana-centered rituals. Among Rastafarians, marijuana is often known as a “holy herb,” and some believe that the plant should only be used in spiritual exercises. Many Rastafarians invoke a prayer before smoking marijuana, often quoted as

Glory be to the father and to the maker of creation. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be World without end: Jah Rastafari: Eternal God Selassie I.

## **Modern Rastafarianism and Spiritual Marijuana**

Rastafarian culture spread throughout the world in the 1970s, with the popularity of Bob Marley and reggae music. While only 5 percent of Jamaicans are self-described Rastafarians, the fact that Bob Marley, the most famous figure in the history of Jamaican music culture, was a dedicated Rastafarian has created a strong international perception that all Jamaicans use marijuana. Demographic studies indicate that as many as 60 to 70 percent of Jamaicans use marijuana, but only a small portion employ it for religious purposes. Some sociologists have compared marijuana use in Jamaica to wine consumption in France in that moderate use is considered a normal daily activity, similar to having a glass of liquor to accompany a meal.

Many modern followers of the Rastafarian tradition, especially those living outside of Jamaica, have abandoned the religion’s founding ideals of repatriating Africa and worshipping Haile Selassie I. Modern Rastafarianism blends elements of Christianity with distinctly Jamaican cultural traditions, focusing on the liberation and advancement of the descendants of African slaves around the world. Marijuana use has likewise become generalized and separated from religious rituals.

In terms of the greater global significance of the Rastafarian focus on marijuana, the use of the drug is similar to many other global traditions that utilize psychoactive substances and physical inducements to heighten the sense of spiritual connectivity or awareness. The Rastafarians were not the first group to use marijuana as a spiritual aid, but they are largely responsible for the continuation of the idea that marijuana has links to spiritual awareness. While there are more recreational marijuana users than spiritual marijuana users in the 21st century, the Rastafarian movement provides one modern example of how intoxication continues to be linked to the process of spiritual enlightenment.

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## RASTAFARIAN FLAG

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### Banner of Afro-Caribbean Identity

The Rastafarian flag is the official symbol of the Ethiopian Empire and the lineage of Solomon, passed through Solomon to the Ethiopian line of kings. The flag features the emblem of the Lion of Judah wearing a crown and scepter and is set against red, yellow, and green bands of color.

### History of the Ethiopian Flag

The colors of the Ethiopian flag trace back to colored pennants that were used in the 17th century. Some historians have claimed that the pennants derived from pre-Abrahamic Ethiopian tribal traditions and had various symbolic meanings within Ethiopian society before the flag came to represent the line of Solomon under the Emperor Menelik I.

The first official flag of the Ethiopian Empire was established in 1897, with the triangular pennants sewn together to form rectangles. The flag originated with the military collaboration between French and Ethiopian forces in 1897, in which Emperor Menelik II gave permission to the French to move through Ethiopian territory and to distribute the flag of Ethiopia to the territories that would come under Ethiopian rule. The green rectangle at the top of the flag was meant to symbolize the fertility of the Ethiopian land. The yellow, or gold, symbolized the wealth of

the people and the spiritual association with Christianity. The red symbolized the blood that was shed in the quest for independence. The 1897 flag also utilized the symbol of the Lion of Judah, representing the Solomonic lineage claimed by Menelik II. The lion on the flag wears an imperial crown and holds a scepter in the shape of a cross.

In 1949, under the rule of Haile Selassie I, the Seal of Solomon ring was added around the Lion of Judah in the center of the flag. In addition, the Selassie I flag featured five golden five-pointed stars, the symbol known as the Shield of David or the Star of David, further representing Selassie I's claim to be a descendant of David and Solomon and part of the lineage of Judah. Each Star of David symbol on the 1949 version of the flag contains a cross, symbolizing the Ethiopian adherence to Christian tradition. The 1949 flag was the first to also feature an inscription written in the script of the Ge'ez language, the official language of the Ethiopian Empire.

After the fall of the Ethiopian Empire, the imperial flag remained in use until 1987, when the Democratic Republic of Ethiopia introduced a new flag utilizing the same colors but adding a blue seal formed from various elements, including the seal of the ancient Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum, a yellow star on a red background and the country's name written in Ge'ez across the top. Later, this design was abandoned in favor of a simple flag that featured only the three bands of color. In 1996, the modern flag of Ethiopia was introduced. It features the traditional colors with the addition of a blue seal containing a yellow five-pointed star that emanates yellow rays. The star symbolizes the united Ethiopian people and their bright prospects for the future.

### **Banner of Rastafarianism**

The Rastafarian movement was an Afrocentric movement that borrowed many ideas from Marcus Garvey's pan-African movement and supported the idea that Africa should return to a system of self-governing nations under Africa rule. As Africa's oldest independent nation, Ethiopia became a symbol for African independence in the pan-African movement, and many, including the Rastafarians, believed that Africa should come under the rule of the Ethiopian monarchy. Marcus Garvey's movement also used a pan-African flag in the colors red, black, and green. The black in the pan-African flag represents the Black people, the green represents natural wealth, and the red represents the blood shed by martyrs.

Rastafarians use the imperial flag of Ethiopia and the colors of Ethiopia as symbols of their spiritual tradition. The most popular is the version of the flag featuring the emblem of the Lion of Judah, representing the Rastafarian belief that Selassie was descended from the line of kings through Solomon, David, and

Judah. As in the Ethiopian version of the flag, the green color is usually described as representing the natural beauty and vegetation of Africa, the gold represents the wealth of Africa, and the red represents the blood spilled in the fight for independence and freedom. Rastafarians also often use black intermingled with the traditional gold, red, and green, representing their adherence to the pan-African movement and the ideals of Marcus Garvey.

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# Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is a complex monotheistic religion that developed in the area that is now Iran between 1200 and 1500 BCE. Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest religious traditions and remains active in the 21st century, though estimates place the number of modern practitioners at less than 200,000 worldwide.

Zoroastrianism is the largest of a small group of religions that represent the flowering of philosophy and spirituality that occurred in ancient Iran during the Persian era. The texts of Zoroastrianism are written in the Avestan language, which is classified as a nonliving language with no native speakers outside of Zoroastrianism. The Zoroastrian scriptures are therefore one of the last remaining links to this once flourishing linguistic heritage of the Middle East.

## Origins and Evolution

The emergence of Zoroastrianism is tied to the mytho-historic life of Zoroaster, the founder of the religion, who lived in northwest Iran, most likely in the second millennium BCE. Writings about Zoroaster's life indicate that he was trained in the polytheistic traditions of ancient Bronze Age Iran. Zoroaster claimed to have received visions that taught him about a single creator god, Ahura Mazda, and a malevolent spirit called Angra Mainyu, who constantly battled for the souls of believers. Zoroaster traveled widely and attempted to spread his beliefs, eventually finding followers among the elite within the complex fiefdoms of Persia.

By the sixth century BCE, Zoroastrianism had become the state cult of a lineage of Persian kings that conquered Iran, founding the first Persian Empire, known as the Archaemenian dynasty, in 549 BCE. The Archaemenian Empire, under the rule of Cyrus the Great, allowed religious freedom in Persia, and the state became a haven for the Jewish people who had returned to Jerusalem after being exiled in Babylon. Zoroastrianism also diversified, giving rise to Zurvanism, an alternative take on Zoroastrianism based on the belief in a creator God called Zurvan, a neutral, genderless entity who created the opposing forces Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. The priests of Zurvanism, known as the "Magi," developed into a powerful aristocratic elite and became one of the pillars of the political



**Magic in Bethlehem**

Some historians believe that the Three Wise Men, or Magi, famous from the story of Jesus's birth, were members of the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism. The word "magic" partially derives from the Persian term "magush," which refers to the ability to exert spiritual influence over the material world.

realm in the Persian Empire. Gradually, Zurvanism became the primary form of Zoroastrianism, eclipsing the more traditional version of the faith.

In 331 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered the Archaemenian Empire, resulting in the destruction of many of the Zoroastrian temples and sacred writings. Zoroastrianism survived through the Macedonian invasion and came back to prominence under the Parthian Empire (247 BCE–224 CE), which allowed a blend of Greek and Iranian traditions to flourish, with Zoroastrianism becoming one of the most prominent faiths in the region. Emperor Vologeses I is credited with helping to gather the texts that became part of the Zoroastrian sacred book, the Avesta. The Parthians had a tendency to combine religious traditions and often equated Greek gods with Zoroastrian gods. For instance, the cult of the Greek god Hades was equated with the evil Zoroastrian spirit Angra Mainyu.

In 224 CE, the Sasanian dynasty took control of Persia under a lineage of rulers that established Zurvanism as the state religion. Under Sasanian rule, the modern canon of Zoroastrian texts was created and became a model for state rituals, led by a powerful sect of Magi. Whereas Zoroastrianism had always been accepting of other faiths, the Sasanian kings abandoned this practice and persecuted Christians and Jews living under the empire. The Sasanian Empire's rule of Persia came to an end with the Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century CE, establishing the powerful Umayyad Caliphate. The Islamic rulers allowed Zoroastrians to continue practicing their religion, but they demanded that they pay extra taxes to the state, a compromise that they also offered to Jews and Christians in the region.

Zoroastrianism never regained its status as a state cult, but it remained active beneath Islamic rule in the centuries since the Islamic conquest of the Middle East. Zoroastrianism has remained centered in Iran, though, in the 10th century CE, a group of Persian Zoroastrians settled in India, establishing the Parsi communities that continue to practice a unique form of the faith that is influenced by Indian culture and beliefs. The conquests of Alexander and the Umayyad Caliphs resulted in the loss of many Zoroastrian texts and the destruction of most of the prominent temples of the faith from the pre-Islamic era. Despite these losses, the remaining texts and temples have been preserved and constitute the basis of modern versions of the faith.

## Zoroastrian Beliefs

Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions, and many of the concepts found in the world's Abrahamic traditions have been influenced by Zoroastrian cosmology. Zoroastrians believe in a single God, Ahura Mazda, who is an "impersonal" God, meaning that Ahura Mazda is not thought of as a humanlike being but rather as an impenetrably complex, infinite entity. This differentiates Zoroastrianism from faiths that utilize personal manifestations of God, such as Jesus in Christianity.

Ahura Mazda is the creator of all good and happiness in the world and resides in a perfect heavenly realm. Zoroastrians also believe in an evil spirit known as Angra Mainyu, who resides in hell and is the creator of death, unhappiness, and evil. After death, human souls reside in either heaven or hell, depending on their behavior in life. There are also six Amesha Spentas, emanations from Ahura Mazda that are sometimes thought of as divine spirits but that also metaphorically represent the goals of Zoroastrian faith. The Zurvan sect posited the existence of a third, morally neutral entity that gave rise to both Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu.

Zoroastrians believe that the duality of good and evil is an essential facet of the universe and that, to some extent, all of life and the universe can be viewed as the interplay of dynamic opposites. However, unlike the balanced opposition of some East Asian faiths, Zoroastrians believe that the goal is to eliminate evil or impurity so as to reach a state of absolute purity and goodness. The rituals and moral behaviors taught by Zoroaster and other prominent teachers are viewed as the path leading to heaven. Contributing to one's society and community is considered an important representation of faith, and Zoroastrians believe in demonstrating righteousness through one's normal life rather than dedicating oneself to pure worship or monastic study.

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## FARAVAHAR

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### Symbol of Egypt and Persia

The Faravahar, or Farohar, is the central symbol of the Zoroastrianism and is based on ancient symbols of Egyptian and Persian origin. The Faravahar is a relatively



The Faravahar symbol originated long before the Zoroastrian religion and has its roots in ancient Egyptian and Persian spiritual symbols. Individual elements within the Faravahar symbol represent key aspects of the Zoroastrian faith.

“Khepera”) and often called the “winged sun symbol.” The winged sun symbol also developed independently in a number of other cultures around the world, symbolizing the ancient metaphoric rise of the sun into the sky like a bird. The winged sun became one of the most important symbols in ancient Egypt and was often associated with royalty, carved into both implements and the tombs of important leaders. Archaeologists believe that the symbol originally combined elements of two prominent deities: the sun disk of the sun god Ra (Re) and the wings of the falcon god Horus. Ra was one of the most important Egyptian gods, and cults to Ra existed throughout the Egyptian Empire.

The winged sun seems also to have spread throughout many other Middle Eastern and North African cultures. The Assyrians used the winged sun as a symbol of their god Assur, and the Sumerians and Babylonians used the symbol to represent the sun god Samas. The ancient Indo-Iranian tribes of Iran developed a large number of independent spiritual and cultural traditions, which were largely polytheistic and borrowed spiritual and artistic inspiration from Egypt. As Zoroastrianism evolved within this environment, the early Zoroastrians borrowed iconography and symbolism from the preexisting polytheistic traditions. Many of the gods of ancient Iranian religion became protective spirits within Zoroastrianism, and the symbols associated with these gods were also often co-opted. Historians are uncertain when, but at some point Zoroastrianism also began using the winged sun as a symbol of their faith.

## Elevation of the Spirits

The Faravahar symbol is named after the “fravashi,” or “guardian spirits,” of Zoroastrianism, beings that played a similar role in the Zoroastrian faith as angels in Christianity. Archaeologists and historians believe that the fravashi were largely representations of Egyptian and native Persian gods who had been reimagined as servants or emanations of the supreme God Ahura Mazda. In the Faravahar, the

modern symbol that was established after an extended period of Christian and Jewish reinterpretation of Zoroastrianism, though elements of the symbol are believed to have derived from older Zoroastrian iconography.

## Egyptian Origins

The central portion of the Faravahar was co-opted from an Egyptian symbol known as the “Khepri” (or

winged sun symbol is accompanied by the image of a bearded man holding a ring in one hand while gesturing with the other.

The identity of the bearded man in the Faravahar is uncertain, though the modern interpretation is that the figure represents the guardian fravashi of Zoroastrianism. Archaeologists have found similar figures in Persian art and architecture that go back to 2,500 years ago, at which time the meaning of the image is uncertain. The symbolism of many ancient Persian symbols changed after Christianity and Judaism replaced Zoroastrianism throughout most of the Middle East. Those who continued following Zoroastrianism were heavily influenced by Christian cosmology and began imitating elements of the Abrahamic faith. The fravashi are not mentioned in the Zoroastrian holy texts and may have played only a minor role in Zoroastrianism in the pre-Abrahamic era. Following the mingling of Zoroastrian and Abrahamic ideas, the fravashi were elevated in status, becoming not unlike the guardian angels of Christianity.

### **Adoption and Contemporary Meaning**

To modern Zoroastrians, the Faravahar serves as the preeminent symbol of their faith and reflects central features of their religious beliefs and cosmology. The ring surrounding the figure in the symbol, which was once part of the winged sun motif, is now thought to symbolize the eternal human soul. The body of the central figure, now often seen as a fravashi, can be divided into different parts, each with different representations. The figure's head symbolizes intelligence and free will, including the freedom to pursue various forms of religion and spirituality. The right hand, which is depicted gesturing upward, points toward the road to spiritual fulfillment, known as "Asha," and toward the abode of Ahura Mazda in the heavens. The left hand is seen holding a ring that symbolizes Khshathra Vaira, a combination of Sanskrit terms that mean "heroic royalty or dominion," and this represents the just rule of Ahura Mazda over the kingdom of humanity.

The wings of the symbol represent the ascent of the soul toward progress and greater levels of spiritual fulfillment, while the bird's tail, near the bottom of the symbol acts as a balance between the opposing forces of goodness and evil, respectively represented by the curved projections to either side of the tail. The upper layers of feathers on the wings represent proper speech, proper thought, and proper actions, the three behavioral requirements of the faith on the road to spiritual enlightenment. The lower layers of feathers represent improper speech, improper actions, and improper thoughts, behavioral vices that place an individual on the path to destruction.

Various scholars have contested the modern interpretation of the Faravahar, and many aspects of the symbol's origin and original meaning remain unclear.

Zoroastrian scholars generally agree that the symbol represents the balance between the paths leading to salvation and destruction and the balance between the material and spiritual worlds, but the interpretation of elements within the symbol differ between scholars and schools of the faith. Iranian artists continued to utilize the symbol in art and architecture long after the decline of Zoroastrianism, and the symbol has become a generalized representation of Iranian culture and heritage, even becoming part of one of the original designs for the Iranian coat of arms prior to the Iranian revolution of 1979.

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## FIREPOT

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### Cultivation of the Holy Flame

Fire is a sacred element in Zoroastrianism, symbolizing purity, truth, and the presence of their God, Ahura Mazda. While all fire is sacred, Zoroastrians differentiate between the temporary fires that humans use for cooking and warmth and the sacred fire that is reserved for temples and household shrines. Historians believe that Zoroastrian fire symbolism was derived from ancient animist traditions among the Iranian polytheistic communities before the emergence of Zoroastrianism.

### Sanctity of Water and Fire

The idea that water and fire were sacred substances first appeared during the Stone Age, and historians believe that the sanctity of these primary elements is one of the world's earliest spiritual concepts. Within the ancient religions of Iran, the worship of both fire and water was widespread, with a variety of cults or sects dedicated to the worship of fire and water gods and spirits. Elements of these ancient beliefs filtered into Zoroastrianism, where both substances became representations of Ahura Mazda. For centuries, Zoroastrians offered libations or food tributes called “zaothras” to both fire and water, and this became a central ritual of the faith. The zaothras were given three times each day (a sacred number), coinciding with the sunrise, noon, and sunset prayers.

Water is essential to life, and it is not surprising therefore that so many cultures around the world have considered the substance to be sacred. Since the Stone Age,

### Heavy Metals

The three-age system divides human history into broad eras defined by the development of different types of tools. The Stone Age (ca. 8000–2000 BCE), when all human tools were made of stone or wood, ended with the discovery and dissemination of metalworking. This began the Bronze Age (ca. 3000 BCE), which eventually transitioned to the Iron Age (ca. 1200 BCE). Historians have not come to agreement about the designation of more modern periods, and a variety of subsequent periods have been suggested, including the Plastic Age, Machine Age, and Space Age.

humans have conducted rituals designed to attract nourishing rains, repel floods and storms, and grant favorable bounty from fishing. The ancient Indo-Iranians made offerings to bodies of water and fabricated water reservoirs that were eventually used for irrigation and agriculture. In ancient Iran, water was envisioned as a feminine substance and was linked to goddess worship.

In ancient Zoroastrian texts, water is referred to as the “wives” of Ahura Mazda, thus preserving the feminine goddess associations with the substance. Zoroastrians gave zaothras to water by casting libations into sacred bodies of water called “Aban” (Apas), which consisted of both pure river waters and vessels of ceremonial water kept in homes and temples. The zaothras given to water consisted of various types of leaves, sap, and the milk of herd animals.

Fire, it can be argued, is essential to culture, providing warmth, light, and the ability to transform matter. Without exaggeration, it can be argued that fire separated humanity from the sun, providing the ability to see without the sun’s light or to keep warm without the sun’s heat. The development of cooking transformed the human diet, allowing humans to eat plant and animal products that were previously inedible and aiding in the preservation of food and the purification of water. Millennia later, fire allowed for the invention of metalworking, a phenomenon so transformative that archaeologists and historians sometimes use this innovation to mark the beginning of a new era in human history.

To the ancient Indo-Iranians, fire was essential in the cold winters and for cooking meat, the staple of their diet. The difficulty of lighting a fire from scratch led to the practice of keeping a fire constantly burning, either within each home or in the form of a single, community fire that was utilized by a network of families. Some historians believe that the Indo-Iranian migrants may have carried stone pots filled with embers with them during their migrations to transfer the fire from one temporary home site to another as they raised their livestock or searched for better foraging grounds. This eternal flame became associated with

divine symbolism, developing into a fire cult that spread throughout the ancient Indo-Iranian population.

Among Zoroastrians, the sacred fire was known as “Atar,” and the zaotbra given to this substance consisted of incense, in the form of dried herbs, and animal fat, derived from a sacrificial animal. Animal fat was offered to a family fire during the daily meals and to the community or temple fires during ceremonies and the daily prayer rituals. The choice of animal fat as a sacrificial substance was not accidental, as fat is also a fuel for keeping the fire burning longer and stronger. Thus, placing a portion of fat on the fire provided an immediate, visible reaction that may have been seen as symbolizing the acceptance of the tribute by divine forces.

### Fire Temples and the Firepot

While almost any form of fire is considered sacred in Zoroastrianism, the Zoroastrians also keep and maintain “eternal fires” to symbolize their unending devotion to God and the principles of their faith. Sacred fires of this type may be kept in homes but also in temples, called “Videvdad,” which refers to a place where fires



Zoroastrian priest performs a ritual at a fire temple in Tehran, Iran, September 12, 2011. The worship of fire and water has been an essential feature of Zoroastrianism since the religion was created by the Bronze Age Persian prophet Zarathustra. (AP Photo)

may lawfully be created and maintained to serve a spiritual community. The fire in a ceremonial firepot must be kept burning at all times, and extinguishing such a fire is considered a sin. In addition, not all fires are equally sacred. The spiritual worth of a fire depends on the fire’s perceived purity. Only certain fragrant types of material can be used in a sacred fire, including sandalwood and the leaves of the aloe plant. The addition of certain types of leaves, wood, or other materials is seen as destroying the spiritual value of the fire.

Zoroastrians, either in temples or in their homes, adhere to certain rules to prevent the pollution of sacred fires. For instance, cooking dishes must be kept half full to prevent spillage onto the flame, and the fire is also kept a certain distance from impure substances. Zoroastrians do

not always keep the home fire lit, but they often light it on spiritually significant occasions, such as to ward off evil or in the case of illness or death in the family.

Community fire temples are sacred places where families gather to pray and make symbolic zaothras to Ahura Mazda through the sacred flame. As Zoroastrianism spread into India, fire temples became an important facet of the Indian approach to the faith and remain one of the primary modes of Indian Zoroastrian organization. Devout Zoroastrians may visit a fire temple daily, while more casual adherents might visit only on the central holy days of each month. To preserve the purity of the flame, visitors to the temple remove their shoes and socks and wash their hands and feet before entering the temple. After a prayer ceremony, each worshipper receives a small portion of ash from the sacred fire. This substance is considered both a sacrament and a charm for spiritual enhancement.

While some modern Zoroastrians may not observe the rules and rituals surrounding fire ceremonies, the firepot has remained a powerful symbol of the religion wherever it occurs. The sanctity of fire is a bridge that connects Zoroastrianism to the most ancient traditions of human culture and to the Paleolithic discoveries that shaped society. Throughout the holy texts of Zoroastrianism, fire is said to be a spiritually transformative force that burns away impurities in a crucible to leave only spiritual purity in its wake. The Zoroastrian fire is also a symbol of Ahura Mazda's presence and represents his role as the symbolic purifier of humanity.

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## THE LIFE OF ZOROASTER

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### Innovator of Monotheism

Zoroaster, the founder of Zoroastrianism, is one of the most important historical figures from ancient Iran, though the details of his life remain largely unknown and have been obscured by the mythology of the Zoroastrian faith. The name "Zoroaster" is the approximate Greek version of the name "Zorothustra," which was used in his native Iran. He is also known as "Zarathusti" in Persian and "Zarhosht" among the Parsi Zoroastrians of Gujarat, India.



Zoroaster's life is partially described in the Gathas, a set of 17 hymns believed to have been written by Zoroaster himself, and in a selection of texts written in the Pahlavi language that were produced between the 9th and 11th centuries CE, a period of intellectual and literary resurgence that is often called the Iranian Renaissance. Zoroaster's life and the development of Zoroastrianism are interesting because they provide a record of the ancient society of Iran, one of the early cradles of human civilization.

### Family and Religious Training

Zoroaster was born into the Spitaman family, the descendants of a progenitor named Spitama whose relationship to Zoroaster is unknown. The dates of his birth and life are unknown. The holy texts place his life around 600 BCE, while literary and archaeological evidence suggests that he lived between 1500 and 1000 BCE and was born in Eastern Iran.

Zoroaster's father was named Pourusaspa, and his mother was called Dughdhova. The known names of the male members of Zoroaster's family, Haecataspa and Pourusaspa, contain the word "aspa," which translates to "horse" in the ancient Avestan language. This has led to the speculation that Zoroaster's family lived a pastoral existence and was involved in animal husbandry of some sort. Zoroaster's father's name, "Pourusaspa," can be translated as "possessing grey horses." His mother's name, "Dughdhova," can be translated as "one who has milked" or "milkmaid." Zoroaster's name in the Avestan language, "Zorothustra," can be tentatively translated as "one who handles camels" or "camel owner," which was a highly valued skill among the nomadic tribes of Iran during this period.

Some sources indicate that Zoroaster was trained as a priest in one of Iran's ancient polytheistic religious sects, though this theory is tentative because little is known about how the religious system in Iran worked at this time. It is believed that the priests and the nobles or princes (karvis) were the dominant members of highly stratified and often oppressive social structure.

Priests in this period were sometimes called "karapans," which translates to "one who mumbles rites," and this refers to a complex series of religious utterances, including magic words, songs, and hymns, that were believed to allow them to communicate with the gods and to invoke mysterious powers. Priestly rites appeared in three basic types: manthras, which were incantations and repeated phrases; songs of praise, which were intended to please the gods and to ask for protection or favor; and religious poetry such as the Gathas, which is attributed to Zoroaster and serves as the primary extant example. Religious poetry was composed only by the Zaoatars, or leading priests, and Zoroaster's composition of the

Gathas (as well as his references to himself as a Zaotar) lend credence to the idea that Zoroaster became a high priest in the native religious tradition.

## The Birth of Zoroastrianism

In the tradition of the era, Zoroaster would have been considered an adult around the age of 15 and would have by then been a fully initiated priest. Zoroaster left his parents at the age of 20 to become a traveling ascetic and (according to the mythology of the faith) spent 10 years traveling before, at the age of 30, he had a vision that led him to spiritual revelation. One of the Pahlavi texts says that Zoroaster's revelation came during a native spring festival, when Zoroaster plunged into a river to fetch water for a ceremony. The purifying power of the water brought about a vision of Vohu Manah (good intention), one of the six Amesha Spentas, or immortals, of the faith. Manah took Zoroaster before the creator God Ahura Mazda and the other immortals, where Zoroaster was taught the secrets to his faith.

Zoroastrianism was fundamentally different from the preexisting polytheistic traditions, but it overlapped with them in key ways, indicating a process that is likely common during the birth of any new religion. Zoroastrianism retains many of the old gods, or Daevas, of the earlier traditions but, reflecting his rejection of that faith, reclassified the Daevas as evil spirits and declared rituals to honor them, especially animal sacrifice, to be immoral. Zoroaster's denigration of the Daevas made his religion controversial, making it difficult for him to win converts within Iran.

In other ways, Zoroastrianism maintained traditions practiced in early eras. For instance, Zoroastrianism embraced the use of the sacred plant called "haoma," which for centuries was fermented to make an intoxicating beverage used in ceremonies. The plant, which is a member of the Ephedraceae family, is still considered sacred in Zoroastrianism and is generally crushed with water to produce a mildly stimulating concoction that is believed to promote healing and sexual energy. In Zoroastrianism, haoma is associated with Vohu Manah, the first of the Amesha Spentas who appeared to Zoroaster.

Traditional accounts say that Zoroaster traveled to the kingdom of Bactria, in what is now northern Afghanistan, when he was around 42 years old. There, Zoroaster managed to convert Queen Hutaosa to his new philosophy, and through her he eventually succeeded in converting the ruling regent, King Vistaspa. Zoroastrianism became an honored religion in Bactria, and legend holds that Zoroaster was treated as an honored prophet by the elite of the kingdom and remained there until his death, at around the age of 77.

It is believed that Vistaspa warred with neighboring kingdoms over his decision to champion Zoroastrianism and eventually spread the religion to the factions

that later founded the Achaemenid dynasty (553–334 BCE). The ultimate success of any spiritual movement often hinges on whether the religion finds patrons within the military or governmental elite, and this demonstrates the often intimate links between faith and politics. Many of the world's great faiths (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) owe their continued success in a large part to the fact that they became the chosen faiths of pivotal political leaders who used their faith to expand their power.

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II



# DHARMIC RELIGIONS

The Dharmic religions are a family of related traditions that emerged in the Indian subcontinent, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and a variety of smaller religions that emerged from one of these faiths. The religions of India share a common origin in the Vedic philosophical traditions linked to the Harappan civilization (3300–1300 BCE) of the Indus Valley region that includes modern Afghanistan, northern India, and Pakistan. The Dharmic religions share a belief in an eternal cyclic universe and the belief that humans, and other living things, are subject to a cycle of reincarnation. In addition, certain mythological figures appear in more than one of the Dharmic faiths, representing their shared heritage. Finally, all of the major Dharmic religions share certain key concepts, such as dharma, karma, and samsara, though each faith defines these concepts in a unique way.

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# Hinduism

The term “Hinduism” is of modern origin, having been invented largely by Western scholars in their efforts to classify and categorize the native religious traditions of India. The term “Hindu” came from early Greek trade with India and is derived from a Persian term used to refer to the Indus River. During the Islamic Mughal dynasty’s control of India, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the term became popular as a way of referring to the native ethnic group of India. Gradually, Indians themselves began using Hindu to differentiate themselves from Muslims in India, and during the British occupation of India, the term became associated with the dominant native religious traditions.

Hinduism does not refer to a single religion but is better defined as a group of related spiritual traditions that share a common origin and certain essential characteristics. Some scholars prefer the term “Vedic religions,” which is a historical approach to classification that refers to the importance of the ancient Vedic texts in the formulation of Indian spirituality, while other scholars used the term “Sanatana Dharma,” meaning “Eternal Law,” which is a belief-based approach, reflecting the importance of the idea of dharma in this family of religions. In any case, the family of Hindu beliefs are among the oldest spiritual traditions in the world, representing more than 5,000 years of cultural evolution. In the 21st century, between 900 million and 1 billion individuals report following some form of Hinduism.

## Origins and Evolution

Hinduism has no single founder or even a definitive starting point. The roots of Hinduism can be traced to the Indus Valley or Harappan civilization, a society that existed at the base of the Indus River from around 3300 to 1300 BCE. Some scholars believe that a group called the “Aryans,” or “Noble Ones,” migrated into India from elsewhere, blending with the remnants of the Harappan civilization, while others believe that the Aryans were merely a subgroup within the Harappan culture that migrated into India. In any case, the Aryan-Harappan mix gave rise to the Vedas, which are the foundational texts of Hinduism that were transcribed from oral traditions around 1200 BCE.



The Vedas can be divided into four separate sections, including the Brahmanas, which deal with the establishment of the caste system of India, and the Upanishads, which deal with philosophical and spiritual principles of the universe. The Vedas introduce a complex pantheon of gods, called “Devas,” many of which are still found in Hinduism. The Classical Age of Hinduism (500 BCE–500 CE) saw the foundation of Hindu spiritual practice inspired by the mythology of the Vedas. It was during this period that the Dharma Sutras were composed, a unique genre of literature that describes the origins and expression of universal laws and principles. It was during this period that Buddhism emerged from Hinduism and developed into an independent religion, and the two traditions then influenced each other through centuries of coevolution. The first unified dynasty of India, the Gupta dynasty, emerged in the fourth century BCE and led to the further diversification of Hinduism into distinct branches, or sects.

Two epic Sanskrit poems of the Classical Age became central to the Hindu canon. The Ramayana, which is ascribed to the sage Valmiki between 600 and 500 BCE, tells the story of King Rama and Queen Sita and their battle with the demon king Ravana. The other epic is the Mahabharata, which is ascribed to the sage Vyasa around 400 BCE, and contains the Bhagavad Gita, a book that describes conversations between a charioteer named Arjuna and his lord Krishna (a manifestation of Vishnu) that explain core values and political principles of Hindu philosophy. The Bhagavad Gita inspired the American Hindu sect known as the Hare Krishnas, which emerged in the 1960s in New York City.

Islam first entered India around 1200 CE, and by the 1500s, the Islamic Mughal dynasty had taken control of most of the region, placing restrictions on the practice of non-Islamic faiths. Islamic control of India ended when the British defeated the last remnants of the Mughal Empire in 1757, though Hinduism was still persecuted under British rule. During the 1800s and 1900s, Hinduism experienced another renaissance, developing beyond its ancient roots to give rise to an ethical and philosophical approach to the faith with a reduced focus on deism, or the belief in gods.

The less-deistic approach to Hinduism became part of the developing New Age movements in the West in the 1960s, which was driven by a fascination with Asian spirituality. This led to the development of a distinctly Western “pop Hinduism” that was fueled by interest in yoga (an ancient branch of Hindu philosophy that involves a number of meditative exercises) and Hindu meditation and perpetuated through self-help literature purportedly derived from ancient wisdom. Most Western schools of yoga and Hindu meditation have little or nothing to do with traditional Hindu philosophy; they use American and European interest in “exotic” Asian spirituality (and the perception of secret Asian esoteric knowledge) to sell exercise and self-help programs. This type of Hinduism has remained popular

### **Spirituality X-Treme**

The Westernization of yoga has resulted in a variety of more strenuous forms of yoga designed to maximize physical benefits. Among the more unusual forms of neo-yoga is BOGA Yoga, a form of yoga practice performed on floating paddleboards that blurs the lines between spiritual practice and alternative sport.

into the 21st century, bolstered by successive waves of Hindu migrants around the world, and is the form often used to market Hindu beliefs as a Western commodity.

## **Hindu Beliefs**

Hinduism is the original dharmic religion, and is the precursor for Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and the other faiths that share variations of this concept. Dharma, in much of Hinduism, refers to a set of laws or principles that underlie the universe. Dharma may also refer to the practice of law or of religion itself. In other senses, a person's dharma can be translated as "virtue," "destiny," or "purpose." Hinduism also involves belief in a soul, or "atman," a nonphysical core that exists within all individuals. The atman is locked into a continual cycle of reincarnation, called "samsara," that can last for an infinite period and involves reincarnation into nonhuman forms. The concept of karma refers to the belief that actions can have inherent positive or negative effects on one's atman and the form of their current and future incarnations. The goal of study and practice is to achieve moksha, or "liberation," from the cycle of samsara and becoming one with the universe.

Hinduism can be pantheistic, which involves belief that God is essentially the same thing as the universe as a whole; monotheistic, which involves belief in a single or primary God who is responsible for creation; or polytheistic, which involves the belief in a system of distinct deities governing different facets of the universe. The concept of Brahman can be understood as the absolute divinity or reality. Some Hindus may envision Brahman as a single all-powerful God, as part of a system of gods, or as a nondeistic force that underlies the universe.

Some Hindus have developed a trinity of gods, called the "Trimurti," which consists of the creator god Brahma, the preserver god Vishnu and the transformer or destroyer god Shiva. More commonly, Hindus tend to fall into three major sects, each distinguished by the worship of a separate manifestation of the supreme God or Brahman principle. Shaivism involves worship of Shiva, though the Shiva of Shaivism is not only a destroyer but is also associated with creation and maintenance of the universe. Vaishnavism focuses on Vishnu and is likely the most populous denomination of Hinduism around the world. Shaktism is the worship

of the mother goddess Shakti, or Devi, who may also appear as the destructive goddess Kali.

Traditionally, Hinduism helped to create and maintain a social caste system, which determined a person's potential job and social rank. These castes included the scholarly and religious caste, warrior caste, merchant caste, and worker caste. The caste-based hierarchy contributed to the origin of Buddhism and Sikhism, which rejected the social stratification of Hindu society in the formation of their alternative philosophies. However, the caste system may not have been as prejudicial until India came under British rule in the 18th century, and some scholars have argued that the British promoted caste differentiation as a form of population control. In any case, though strict caste-based differentiation is no longer the norm, caste-based discrimination still plays a role in Indian society and contributes to social and sociological policies.

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## HANUMAN

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### Divine Monkey of Legend

The monkey hero Hanuman, from the classic epic poems of Hindu literature, is one of a pantheon of simian spirits that appear in religious traditions around the world that represent ancient links to animistic traditions. A beloved folk hero in India, Hanuman has inspired religious sects and ceremonies, schools of yoga and meditation, and countless works of art and literature.

### Origins and Myth

The story of Hanuman is part of the Ramayana, or the “Romance of Rama,” which is one of two great epic poems of the Sanskrit language (also called the “Mahakavya,” or “great works”), the other being the Mahabharata, or “Epic of the Bharata Kingdom.” The Ramayana is attributed to the legendary Indian sage and poet Valmiki, often heralded as the first poet or first great poet of India. Historians generally believe that the earliest of the seven books of the Ramayana may have been written around 300 BCE.

The Ramayana tells the story of the sage-king Rama, who is considered an avatar of the god Vishnu. Rama develops a passionate and devoted love for Sita, the daughter of King Janaka, and eventually marries her. After a jealous servant frames Rama for thievery, Rama and Sita are banished to the forest, where further misery befalls them when Sita is kidnapped by the demon king Ravana of the kingdom of Lanka. After many further adventures, Rama and his brother encounter Sugriva, the deposed king of the monkey people called “vanara” and help him reclaim his throne. In gratitude, Sugriva pledges his monkey armies, under the leadership of the general Hanuman, to serve Rama and help him rescue his beloved Sita.



Statue of the Hindu monkey-god, Hanuman, Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple, India. (Yuliya Kryzhevskaya/Dreamstime.com)

Various myths recount the details of Hanuman’s origins differently, but he is generally considered to be the child of the wind god Vayu and a female vanara. He is usually depicted as having a human body with the face and tail of a monkey. Hanuman’s name is generally translated to mean “disfigured jaw,” and this is a reference to a story in which Hanuman, as a mischievous youth, attempted to eat the sun after mistaking it for a piece of fruit. The god-king Indra struck him in the jaw with a lightning bolt for his impudence, deforming his face. Some Hanuman myths hold that Hanuman was sent by the gods to serve Rama and was given supernatural powers to ensure his victory, including immortality and protective magic that protected him from any mortal weapon.

Hanuman and the monkey armies searched for Sita, but they were hindered by a series of seemingly insurmountable obstacles that Hanuman was only able to overcome thanks to his divine powers. In one story, Hanuman leaps across the ocean that separates India and Lanka in a single bound, and in another, he shrinks to the size of a mouse to infiltrate the kingdom of Lanka. Hanuman and his armies eventually lay siege to Lanka through a grand series of battles in which Hanuman defeats hordes of demonic soldiers. Rama and Hanuman are eventually victorious

over Ravana and rescue Sita, after which Hanuman elects to remain with Rama, serving as an adviser and protector to his kingdom for more than a millennium.

### Meaning and Influence

Hanuman has many associations in Hindu culture and is sometimes venerated as an independent deity. There have been prominent Hanuman cults over the centuries, and he is also an important subsidiary deity in temples devoted to Rama and Vishnu. Hanuman is often associated with bhakti, the principle of devotion, representing Hanuman's loyalty to Rama. At the end of his portion of the story, Hanuman declares that he will not accept any reward nor keep any object that is not a direct representation of Rama and Sita. When Hanuman is asked why he then keeps his own body, he opens his chest and reveals that his heart contains Rama and Sita within it.

The Hanuman legend bears close similarity to the legends of Sun Wukong, the monkey king of Chinese mythology who appears in the *Hsi-yu Chi*, or the "Journey to the West," a classic of Chinese literature that was first published in the 16th century. This epic story follows a Buddhist monk named Golden Cicada (based on the historical figure of Xuanzang), who travels to India to retrieve Buddhist scriptures. The story depicts a China in which Buddhism and the ancient Taoist pantheon of gods exist in harmony, and the character of Sun Wukong, a mischievous minor deity from the monkey people, represents both philosophical systems. Raised in the celestial heavens of the Taoist gods, Sun Wukong converts to Buddhism after he is assigned to aid Golden Cicada's quest to retrieve scriptures from India.

A number of contemporary folklorists have suggested that Hanuman was the inspiration for Sun Wukong. Both figures appear as ancillary aids to the protagonists of the stories and have similar appearances and similar ancestry, as both are described as descendants of the wind gods. In addition, the powers attributed to both figures are remarkably similar, including the abilities to change shape and to travel through the air by leaping, flying, or riding on clouds, and both are immortal and cannot be harmed by normal weapons. While some Chinese scholars object to the Hanuman-origin hypothesis in favor of a native origin for Sun Wukong, this opinion seems to be motivated more by nationalistic sentiment than historical rigor. Numerous scholars have argued that the overlap between the two characters defies explanation by mere coincidence and also point out that the subject of the *Hsi-yu Chi* is the blending of Indian Buddhism and Chinese culture, which is precisely what seems to have occurred in development of the Sun Wukong character.

Long before the discovery of evolution, humanity recognized shared characteristics with primates, especially the larger apelike simians of Asia and

Africa. Various myths and legends have explained this relationship, claiming that monkeys were cursed or twisted humans or symbolic spirits bridging the gap between the civilized and feral realms. The Hanuman langur (*Presbytus entellus*), a species of monkey from India and Sri Lanka, is named for the epic hero but may also have played a role in inspiring the Hanuman myth. Today, the langur is considered sacred, and at temples honoring Hanuman, the langur is fed and venerated. The Ramayana, like many ancient literary classics, includes heroes that are part animal and part human, and this may reflect even more ancient animistic myths that attempt to define the relationship between human, animal, and the divine. Hanuman's mischievous nature contrasts with his devotion and faithfulness, representing the contrast between humanistic and animalistic impulses, and this may reflect the inherent conflict between these same forces in the human psyche.

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## KALI CULTS

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### Spirituality of Destruction

The Hindu goddess Kali is a complex figure associated with both death and destruction and with the infinite nature of the universe. Since the early medieval period, there have been a small number of cults and religious sects dedicated to the worship of Kali. Within Tantrism, Kali is sometimes worshipped as the most powerful goddess and a force of creative power, while in other traditions, she represents the destructive power of war and death. The Thuggee cult of northern India, which existed from the 13th to the 19th centuries CE, committed thousands of ritual murders in the name of Kali, though their motivations were practical as well as spiritual, as they were also career thieves who lived off the property they took from their victims. The Thuggee cult has since inspired a number of fictional portrayals that associate the Thuggees with dark, mystical powers.

### Kali the Destroyer

Kali is a goddess of opposing forces. She is a destructive force and a bringer of death and yet also worshipped as a protective mother. In many legends, Kali

appears to be an independent deity, and worshippers often treat her as such, but she is also closely associated with the god Siva (Shiva) and often appears in myths as Siva's consort, wife, or friend. Kali's name is derived from the Hindi term "kalam," generally translated as "black" or "dark." Her name is a metaphorical association with darkness and evil, but it also refers to the black color of her skin (in nearly all depictions), associating Kali with notions of infinity and the all-encompassing nature of the color, which absorbs all other colors. Kali is also sometimes known as "the Black One" or "the Black Mother." Most depictions portray Kali as a frightening figure. She is generally shown naked, with disheveled hair, four arms holding various types of weapons, and a fierce, some might say murderous, expression on her face. She is often depicted as wearing a necklace made of human skulls and tiger skin.

Independent worship of Kali began in the early medieval period, and Kali's popularity was largely inspired by the Hindu text known as the *Devi Mahatmya*, which was published during the 5th or 6th centuries CE. In the *Devi Mahatmya*, Kali is depicted as having sprung from the forehead of the goddess Durga while Durga was engaged in battle with demonic forces. Upon emerging from Durga's head, which had become as "black as ink" because of her anger, Kali began a murderous rampage, tearing apart demons with her bare hands and slicing them with her sword.

Durga ordered Kali to defeat a powerful demon known as Raktabija who was difficult to kill because whenever he was wounded, any drop of Raktabija's blood caused a duplicate of the demon to spring from the earth. After a long battle, the wounds Kali inflicted upon the demon only worsened the situation, and she was now faced with an army of Raktabijas. Kali's solution was to eat all of the duplicates and to drink Raktabija's blood to prevent further multiplication. In the wake of the battle, Kali's rage could not be contained, so Siva threw himself at her feet to stop her. This legend led to one of the most common depictions of the goddess: standing with one foot on the body of a supine Siva with her bloodstained tongue protruding from her face.

Kali worship drew heavily on the goddess's association with blood, and many worshippers offered human or animal blood as a tribute. Some devotional ceremonies also involved drinking blood to win Kali's favor. While Kali symbolizes destruction, anarchy, and death, worshippers also view her as a protector, a creative force, and a maternal figure. Each of her attributes that outwardly symbolize death can also be seen as representing more beneficial or, at least, neutral characteristics. Kali's necklace of human skulls, for instance, represents the transcendence of the human reaching nirvana, while the 55 skulls on the necklace represents the 55 letters of the Hindi alphabet and thereby symbolize the literary element of human knowledge.

## The Thuggee Cult

The Thuggees were a fraternal cult of professional assassins that was mainly active in northern India during the 13th century CE. Historians believe that the Thuggee cult began as a devoted spiritual movement, with members performing ritual murders to honor Kali. The specific rituals and earliest origin of the cult are not well understood, but it appears that the cult was active in small cells across India by the late 1300s. Membership in the cult is believed to have passed from father to son, though nonrelatives may also have been admitted in some situations.

Thuggee assassins would meet up with groups of travelers along the roads between India's settlements and stay with a caravan until the travelers no longer harbored any wariness or suspicion. In some cases, several members of the Thuggee group joined with a caravan over time, building their strength over days or weeks. When they felt the time was right, one or more individuals would be lured away from the group to a secluded location. There, a Thuggee cultist would approach from behind and slip a handkerchief around the individual's throat, suffocating him or her. The cult often divided duties among the members, with some committing the attacks while others functioned as lookouts or drove a carriage so that the group could make their escape.

After each murder, the Thuggees removed any valuables from the victim's body and then performed a ritual burial to honor Kali with the sacrifice, often disguising the burial site to avoid suspicion. In honor of their preferred method of killing, the Thuggees were sometimes called "phansigars," meaning "stranglers." Some reports indicate that they used yellow headscarves to commit their murders, as the colors yellow and beige are symbolic of Kali worship.

Over the centuries, the Thuggee cult changed, gradually losing much of its former spiritual associations and becoming more of a secret underground criminal network, with members of both Hindu and Muslim descent. In the 1800s, the British colonial government engaged in a concerted effort to eliminate the cult. The mastermind of this effort was William Henry Sleeman, a British administrator whose police captured a Thuggee known "Feringhea," whom Sleeman's interrogators convinced to provide evidence on the cult. Feringhea showed Sleeman and his officers a secret burial ground that contained the remains of thousands of victims.

With the help of informants, British forces arrested hundreds with suspected involvement or ties to the group. In 1830, authorities arrested the man believed to be the cult leader, generally known as Thug Behram. Some reports indicate that Behram confessed to as many as 931 murders, though historians believe now that Behram may have been directly responsible for 100–200 murders but was aware of or indirectly involved in nearly 1,000. In any case, the Thuggee cult was one of the deadliest secret societies ever known, and the legend of the cult lived on through fiction and historical accounts.



### Templars of Doom

Fans of the 1984 prequel film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* might remember that Dr. Jones's enemy in the film was a highly fictionalized version of the Thuggee cult, which was led by an evil priest, Mola Ram, who used dark magic to remove the hearts of his victims.

The name “thuggee” was derived from the Hindi term “thag,” meaning “thief” or “deceiver,” and the term “thug” has been preserved as part of the English language, meaning a “dangerous or violent criminal.” In English usage, “thug” sometimes carries the connotation of an unintelligent and rather brutish person, but this usage bears little relation to the actual cult. Thuggees were assassins rather than brutish murderers, using deception, subterfuge, and secrecy to murder thousands while remaining concealed in the shadows of Indian culture. By some estimates, the Thuggee cult may have committed 1–2 million murders before their dissolution. Thug Behram was sentenced to execution and hanged in 1830, bringing a symbolic, public end to the cult's centuries-long reign of violence.

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## THE KAMA SUTRA

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### The Hindu Book of Love

The Kama Sutra is an ancient text that covers aspects of love, marriage, and sexual behavior. It was first committed to written form between the second and the third centuries CE, though much of the text may have been composed long before it was compiled into a single volume. The Kama Sutra is the world's oldest and most famous guide to sexual positions, but it is not limited to physical techniques. It also contains information on many aspects of romantic life and interpersonal relationships. The name “Kama Sutra” is from ancient Sanskrit and translates generally as “aphorisms regarding sensual pleasure.”

## Origin of the Kama Sutra

Historians have not been able to determine a precise origin or age of the Kama Sutra, but it was most likely compiled during the Gupta dynasty (ca. 320–550 CE). The Kama Sutra is largely attributed to a mysterious Vedic monk named Vatsyayana, whose life remains a mystery to historians though it is generally agreed he lived during the Gupta dynasty, which is considered a golden age of Vedic literature and philosophy. According to some largely unconfirmed accounts, Vatsyayana belonged to a celibate monastic tradition and studied sexuality and sensual behavior as a form of meditative practice. Because the Kama Sutra describes the lives of individuals living during this period of Indian history, the book has become an important source for scholars studying society in the Gupta dynasty.

Though the Kama Sutra is the most famous book on sensuality, it was not the only manual on the subject produced in Indian culture. The Kama Sutra is one of several books that make up the Indian Kamashastra, or the tradition of “writings on love, sensuality, and sexuality.” Other important works in this tradition include the *Ratirahasya*, or the “Secrets of Love,” which is believed to have been written in the 11th century CE, and the *Ananga Ranga*, or “Stage of Love,” which was written in the 16th century.

The 16th-century poet and sage Kalyana Malla, who wrote the *Ananga Ranga*, is also credited with one of the most lasting editions of the Kama Sutra. After the 1500s, the Kama Sutra became a relatively obscure historical text in Indian scholarship, largely because the ancient Sanskrit of the original was only accessible to serious scholars. A resurgence of interest in the Kama Sutra came in the 1800s, thanks to a proliferation of new compilations and translations from scholars studying the far more accessible *Ananga Ranga* who began to take a renewed interest in the foundational works on the subject.

The Kama Sutra was first translated into English in 1883 by Forster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot, a British civil servant; Sir Richard Burton, a famed British explorer and captain in the army of the East India Trading Company; and Indian scholar Bhagvanlal Indraji. The 1883 edition of the text was based on the version compiled by Kalyana Malla and contained a foreword written by Burton, a well-known supporter of early erotica and Indian literature. In 1885, the three men collaborated to produce the first English-language version of Kalyana Malla’s *Ananga Ranga*.

Burton published and promoted his translation of the Kama Sutra in Britain, despite the fact that the book violated provisions against indecency in publishing. To avoid censorship, Burton and his collaborators, who established a press known as the Kama Shastra Society, published the book outside of England and priced it so that only wealthy persons could obtain a copy. By offering the book through an irregular publishing source and delivering it only to a select clientele,

Burton avoided attempts to censor the book. Before long, pirated copies of the book spread throughout Europe and into the United States. By the early 20th century, the Kama Sutra had achieved status as the world's most famous erotic text, a distinction that has remained valid into the 21st century.

## Contents of the Kama Sutra

Most who have seen the Kama Sutra, or at least heard of it, know that the book contains a dizzying array of sexual techniques and positions, initially demonstrated through images of stone carvings. Later editions replaced the stone sculptures with drawings and then photos. However, though the catalogue of sexual techniques is a central element of the Kama Sutra, the book was intended as more of a guidebook for romance and sensual pleasure that was aimed at helping men and women learn to engage in healthy, mutually pleasing, and mutually sensual relationships.

The Kama Sutra might in many ways be compared to a marriage manual, though it is written in poetic prose and has an underlying focus on spiritual fulfillment through a harmonious union. Part of the book is written in a more or less practical manner, providing instructions for both men and women on how to find and attract a mate. Much of this original material is only moderately relevant to persons living in modern society, but it has been a source of fascination and illumination for historians seeking to understand medieval culture in India. The Kama Sutra does not abide by common moral regulations and even contains sections with information on how to seduce women or men outside of one's relationships, including the wives and husbands of others. Particularly, one of the characters in the Kama Sutra is a courtesan (prostitute) who must learn a variety of pleasure-inducing techniques and behaviors to lure and entice her clients.

In regard to sexual and erotic content, the Kama Sutra contains a wealth of information about methods of contact that produce pleasure, covering the entirety of the body from the top of the head to the toes. The Kama Sutra describes sensual massage, various kissing and manual stimulation techniques, and a variety of penetrative forms and styles. In addition, the Kama Sutra also discusses different body types and how these different body types may fit together in various ways. For those who experience difficulties in sexual congress, the Kama Sutra contains lengthy lists of tips and tricks aimed at facilitating attraction, sexual interest, and orgasm, even delving into foods, devices, and herbs that can be used to stimulate and enhance arousal.

There is a significant emphasis placed on producing the sensations of pleasure and orgasm in women, and it is clear from the text that producing similar sensations in the male was seen as a comparatively simple process. In some sense, the

Kama Sutra seems to suggest that it is the male's duty to ensure that his mate receives pleasure and implies that, if the male fails to do so, the woman must be considered free to seek pleasure elsewhere.

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## OM SYMBOL

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### The Sound of Creation

The om symbol is a sacred sound syllable that originated in ancient Hinduism. It represents many different concepts, including Brahman, the absolute nature of the universe, and in its graphic form the trinity of Hindu deities. Now famous around the world, the om symbol has become emblematic of Hinduism in the West, or more specifically of the Westernized versions of Hindu spiritual practice, such as yoga and Indian meditation, that have become popular in Europe and the United States.

### Meaning of the Sound

Om is a sound symbol, meaning that om is meant to be experienced through the spoken and heard sound of the word as well as its visual representation. The om concept involves three independent, yet interlinked, layers of meaning. First, there is the spoken quality of word or syllable, often written phonetically as "A-U-M," and the effect that speaking the syllable has in terms of engendering meditative awareness. Second, there is the aural quality of the word itself, as experienced when a person hears the syllable sounded out or speaks the syllable and hears



The om symbol is one of the most important symbols in many of the Dharmic faiths, representing the three parts of the "A-U-M" syllable. In Hinduism, the om symbol or omkar has also come to represent a variety of other three-part spiritual concepts.

the resulting sound. Third, there is the graphic om symbol and its mythological and historical associations.

The om syllable has been described as the primordial sound of the universe, or the most basic sonic representation of reality. In many Hindu writings, it is said that the monosyllabic om sound existed before the world was created and contains the essence of creation within it. While often associated with creation, om also encapsulates the ending, representing the spectrum from birth through life and finally to death or nirvana. Om is often described as a “vibration,” in recognition of how the symbolic undulation of sound waves relates to the vibrational energy that gave rise to the universe.

According to one perspective, the universe is a combination of name (*nama*) and shape (*rupa*), which could also be described as “form” and “identity.” The creator of the universe is Brahma, but before this there was a sound, “om,” often called a “sphota” in Brahmanic linguistic tradition. It is believed that this sound would remain if all the individual characteristics of all other words were removed to reveal the underlying kernel of sound that underlies all speech. Thus, the syllable “om” is the symbol of Brahma *and* the most sacred of all sounds.

While the monosyllable “om” is a holistic concept, it can also be characterized as combination of three separate sounds, hence the typical English characterization as “A-U-M.” The division of the syllable into three parts is important because it connects om with other three-part concepts in Hindu spirituality and with other tri-natured symbols, such as the “trishula,” or “trident,” which is the symbol and weapon of the god Shiva. The division into threes is a common spiritual concept that transcends cultural boundaries and appears in many religious traditions, from Christianity to neo-paganism.

The three syllables of om can symbolize the emergence, continuation, and end of life, thus dividing existence into three basic states. There is a fourth aspect to the om sound as well, the silence that follows the utterance of the *M* sound. This silence is often described as the “fourth state” of the universe associated with the indescribable essence of Brahman, infinity, or existence. Om also represents a three-part concept of spiritual development in which the individual is viewed as one part, with om representing the path toward enlightenment and Brahma envisioned as the goal of one’s spiritual journey.

## Om as the Central Mantra

The syllable “om” is meant to be spoken or chanted as part of meditative exercises to facilitate spiritual realization. Om is therefore considered a mantra, which can be roughly understood as a sound or collection of sounds that are believed to aid

in spiritual transformation. Mantras serve as meditative themes, helping to focus the mind toward the goal of achieving greater levels of awareness. Om is often described as the “central” mantra or, in actuality, the only essential mantra from which all others are derived. For this reason, om is called the “pranava mantra,” or the “source mantra.”

Many different mantras begin and end with the sound “om” or utilize the sound as a central element. For instance, the mantra “Om nama shivaya,” sometimes called the “five-syllable mantra,” is the most important mantra in the Shavatism sect of Hinduism, the sect devoted to the god Shiva. The mantra begins with the utterance of “om” and then recites, “namah Shivaya,” which is the holy name for Shiva and also relates to the other meaning of the word “shiva” or “siva,” which is “benevolent” or “kind.” The “om nama Shivaya” mantra has become unknowingly famous to many movie fans from its repeated utterance by a sacrificial victim in the film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.

Meditating on the om symbol, either in written or sonic form, is considered a road to enlightenment in itself. It is sometimes written that a person with a basic understanding of om will be reincarnated to the earth, while a person with a better understanding will join other enlightened individuals in a cosmic state. A person with a complete understanding will speak the sound as his or her final utterance of life and then join with Brahma, the ultimate state of the universe.

## The Visual Aspect of the Om Symbol

The character used to represent om is known as the “omkar.” It consists of three joined curves, often with a dot placed above the central shape. The symbol is a yantra, which is the graphic, visual equivalent of a mantra: an image that is meant to aid in meditation that symbolizes various spiritual concepts. As a yantra, practitioners trace the shapes of the omkar symbol with their eyes, using the image to focus their meditative efforts. Some historians assert that the form of the omkar predates the Sanskrit language and developed from an ancient hieroglyphic symbol that was carved and painted into rock before the development of written language.

The graphic representation of the omkar has many symbolic associations. One of the most common is with the trinity of Hindu deities (Trimurti), namely Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. As we have already seen, the om sound symbol is deeply associated with Brahma, but the three curves comprising the omkar can each be related to one of the three primary deities, thus comprising a visual representation of the trinity. Each of the three curves can also be associated with the three sounds comprising the spoken “A-U-M,” while the dot above the central curve represents the silence that follows recitation, or the “fourth state.”

In India and in the West, the om symbol has become an emblem or logo for Hinduism as well as for the many New Age practices that have been derived from Hindu tradition. The omkar emblem has become a popular tattoo design in the West, though not as part of an actual Hindu religious practice, and is also present on thousands of logos used on T-shirts, coffee mugs, and all manner of other merchandise marketed for its “mystical” connection to Hindu tradition or “wisdom.” Despite this tendency to use om as a superficial decoration, the omkar and the use of the spoken and written om symbol have remained one of the central sacred concepts in Hinduism and a link to the ancient Vedic spirituality.

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## SWASTIKA

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### Symbol of Life and Death

Few spiritual symbols have become as maligned and infamous as the swastika because of the symbol’s political associations with the German Nazi Party and their heinous war crimes during World War II. Though many are aware that the swastika did not originate in Nazi Germany, there remains significant confusion regarding the origins of the symbol. Swastika-like symbols seem to have emerged independently in many civilizations. The name “swastika” derives from the Sanskrit term “svastika,” meaning, “conveying good fortune.” Though the swastika does not have a single clear origin, the use of the swastika in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism depicts the most common meanings associated with the symbol.

### History of the Swastika

One of the earliest-known versions of a swastika-like symbol, also called a “crooked cross,” comes from the Vinca civilization in southern Europe and may have been created between 5000 and 6000 BCE. There seems to be little evidence that the Vinca script of southern Europe influenced similar crooked-cross designs in other cultures, but it is known that the symbol was used by the ancient Sumerian culture in what is now Iraq and parts of Mesopotamia between 4500 and 4000 BCE. Archaeological remnants from around 2000 BCE in Mesopotamia contain swastika symbols similar to the modern forms used in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Within India, the swastika seems to have come from the Harappan or Indus Valley civilization, which existed from approximately 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE. The swastika has been found in architectural remnants from the Harappan city of Mohenjo-Daro, also called the “City of the Dead,” and seems to have been associated with the god Vishnu in the ancient Vedic texts. As Hinduism developed from a number of spiritual systems that seem to have existed side-by-side in the Indus Valley, the swastika remained an important symbol and eventually became part of many other Indian religions.

The swastika became an important part of Buddhist symbolism as Buddhism emerged from Indian Hinduism. Some evidence indicates that Chinese Taoists may have used a swastika-like symbol before the arrival of Buddhism, but the symbol is now firmly associated with the Buddhist tradition. Statues of Buddha, especially ancient statues, sometimes depict the Buddha as having swastika symbols on his chest or the soles of his feet. In the modern world, the swastika is most often used in Asian-Buddhist art, symbolism, and architecture found in Bhutan, Tibet, China, Japan, and Korea.

The swastika also appears in ancient Greece and has been given the Western name “crux gammata,” or “gammadion cross,” because of the symbol’s resemblance to the Greek letter “gamma.” Historians have noted that the gammadion cross became a secret symbol for followers of Christianity in the early history of the religion, and the symbol has been found inscribed on numerous Christian tombs during a time when the Latin cross was a prohibited symbol under the Roman Empire.

Historians generally agree that the swastika emerged independently numerous times in different cultures around the world, though some historians speculate that the swastika in Europe, India, and Asia may have derived from the same root symbol, which was then passed through migration and trade between cultures in the Middle East, Africa, India and throughout Europe. This would not explain, however, the appearance of nearly identical symbols in the Americas. The Navajo people of North America use the swastika as a religious symbol, and a similar symbol has been found among relics of the Mayan civilization.

## **The Nazi Swastika**

Adolf Hitler was a student of history and cultural symbolism before he became the leader of one of the most destructive genocidal military movements in history. Hitler’s adoption of the swastika symbol was based on his belief in a group of Eurasian peoples known as the Aryans, who formed one part of the ancient Indo-Aryan ethnic group in India and the Middle East. An old Germanic myth held that the swastika was the symbol of these individuals, who were described as



“Sun People,” and that they were innately superior to the other races of the world. Hitler’s Germanic Nazi movement was partially based on the theory that those of “pure Aryan blood” needed to regain control of Europe.

Hitler also borrowed ideas from Guido von List, a Viennese merchant who believed himself to be descended from ancient Germanic priests. List built a secret society using the swastika as his holy emblem and the phrase “Heil” as a greeting, both of which were later adopted into the Nazi movement. List’s secret group, known as the Armanen Order or Armanen Society, proved to be the ideal breeding ground for radical German nationalism, and among its members were a number of people who went on to play major roles in the Nazi movement. Archaeologists have found no evidence to support the claim that the swastika originated among the pre-European population of the Indus Valley rather than those who went on to found India and Hinduism.

### Meaning of the Swastika

Historians generally agree that the swastika evolved from the cross symbol, one of the oldest and most widely used spiritual symbols in the world. In its most basic form, the cross consists of two perpendicular lines and often represents the four corners of the world or the four cardinal directions. The crooked arms of the swastika can basically be described as representing a cross in motion, with the bent arms symbolizing a direction of rotation. This moving cross interpretation is contained within many modern examples of swastika imagery, such as in the Falun Gong emblem, which contains multiple rotating swastikas to symbolize the eternal movement of the universe.

The swastika is often used in India as a symbol for the god Shiva, but it also has many other different interpretations and symbolic meanings in Hinduism. For instance, the Hindu swastika may symbolize the four potential fates for the human soul: to return to earth in animal or plant form, to be reborn as a human, to transition to the Hindu celestial realm, or to transition to the realm of punishment. Some interpretations say that the four arms represent the four castes of traditional Hindu society—the Brahmins (scholars and priests), warriors, landowners or merchants, and servants—with the center of the symbol representing the ideal state to which everyone is expected to aspire.

One of the most common interpretations of the origin of the swastika in Hinduism is that the symbol originally represented the sun as it rotated through the four corners of the earth. The symbol may also have represented fire sticks, which were rubbed together to create fire. The sun-image hypothesis has also been proposed for the origin of other swastika symbols, such as those that appeared in the Mayan civilization or elsewhere in the Americas. Sun symbolism is among the oldest forms of spiritual symbolism, and the swastika, like many other circular

symbols that have arms representing solar radiation, may have evolved from solar symbols in ancient civilizations.

The meaning of the swastika can also differ according to which way the bent arms face, often called “right-turning” or “left-turning” swastikas. In Hinduism, the right-turning swastika is often used as a symbol of the male god or the masculine principle, while the left-turning swastika is more often associated with femininity. The left-turning swastika is called the “sauvastika” in Sanskrit and is used to represent the goddess Kali, among other feminine associations.

Whether derived from a solar symbol, a representation of the cardinal directions, or a combination of multiple influences, the swastika has been a positive symbol for most of its more than 7,000 years of use, usually symbolizing life, good fortune, and the positive evolution and development of the universe. It is only through the barbarous misguided philosophy of the Nazis that the swastika came to be seen as a symbol of evil, and this historical connection has fundamentally altered reception of the emblem in the West.

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## TANTRISM

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### Esoteric Doctrine of Immediacy

Tantrism is a spiritual and philosophical tradition that is practiced within Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The Tantric traditions of each religion are unique, but they share many characteristics, including a focus on the divinity of the body and the use of physical rituals to obtain an enlightened state. Tantrism has its roots in a marriage between the ancient pre-Hindu traditions associated with fertility deities and the later Upanishadic traditions that developed from the foundational Vedic texts. In the Indian tradition, Tantrism often involves attending to ceremonies and practices that deal with the devotional aspects of desire. This focus differentiates Tantrism from other Hindu and Buddhist traditions, which view desire as an impediment to enlightenment.

### Origin of Tantric Rituals

The history of Tantrism is difficult to trace because over the centuries Tantric rituals have been passed down in secret from single teachers to a small group of

followers. The word “Tantra,” generally translated as “loom,” was first mentioned in the Rigveda, which was written around 1100 BCE. Most historians believe that Tantric sects may have emerged as early as the 5th or 6th centuries CE, and many of the most influential writings on the subject appeared in the 9th or 10th centuries.

Tantric texts can be divided into three basic classes: the Tantras, which are handbooks of doctrine concerning ritual or spiritual underpinnings; the agamas, or “books of ritual,” concerning the construction of Tantric temples and the completion of certain Tantric rituals; and the Samhitas, a collection of mantras, which are spoken or chanted sounds believed to aid in the search for liberation and enlightenment. Primarily, Tantric texts are written in Sanskrit, which was the language primarily used by the Brahmin (scholarly/priestly) caste in India, and it is therefore believed that Tantric rituals first spread among the elite religious class.

Hindu Tantrism is strongly connected to older philosophical and spiritual tribal rituals from before the emergence of modern Hinduism. For instance, many Tantric ceremonies involve ritualized sexuality (believed to encourage divine revelation), which may have derived from sexual rituals that once accompanied ceremonies intended to improve the fruitfulness of an agricultural season. In these rituals, the male symbolized the sky, and the female symbolized the earth. The union between the two symbolized the deliverance of the rain to bring growth to the crops. Another example of this ancient link can be found in the ritual eating of beef and drinking of alcohol, both of which are largely prohibited in Vedic Hinduism and may be related to ancient pre-Hindu agricultural traditions.

### Central Beliefs of Hindu Tantrism

It is difficult to identify a central belief system in Tantrism because there have been hundreds of different Tantric schools with unique philosophies and rituals. There is a general sense, in many Tantric traditions, that the universe can be viewed as a combination of male and female aspects. The division of the world into complementary halves, such as male and female, active and passive, and creative and destructive, is characteristic of Tantric philosophical systems but not universal, and some Tantric sects avoid dualism in favor of a holistic view of the universe.

As mentioned previously, most Tantric rituals are practiced in secret within exclusive groups. Adherents must undergo an initiation ritual, known as a “diksha,” which involves pledging oneself to a certain guru. During this initiation, the guru passes on a secret spoken formula, or “mantra,” to the student. While Tantric practitioners may utilize a number of mantras, each sect may have one or more unique mantras only taught to initiates. The guru will also pass on a number of bijas, which are syllables associated with various deities that are believed to have a certain

mystical power. The practice of an adept within a Tantric tradition is known as “sadhana,” a term usually translated as “means to accomplish something.”

Symbolism, idols, and deities often play an important role in Tantrism. In addition to the spoken or chanted mantras, individuals may also utilize yantras, which are geometric designs used to focus contemplation or meditation. Other artistic diagrams, including chakras and mandalas, may also be used in Tantric meditation to bring about a trancelike state that facilitates spiritual realization. Various Tantric sects may utilize unique mandalas, yantras, or chakras characteristic of their sect. These meditative aids represent various facets of the universe, including the flow of energy through the human body or structure of the cosmos.

In both Buddhist and Hindu Tantrism, there is tendency to focus on physical activities or rituals that can increase the flow of energy in the body and heighten spiritual awareness. Yoga, a form of mental, physical, and spiritual exercise derived from ancient Indian society, plays an important function in Tantric ritual. Certain types of yoga, including the school known as “Kundalini Yoga,” are inherently Tantric by design and emerged within Tantric sects in India.

### **Left-handed Tantrism and Reversal**

Tantric practices are sometimes divided into two different aspects, known as “vamacara,” or “left-handed,” and “daksinacara,” or “right handed,” Tantrism. This terminology derives from ancient customs that associated the left hand with impure activities, such as cleaning oneself after defecation or urination, while the right hand was associated with pure activities, such as eating. Vamacara Tantric practices are those that most violate orthodox Hindu traditions or morality and are believed to help achieve liberation by reversing energy flow. Sects that follow this path may engage in rituals that utilize the five forbidden substances: meat, fish, wine, sexual intercourse, and parched grain. The vamacara path is believed to be one of the earliest manifestations of Tantric practice.

Tantrism is often associated with meditative and spiritual sexuality, and sexual rituals are common in many Tantric sects. Much of the sexual content in Tantrism derives from the vamacara tradition of engaging in nonreproductive sexual behavior, even if aimed at spiritual realization, which is a reversal of common prohibitions regarding sexual desire in many schools of Hinduism and Buddhism. According to the Tantric tradition, the procreative function of sex and the pleasure of sex are only two aspects of sexuality, with the third being the attainment of liberation. Tantric sexual contact can therefore be used as a form of mutual physical meditation, merging energies with a partner as a path to achieving spiritual ecstasy.

There are a variety of ancient texts on Tantric sexual rituals, and (because of the central importance of sexual recreation in human culture) Tantric spiritual sexuality has become the most-researched and most-popular aspect of Tantric traditions. This is especially true of the way that Tantrism is portrayed in Western pop Hinduism. Writers of self-help and self-realization literature (with varying degrees of authenticity) often use Tantric sexuality as a way to transform Eastern traditions into mass-market consumer products in the form of books purporting to provide guidance to realization through sexual behavior.

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## TRISHULA

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### Weapon of the Sacred Trinity

The term "trishula" is a Sanskrit word meaning "three points" and refers to a three-tipped spear, better known in the West as a "trident," a term meaning "three teeth." From its origins as a weapon and hunting tool, many divergent cultures have adopted the three-pointed spear as a spiritual symbol that generally represents some form of three-part spiritual concept, or "trinity," such as birth, life, and death. Though many religions abandoned the three-pointed spear symbol, the trishula remains an important spiritual symbol in Hinduism and certain branches of Buddhism.

### Origins of the Three-pointed Spear

Historians are uncertain about the origins of the three-pointed spear, but the tool seems to have emerged independently in many cultures around the world and was used as both a hunting implement (especially for fishing) and a military weapon. Religions reflect the cultures in which they emerge and, for this reason, important tools often become imbued with spiritual significance. Some historians have suggested that the three-pointed spear may once have represented a three-pronged phallus, and served as an ancient fertility symbol. If this interpretation is correct, the phallic/fertility aspects of the symbol have been largely lost in history.

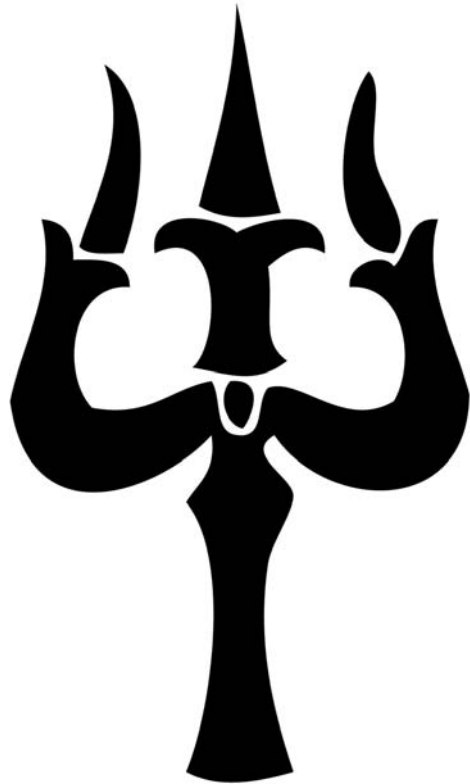
### The Next Gig Thing

In the Americas, the term “gigging” refers to fishing for frogs, eels, and small fish by using multipointed spears called “gigs.” Single-pointed spears are less effective for small animals because the prey has a tendency to wriggle off the single prong. The multipoint spear prevents this by holding the prey item at multiple points along its body.

Implements of warfare, like the sword, spear, and shield have an ancient history in spiritual symbolism and the trishula falls into this category. Weapon-like symbols reflect the violent cultural clashes that constitute an important aspect of religious expansion around the world and often also reflect mythology, representing the divine weapons used by gods or mythological heroes in battles against evil forces or mythological monsters. The three-pointed spear is also a tool for hunting and therefore falls into the category of symbols that link the world’s spiritual traditions to broader patterns of subsistence. In many cultures, the three-pointed spear was used in fishing and so became an important representation of oceanic and river deities in cultures closely linked to fishing economies.

### The Trishula in Hinduism and Buddhism

The trishula is a multifaceted symbol in Hinduism and has been associated with many different gods and mythological heroes. The symbol emerged within the Indus Valley civilization that thrived along the Indus River in northern India, Tibet, and Pakistan from 3000 to 1300 BCE. In the ancient city of Harappa, now one of the most important archaeological sites in the world, the trishula symbol



The trishula, both a religious symbol and a representation of the divine weaponry used to battle evil, is one of many worldwide symbols representing the divine associations with the number three.

has been found in architectural remains and pottery, and historians believe it had already become a spiritual emblem.

The trishula is most commonly associated with the god Shiva, one of the most prominent Hindu deities and the primary god in the sect of Hinduism known as “Shaivism.” Shiva is depicted as both a creator and a destroyer and is the primary protagonist in hundreds of different Hindu myths and legends. In myths where Shiva battles monsters or evil forces, such as the myth of Shiva’s battle against King Mandhatar and his army, Shiva uses a trishula as his weapon, and the symbol has therefore become an important representation of Shiva worship. Followers of Shaivism often keep an iron trishula in their shrines, the shaft of which represents the goddess Kundilini’s descent to earth to join with Shiva.

In some symbolic analyses, the three points of the trishula are said to represent creation, preservation, and destruction, corresponding to the three gunas, or qualities of nature. The trishula is also a symbol of Trimurti, or the “trinity” of Hinduism, a three-deity approach to Hinduism through the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The trishula is also used to represent the threefold nature of time, divided into past, present, and future. In some Hindu traditions, Shiva is considered the patron of yoga (a type of meditative exercise), and there are numerous yogic practices that pay homage to Shiva and his symbols. Within yoga, the trishula also represents the three subtle arteries of the body that reach from the spinal cord to the crown of the head. The three prongs of the trishula are also sometimes associated with the three sounds that make up the sacred syllable om.

In Buddhism, the trishula has many of the same associations that it has in Hinduism, representing three-part conceptions of time, the universe, and channels of energy. The trishula can also symbolize the three branches of Buddha’s teachings on ethics, meditation, and wisdom and the Mahayana trinity of Buddhist philosophy, consisting of Buddha, dharma (practice), and sangha (community). In Tibetan Buddhism, which utilizes a more deistic mythological approach than Chinese or Indian Buddhism, some of the minor protective Buddhas carry magical trishulas that they use to battle demonic forces.

## **The Trident in the West**

The symbolic associations of the three-pronged spear in the West primarily derive from the instrument’s use in hunting and agricultural labor. In Greek mythology, the trident became one of the symbols of Poseidon, the god of the aquatic realm, possibly because of the instrument’s associations with fishing. The trident is used in modern astrology to represent the planet Neptune, named for the Roman god of the seas. The trident also has symbolic associations with lightning and was used

as a symbol of the Roman Jupiter and Greek Zeus, representing the thunderbolts used as weapons by these gods.

The trident was one of more than 70 tools used by Jewish priests in sacrificial rituals conducted as Jewish temples in ancient Judaism. Specifically, the trident was used to turn the innards of sacrificial animals on the fire. The Jewish use of the trident may have inspired early Christian cults to adopt the trident as a religious symbol, where the trident was sometimes used to represent the Holy Trinity (God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit). Over the centuries, the trident's spiritual associations to Christianity and Judaism diminished.

The most common modern association with the trident in the West is the tool of Lucifer, the Christian devil. Religious historians have developed a number of potential explanations for the depiction of the trident as Satan's tool, including the idea that the trident represent a deformed, and evil-looking version of the cross. Another suggestion is that the trident represents a twisted version of the Holy Trinity, though this interpretation is only speculation and not based on specific evidence. The association between the trident and Satan seems to have emerged in the Middle Ages, before which time the trident primarily carried positive symbolic associations.

The sacred trinity archetype appears again and again in religions around the world, and the trident and trishula are part of this larger category of symbols, representing this basic numerological tendency of the human mind. Trinities represent change and process, combining the duality of beginning and end, with the concept of change and transition between the two. Just as one could say that birth and death are the beginning and end of life, the trinity of birth, transition, and death is a further evolution of this concept, representing both the end points and the process.

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## YANTRAS

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### Diagrams of Meditation

Yantras are spiritual diagrams used in certain schools of Hinduism and Buddhism as a focus for meditation. Yantras are the visual equivalent of mantras, which are



spoken or chanted formulas that are also used as focusing aids in meditation and ritual. Archaeologists have found evidence of yantra-like designs in Hindu artifacts from around the sixth century CE, and some scholars believe that yantras developed centuries earlier but were merely popularized between the sixth and seventh centuries.

## **Mandalas and Yantras**

The word “mandala” is a nonspecific description usually used for any spiritual diagram. A yantra is a type of mandala that is primarily based on symmetrical arrangements of geometric shapes formed from intersecting lines. Mandalas are believed to have evolved from the circle symbol archetype found in many cultures in which the circle is used to represent the entirety of creation or reality encapsulated in the space within an unbroken line. Eventually, the circle was filled with additional symbols that represent various aspects of the material or spiritual universe, thus creating the modern family of mandala symbols.

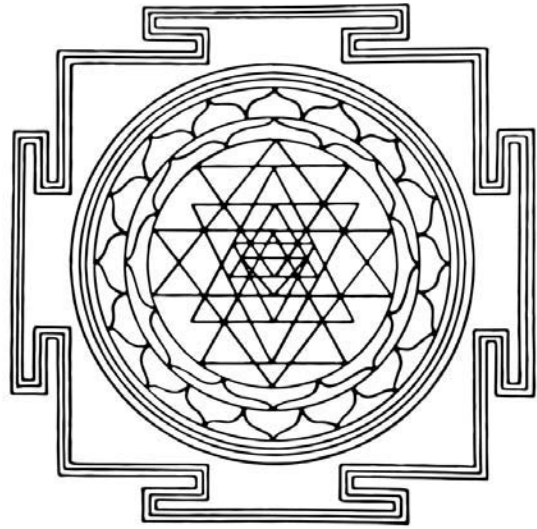
Mandalas and yantras are sometimes described as symbolic microcosms of the universe, depicting the cosmic or spiritual relationships that underlie reality. While some types of mandalas depict a relatively literal representation of reality, yantras are generally more abstract and are described as depicting the hidden aspects of reality or patterns that underlie the material world. Mandalas are common in Buddhism and Hinduism, while similar designs also appear in many other cultures around the world. The Deccan Caves archeological site, built between 600 and 1100 CE, contains some of the earliest-known Tantric-Buddhist artifacts, including several prominent yantra-like designs.

The purpose of both the mandala and the yantra is to help focus meditation and concentration. Because yantras are geometric, an individual can follow the lines and shapes of the yantra with his or her eyes and thoughts, thus tracing a meditative path through the design. Some yantras and mandalas are constructed to produce different types of contemplative interactions, depending on how they are used in meditation. The creation of mandalas and yantras is also considered a spiritual and meditative exercise, and yantras or mandalas worn as jewelry or displayed as art are often considered totems of spiritual protection or representations of spiritual affiliation.

## **Elements of the Yantras**

Yantras are surrounded by a circular border that separates the central design from the environment. The circle may consist of simple lines or may be constructed of other elements, such as lotus flowers or geometric shapes. In some yantras,

symbols or images of Hindu deities may be depicted outside of the circle. These designs and symbols are not part of the yantra's meditative center, but they may explain the purpose or significance of the yantra within a broader religious framework. Lotus flowers and lotus petals are important symbolic images in Hinduism and are often used to symbolize chakras, which are conceptualized as wheels or vortexes of energy within the human body. Open and closed lotus flowers depict these energy vortexes in different states of energetic potential.



The geometric yantras are part of a broader family of symbols that also serve as active meditative aids, often called “mandalas.”

At the center of many yantras is a bindu, which is depicted as a single point or dot, sometimes contained within a larger circle. The bindu in the yantra represents the moment of creation and the physical point from which all reality ultimately came forth. The bindu also represents the primordial state of the universe, or the potential of reality before the moment of creation. The bindu is familiar in the West from its decorative use in Hindu tradition, especially among certain Hindu devotees who place a small dot of color (called a “bindi,” the feminine of bindu) between their eyes for certain occasions and ceremonies. The dot marks the spot of ajna, the sixth chakra of the human body.

The center of the yantra generally consists of intersecting triangles forming a symmetrical geometric pattern. In many cases, the triangles at the center overlap so as to create the image of the six-pointed star, or hexagram, a shape that has been incorporated into many spiritual traditions around the world, including the Star of David in Judaism. In Hinduism, the hexagram, or shatkona, has multiple symbolic meanings.

Another element commonly used in yantras is the swastika, a Paleolithic symbol common in ancient Hinduism and Buddhism. The swastika appears in many forms and in many different cultures around the world and is generally depicted as a symbol of eternity or universal continuity. Yantras used in the West rarely feature the swastika because of the association between the symbol and the Nazi movement.

## The Sri Yantra

One of the most well-known and complex yantras is the “Sri Yantra” or “Sri Chakra,” a complex yantra consisting of nine interlocking triangles surrounding a central bindu and bordered by lotus petals and triangular designs that symbolize the doors to the universe. The four upward-pointing triangles signify the masculine god Shiva and the male sex organ (lingam), while the five downward-pointing triangles represent the female deity and principle Shakti and the female sex organ (yoni). The combination of the two triangles represents the metaphysical and biological union and the creative potential that gives rise to life and the universe.

The outer border of the Sri Yantra is designed to resemble the entrances to a temple, thus symbolically providing either a starting or finishing point for meditation. The intersecting lines of the triangles constitute nine circuits, or paths, that one can follow through the design, and each circuit can be a focus for meditation. Those using the Sri Yantra for meditation may begin with the bindu in the center of the design and work their way outward or may begin with the outer doors and work their way toward the center, focusing on each individual element during the meditation and allowing their eyes and mind to follow the paths of the interconnected lines.

The Sri Yantra is one of the most important yantras for Tantric meditation and is also known as the Fortune Yantra. Most yantras are relatively simple designs, and the intricate complexity of the Sri Yantra represents a dividing line between the yantra and the more complex mandalas used as meditative aids in Buddhism and Hindusim. Though the Sri Yantra is associated with Shiva and Shakti, it is also a representation of the universe as a whole, with the intersecting lines surrounding the bindu representing creation and eternity.

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# Buddhism

Buddhism is one of the world's fastest-growing and most influential religious traditions, represented by more than 370 million followers worldwide. Buddhism originated in India and flourished in central and eastern Asia, becoming one of the most dominant religions in history. Buddhism was first imported into the West in the late 19th century and has remained popular in Europe and North America since that time as an alternative to Western religious traditions.

## Origins and Evolution

Buddhism originated in India around the sixth century BCE and incorporates several core concepts that represent the broader dharmic religions of India, including the concept of dharma, which is uniquely defined in Buddhism as the doctrine of religious and spiritual practice. The early development of Buddhism centers around the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 560–400 BCE), the most heralded teacher of Buddhist doctrine. Buddhists also recognize three other enlightened teachers that preceded Gautama Buddha and who also developed key principles of Buddhist practice and philosophy. Gautama Buddha is also therefore known as the fourth Buddha.

Around 250 BCE, the Indian emperor Ashoka Maurya converted to Buddhism and helped to spread the religion throughout India as well as into Hellenistic Greece and Egypt. Buddhist converts were still living in Greece and Egypt during the first century after the origin of Christianity. Buddhism reached a new pinnacle after its introduction to China between the third and first centuries BCE. The first Buddhist temple in China was built by two Indian monks who migrated to Central China more than 200 years later, in the first century CE.

Chinese Buddhism evolved in unexpected ways, including the incorporation of elements of traditional Chinese folk religion, Taoism, and Confucianism. Ch'an Buddhism is one of the characteristic forms of Buddhism that represent the religion's Chinese evolution. Buddhism was imported to Japan in the fifth century CE, but it did not gain significant popularity until the 900s. Japan later adopted Ch'an Buddhism from China, transforming it into the Zen philosophy that dominated Japanese Buddhism in the Middle Ages.

Pure Land Buddhism, another school that originated in India around the second century BCE, spread into China in the second century CE and became something of a craze among peasant farmers in China. While based on the same rigorous philosophy as other schools, Pure Land Buddhism offered a more mystical approach, encouraging followers to chant the name “Amitabha Buddha,” as if praying to a minor spirit or savior. Pure Land Buddhism does not require the same types of stringent behavioral controls or meditation as other schools. It also appealed to rural Chinese because it bore similarities to the traditional folk religion and folk Taoism of China.

Buddhism spread into Tibet in the eighth century CE, after the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen invited Indian Buddhist monks to bring the religion to his country. Tibetan Buddhism developed unique characteristics, including designating teachers of Buddhist dharma as Lamas, many living in monastic orders called Lamaseries. Buddhism became the official state religion, and the leading Lama (called the Dalai Lama) served as spiritual leader of the nation. The Tibetan Lamas were the aristocratic class in the Tibetan feudal government, which was one of the longest-lasting feudal systems in the world. The current (14th) Dalai Lama is considered by some to be the legitimate leader of Tibet, though he has led the nation in exile since the Chinese takeover of Tibet in the 1950s.

Interest in Buddhism in the West began in the late 1800s, with a few European scholars importing and studying Buddhist scriptures. Chinese and Japanese immigrants to Europe and North America established the first permanent Buddhist temples in the West. In the 1960s and 1970s, a new wave of Buddhist philosophy, sometimes called “pop Buddhism,” emerged. It involved a combination of Buddhism, psychoanalysis, and New Age spirituality. Western pop Buddhism comes in two basic varieties, those that dismiss or deemphasize the spiritual aspects of Buddhism in favor of a more philosophical approach and those that emphasize the mystical or magical aspects of Buddhist theory as a way to understand the mysteries of the universe.

## **Buddhist Beliefs**

Buddhism is a spiritual system that focuses on the attainment of spiritual enlightenment, called “nirvana,” by following the teachings of Gautama Buddha and others believed to have reached this enlightened state. Various schools of Buddhism differ concerning what happens to an individual after reaching nirvana and regarding the appropriate way to reach enlightenment.

Buddhism is usually described as nondeistic, meaning that the religion does not involve belief in god(s). In practice, many schools of Buddhism treat Buddhas and other teachers as divine spirits and accept the belief in many other supernatural beings similar to lesser gods in other traditions. In early Buddhist scriptures, Buddhas

have such supernatural powers as flight and superhuman strength and sometimes battle with evil beings. Many of the ancient Hindu deities (Devas) are still venerated in Buddhism and are often said to exist in the Heaven of the 33 Gods (“Tavatimsa” or “Trayastrimsa”), one of the complex celestial realms of the Buddhist cosmology. Buddhism has absorbed gods and demons from many other religions around the world and generally reimagines these deities as semidivine beings who represent the denial of Buddhist truth or who converted to Buddhism and became mythological heroes. In some cases, the belief in divine beings and celestial heavens is quite literal, while other more intellectual strains of Buddhism see these myths as metaphorical representations of Buddhist philosophy and psychology.

Buddhists believe in an eternal universe in which all beings cycle through an endless series of reincarnations, called “samsara,” created by physical, mental, and spiritual attachments. Samsara is the reality of the universe but also the cause of all suffering. The goal of Buddhist study is to free oneself from samsara by reaching a state of enlightenment. Buddhist practice focuses on the three jewels: the Buddha; the dharma, or Buddhist doctrine; and the sangha, or community of Buddhism. During a person’s life, an individual’s actions have spiritual value (karma), and a person’s actions affects their attachment to the cycle of samsara, with some actions deepening attachment while others allow reduced attachment and eventually enlightenment. Complete enlightenment, at the moment of death, brings about parinirvana, defined as complete awakening and freedom from the physical world.

An individual who reaches enlightenment becomes a Buddha, or an arhat, which is another type of enlightened being slightly below a Buddha in terms of enlightenment level. Some schools believe that individuals can also become bodhisattvas, which are individuals who obtain enlightenment not for their own benefit but for the benefit of humanity. Bodhisattvas choose to remain within the material world, helping others to see the truths of Buddhism. In parts of Asia, Buddhism has become entwined with folk religion, and Buddhists sometimes ascribe mystical or magical properties to bodhisattvas and arhat Buddhas, similar to the guardian spirits of ancient polytheistic religions.

Buddhism can be divided into several approaches and schools:

- Hinayana is the name used for the earliest approach to Buddhism. The name “Hinayana,” meaning “inferior vehicle,” is a derogatory term for this approach given by followers of later schools who considered their approach superior.
- Theravada (teachings of elders) is one of the earliest Buddhist schools, which developed around the third century BCE. Theravada is often mistakenly thought to be a synonym for Hinayana, but it is a related but distinct formulation of Buddhist practice. Theravada focuses on the original teachings of Gautama Buddha and the earlier individuals who reached

enlightenment. Just over 30 percent of modern Buddhists practice Theravada, primarily in Southeast Asia.

- Mahayana Buddhism (the “Great Vehicle”) is both an approach and a family of Buddhist schools that emerged between the first century BCE and the first century CE. Mahayana Buddhism places emphasis on the bodhisattva tradition and the use of Buddhism to aid humanity. More than 55 percent of modern Buddhists practice some form of Mahayana.
- Vajrayana Buddhism developed out of the Mahayana tradition around the sixth or seventh centuries CE and involves the use of esoteric Tantric rituals that are not found in traditional Mahayana schools. Approximately 5–6 percent of modern Buddhists practice Vajrayana, which occupies a special position in Tibet and Nepal, where Buddhism has blended with native folk religions.

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## ASHOKA AND THE NINE UNKNOWN MEN

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### Buddhism’s Legendary Society

The Nine Unknown Men is a legendary secret society formed by Emperor Ashoka (sometimes written “Asoka”) to protect the secret knowledge of mankind that would, if it fell into the wrong hands, cause global devastation. The secret society of the Nine Unknown Men was brought to the Western imagination through 19th-century writers who were interested in the mystical knowledge of India and Egypt. Some believe that the society of the Nine Unknown Men may still exist and may even be synonymous with the world-famous Illuminati, a secret organization that purportedly controls the world’s governments and economic systems.

### Emperor Ashoka (ca. 290–232 BCE)

Ashoka was a famous emperor of the Mauryan dynasty, which ruled most of India from 322 to 185 BCE. Ashoka took power around 270 BCE, though the exact date of his ascension is currently unknown. Because of his role in the formation

of Buddhism, it has been difficult for historians to separate myth from history in accounts of Ashoka's life and rule. In legend, Ashoka became the ruler of the Mauryan kingdom by killing 99 of his brothers, though historians believe it is more likely that he simply killed his stepbrother, who was the legitimate heir to the empire. Ashoka greatly expanded the empire during his reign, increasing both its geographical reach and economic prosperity.

Around 261 BCE, coinciding with Ashoka's eighth year as emperor, his armies annexed the coastal city of Kalinga, formerly a feudal state, resulting in the protracted Kalinga War. According to legend, Emperor Ashoka was so horrified by the bloodshed—reported to have resulted in the loss of 100,000 soldiers—that he decided to dedicate himself to Buddhism and spread the philosophy of nonviolence throughout the empire. The accuracy of this legend has not been determined, but it is known that the reign of Ashoka after the Kalinga War was one of the most peaceful and productive periods in the history of the continent.

The emperor's decision to convert to Buddhism helped spread the religion from the elite to the working class, and Ashoka is sometimes called the first Buddhist pilgrim, as he traveled across much of northern India in his effort to spread the religion. Ashoka's empire also sponsored the construction of Buddhist monasteries, yielding a generation of Buddhist monks who spread their beliefs beyond the confines of India. A lasting remnant of Ashoka's rule can be found in the 33 inscriptions known as the Edicts of Ashoka, which appear on a series of 40–50 foot tall stone pillars across northern India. Though some historians believe that many of the pillars of Ashoka were erected before his rule, the inscriptions (some of which are believed to have been applied by Ashoka himself) tell the story of Ashoka's rule and conversion and communicate general Buddhist principles, such as kindness to animals and religious tolerance.

## The Nine Unknown Men

According to legend, Ashoka believed that certain types of information should be kept secret from the public lest dangerous knowledge would fall into the wrong hands and lead to apocalyptic developments. To this end, Emperor Ashoka forbade the study of science and even took steps to hide all existing scientific knowledge. It is also rumored that Ashoka formed a secret society, consisting of nine men, each tasked with guarding a book containing secret knowledge pertaining to one of the “dangerous” fields. Some theorists believe that Ashoka and the secret society of the Nine Unknown Men had information about technology, magic, and scientific practices that were more advanced than anything that would be invented for millennia.

In Europe and the United States, the legend of the Nine Unknown Men has become a popular conspiracy theory, with speculation that this society still exists,



or at least existed for thousands of years, and works behind the scenes to control global affairs. Some theorists have said that the Nine Unknown Men participated in global machinations to continue Ashoka's aim of protecting the world from advanced metaphysical and technological secrets, while others hold that the Nine Unknown Men was a precursor to the Illuminati or other secret societies who manipulate global politics in furtherance of an economic, religious, or cultural agenda. This legend has also been linked to numerological theories regarding the symbolic significance of the number nine and the way that this number has been repeatedly associated with secret societies.

The conspiracy theory of the Nine Unknown Men was popularized by the fiction and mysticism writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who found a niche audience of readers captivated by the ancient cultures of Egypt, India, and China. Many believed these cultures guarded secret information about the nature of the universe or the beginning and end of humankind. Remnants of this fascination with Eastern culture are still apparent in pop culture and New Age religion in the 21st century.

English novelist Talbot Mundy wrote the short novel *The Nine Unknown* in 1923 about the secret society of the Nine Unknown Men. In the book, these nine men battle with members of a cult of Kali worshippers who desire the secrets contained in the nine secret books. According to Mundy's account, the nine secrets books deal with psychological warfare, alchemy, physiology, microbiology, communication with extraterrestrials, gravity, and devices that can defy gravity, cosmology, light, and sociology. Mundy had traveled extensively in India before beginning his writing career and was part of a group of writers known for writing about Indian and Asian mysticism. Some readers later came to believe that Mundy's fiction was more or less the true story of the Nine Unknown Men disguised as fiction to spread the word about this secret society.

To many in the modern world, Indian culture no longer has the same associations with mysticism that it might have had to a person living in the late 19th century. Still, there remains a subset of people who believe that Indian and Asian cultures, perhaps because they still seem so alien to the Western concept of the world, contain mysterious knowledge that hints at an understanding of the universe that has remained obscure or hidden throughout the centuries.

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## BUDDHIST DEMONS AND MONSTERS

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### Evil in Metaphor and Reality

In Europe and North America, Buddhism is generally seen as a philosophical discipline that is largely nondeistic (does not involve belief in gods) and nonmystical, and this derives from the more intellectual and psychological strain of Buddhism that developed in India and China and has become the primary representation of Buddhist philosophy in the West. However, Buddhism also contains a rich mythology and cosmology that includes supernatural beings and mythic battles between the forces of divinity and chaos.

### Mara

Mara (sometimes “Maara”) is a character from Buddhist mythology who is often described as a demon or a personification of or metaphor for death and destruction. Stories about Mara appear in the Pali canon, which is one of the oldest scriptures of the Theravada School, and also in several sutras from other Buddhist traditions. Mara is sometimes known as the “lord of death” or “lord of desire” and was likely derived from the evil spirits of the Vedic pantheon. As Buddhism spread through Asia, Mara legends and symbolism have incorporated myths about a variety of other evil spirits and demonic beings.

In most of the Mara myths, Mara appeared as Gautama Buddha (the fourth Buddha) meditating beneath the Bodhi tree, determined to continue until he reached enlightenment. Mara then used trickery and temptation to prevent Buddha from reaching enlightenment. The Gautama-Mara interaction can be described as a Buddhist version of the temptation archetype in mythology, which is found in many myths around the world, and is prominent in Christian and Greek mythology. In this device, a nascent hero is faced with a moment of potential doubt or temptation intended to distract him or her from attaining an important heroic goal. The antagonist often offers an easier path or the temptation of various pleasures, and the hero’s ability to resist these temptations represents his or her moral character and spiritual or heroic determination. The recurrence of this archetype may reflect basic human psychology, and the recognition that the moral and virtuous path is often more difficult and requires one to make significant sacrifices.

In the standard version of the Mara myth, the Devas (deities) of the Vedic pantheon gathered to witness Gautama Buddha’s moment of revelation, and one of Mara’s distractions was to bring a storm of rocks, rain, and wind to drive the Devas away. Mara also attempted to distract Gautama by sending his daughters (three to five daughters, depending on the source) to tempt him. The daughters are usually

described as personifications of such abstract temptations as desire, delight, or thirst and therefore serve in a clear metaphoric capacity within the story.

In Tibetan Buddhism, Gautama Buddha's encounter with Mara is the ninth of the Twelve Deeds of Buddha and involves an epic battle in which Mara attacks Buddha with an army of demonic soldiers. Mara's armies are depicted as a horrendous throng of subhuman beasts, some with animal heads or grotesque heads protruding from their chests. The army rides dragons and mythological steeds and uses terrible weapons (each with symbolic or metaphoric significance), including a siege canon that shoots flaming stars and magical implements such as a bag of disease. As these weapons are hurled against Buddha, they turn to flowers and are unable to harm him, thus further reflecting Buddha's serene divinity and purity.

## Mythological Creatures

Buddhism has a complex cosmology that consists of multiple celestial realms or heavens that contain a variety of semidivine beings, many taken from other traditions. The gods of Hinduism (Devas), for instance, have been reimagined as semidivine spirits that represent the ancient religion and offer their support to Buddha, thus symbolically passing the torch to the Buddhist conception of divinity. In addition to Hindu mythology, Buddhism has also absorbed and reformulated a pantheon of creatures and deities from the native traditions of China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Nepal, and Thailand, creating unique regional varieties of Buddhism that are a blend of native and foreign mythology. Some ancient gods have become monsters that stand against Buddha and must be defeated to allow the divine revelation to be fulfilled. Many of the realms also contain nonhuman mythological beasts or zoomorphic combinations of human and animal characteristics. In general, these animalistic entities represent the web of animist and polytheistic deities and beliefs that have been reformulated within Buddhism.

The Naga provide one example of a mythological creature found in Buddhist mythology that has been adopted from earlier traditions. The Naga are a race of half-serpent humanoids that originally appear in Hindu mythology, but they have also come to represent serpentine or reptilian spirits taken from other animist traditions, including ancient dragon myths from China and the reptilian water spirits of Tibetan shamanism. The Nagas are associated with cobras, a family of dangerous poisonous snakes that live in both India and southern Asia and have been a source of both admiration and fear since prehistory. Generally benevolent in Buddhist mythology, Nagas are often depicted as protectors of temples. In Thai Buddhism, the Naga king named Muchalinda is a patron protector of Gautama Buddha and, in a famous fable, used his heads (or hood) to shelter the meditating Buddha from the rain for seven days.

### **Pets of the Gods**

Many of the Hindu deities have animal associates called vahanas, which appear in myths as mounts and friends of the deities and also serve as metaphors for spiritual characteristics. The Garuda is the vahana of Vishnu, while the god Ganesha, often depicted with the head of an elephant, is associated with a giant mouse named Mushika.

A related species is the Garuda, a race of giant intelligent birds that live both in the heavens and on earth. The Garuda also come from Hindu mythology, where Garuda was a spiritual entity, often depicted as the steed or mount of Vishnu. In Buddhist mythology, Garuda are usually depicted as extremely large, with a wingspan of hundreds of miles, and live in complex societies similar to human kingdoms. Garuda only eat snakes and are therefore the enemies of the Naga. This may reflect observations of animal behavior in India, where several species of eagle and other birds regularly prey on predatory snakes. In some areas, Garuda are evoked as a talisman to drive away snakes and a protective charm against poison and envenomation. Sometimes benign and sometimes dangerous, the Garuda have come to reflect and represent the various bird gods and bird myths of Asian pre-Buddhist traditions. Garuda fables therefore often include mythologized reflections on the behavior of birds, such as their tendency for ophiophagy, their association with the heavens through flight, and their sharp vision.

### **Metaphor or Realism**

The Mara myths of Buddhism can easily be interpreted as metaphors for the psychological and philosophical aspects of the struggle to separate from the material world in the achievement of nirvana. Mara's daughters, for instance, are already named for the symbolic concepts they represent, such as desire, and it is therefore not a stretch for a Buddhist to believe that these stories are designed to transmit ideas or concepts rather than literal descriptions of events or beings. This is, however, only one way to approach Buddhist mythology.

In many cultures (notably Thailand, Nepal, and Tibet), Buddhism has been integrated with the animist folk religions that existed for centuries before the arrival of Buddhism and still exert a powerful influence on native culture. Buddhists in these societies have a tendency to accept the existence of mythological beings in a more literal sense, representing the ancient gods of wind, fire, and stone that were once evoked to explain the features of the earth. Buddhas, arhats, and bodhisattvas in these traditions have become mythological heroes, slaying demons and monsters like the demigods of Hinduism or Greek mythology.

To some extent, all religions contain some element of mysticism and the supernatural, and there is no objective criterion for deciding that some beliefs (like the belief in mythical beasts) are irrational while others (divine healing or precognition) are seen as more believable. All religions involve a spectrum of belief from literal to figurative, and the movement between different interpretations is one of the driving forces behind the evolution of religion through time.

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## CONCH SHELL

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### Divine Trumpet

The conch shell is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols, known in Sanskrit as “ashtamangala,” that are utilized in many Indian religious traditions, including Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Today, the symbol is most often associated with Buddhism, which has adopted and expanded upon the eightfold spiritual division common to many religions around the world. The conch shell was an ancient symbol from the pre-Hindu Vedic spirituality in India before being incorporated into Buddhist iconography.

### Use of the Conch Shell

The word “conch” is now used to refer to the shells of many different species (some only distantly related) of marine mollusks around the world. For thousands of years, these species have been used for food, while their shells have been to make jewelry and religious instruments. The word conch also refers specifically to sea snails of the genus *Strombus*, though large shells from oceanic mollusks may also be called conch shells colloquially. The genus *Strombus* contains more than 50 species of marine mollusks, ranging from 5 to 30 centimeters or more in length and weighing as much as 2.5 kilograms, with females being heavier than males on average. Conch species, and other marine snails colloquially called conchs, live around the world in the warm tropical waters of the Pacific Ocean.

Archaeologists are uncertain when humans began harvesting conchs and other large mollusks for meat or when humans first began using conch shells to construct

### **You Say Conchs, I Say Conches**

Opinions differ on how to pronounce conch (“Konk” or “Kon-ch”), a word taken from early Greek, but the pluralization of the word in historical texts indicates that both pronunciations have been used for centuries and that both are correct, depending on one’s region.

artifacts, but it is known that the conch has been harvested for at least 5,000 years and likely much longer. The Mayans in South America used the shells of the green conch to make a trumpet by drilling air holes into the wall of the shell. Conch shells and other large mollusk shells have been used as trumpets for thousands of years, and the practice seems to have emerged independently in cultures around the world, becoming particularly popular in Asia and throughout Oceania. Much of the symbolism surrounding the conch shell is associated with its use as an instrument.

In addition to making music, the conch shell and other mollusk shells have long been used to make jewelry and decorative items. This practice was likely a by-product of the harvest of conch and other sea snails for food, and many marine mollusks are still eaten in parts of the world. Several types of conch and associated species also produce pearls, which have been valued by jewelers and collectors for centuries. The pearls produced by conchs appear in a variety of colors, including many shades of white, brown, yellow, and pink. In the West, an ancient set of myths say that one can hear the sound of the ocean inside an open conch shell. This phenomenon is the result of ambient environmental noise echoing through the shell, which creates a sound akin to the sound made by rushing water.

### **Symbolism of the Conch Shell**

Among the Mayans and Aztecs, the conch shell was a symbol of the ruling class and was often depicted in a bisected state, revealing the spiraling layers within, which symbolize infinity. Archaeologists believe that the conch trumpet was used in a wide variety of Mayan rituals and was symbolically linked with the primordial ocean that preceded the development of land and terrestrial life in Mayan cosmology. Because of their use as trumpets, conch shells also came to be associated with the primordial wind and with the deities of the wind in Mesoamerican mythology.

In Hinduism, the conch trumpet was a symbol of the ancient heroes and was used as a horn of victory following a conflict. A number of Hindu gods are often depicted holding conch shells or using them as instruments. For instance, the god Vishnu is sometimes depicted with a magical conch, known as

“panchajanya,” which is shown spouting fire to represent Vishnu’s control over the five classes of living beings. In some ancient myths, the conch shell is said to have emanated the primordial om, or first sound that signified the beginning of creation.

In Hinduism, the conch was divided into two varieties, the bulbous and slender conchs, representing males and females, respectively, and other symbolic associations depended on the color of the conch, with the white variety symbolizing the priestly Brahmin caste. There are also two varieties of conch, depending on orientation. They are known in India as the common left-spiraling conch, or “vamavarta,” and the far more uncommon right-spiraling variety, known as “dakshinavarta.” The right-spiraling variety of the smooth white conch is the most auspicious of all conch varieties in the Hindu tradition, and a similar classification system has been incorporated into Buddhist beliefs.

The right-spiraling white conch shell became one of the ashtamangala, or Eight Auspicious Symbols, of the Dharmic faiths, usually symbolized by a stylized image of the shell oriented vertically, with a ribbon strung through the lower part of the shell’s body. As an instrument, the shell symbolizes Buddha’s teachings and the laws of the dharma penetrating the world. Some Buddhist legends hold that Buddha had a deep, penetrating voice not unlike the sound of the conch shell trumpet. Japanese Buddhists continue to use the conch shell trumpet to begin certain rituals, and the sound of the shell is also thought to drive away evil in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

The global distribution of the conch and similar sea snail species and the early independent discovery of the use of conch shells as instruments created a material link between cultures around the world independently drawn to the beauty and functionality of these natural artifacts. As one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols, the conch is also one of the emblems that links Buddhism, Hinduism, and the other Indian traditions together in recognition of the shared roots of these various traditions throughout Asia. Human spiritual development in many ways reflects the realities of cultural evolution, including very ancient human ties to the sea, which provided resources and fueled the development of society. In this vein, religions around the world have come to depict the ocean as the primordial generative source, and objects from the ocean, such as the attractive conch shell, as symbols of this ancient relationship.

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## DHARMACHAKRA

### Wheel of Eternity

The dharmachakra, or “wheel of dharma,” is an ancient Buddhist symbol symbolizing the teachings of the Buddha and the path to enlightenment. Scholars believe that the wheel symbol was derived from Vedic and Hindu symbolism and may have been related to both solar symbolism and a circular weapon used by warriors in ancient India. The eternal wheel symbol has spread over the world and is found in Indian and East Asian Buddhism. The dharmachakra is one of the *ashtamangala*, or “Eight Auspicious Symbols,” of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. In transitioning from Vedic spirituality to modern Buddhism (with different meanings), the dharmachakra provides an example of the versatility and mutability of many religious symbols.

### Origins of the Eternal Wheel

The Buddhist wheel is one of several prominent circular symbols that historians believe originated as solar symbols. Ancient versions of a wheel symbol have been found in the ruins of the Harappan civilization that occupied portions of the Indus Valley around 2000–2500 BCE. Harappan wheel symbols had varying numbers of spokes, ranging from a few to several hundred, which are believed to represent solar radiation. Modern legends about the appearance of the dharmachakra still reflect solar associations. For instance, there is a Buddhist legend that says the rule of a just king will be accompanied by the appearance of a flaming, multi-spoked wheel in the sky.

In Vedic mysticism, the wheel became the symbol of Vishnu, one of the oldest Hindu gods who was also associated with the sun. In the *Mahabharata*, one of the great Sanskrit epic poems, Vishnu’s weapon for defeating evil was the *Sudarshana Chakra*, a metal circle surrounded by 108 blades. Vishnu’s *Sudarshana Chakra* was either inspired by or was the inspiration for the “*chakram*,” or



The dharmachakra is one of the central symbols of Buddhism, symbolizing the fundamental eight-fold teachings of Buddha. The symbol also mirrors a ship’s wheel, and therefore represents the process of steering one’s life towards the goal of enlightenment.



“chakkara,” an ancient ranged weapon consisting of a sharpened circular blade. Hindu and Sikh warriors would spin the chakra on one of their hands to build momentum and then release the blade, often inflicting mortal wounds at moderate range.

## Buddha’s Teachings

Vishnu’s Sudarshana Chakra is also a symbol of motion, continuity, and the perpetuity of the universe. These symbolic associations carried over into early Buddhism, where the wheel became known as the dharmachakra, or the “wheel of dharma,” symbolizing the teachings of the Buddha, which are also considered to be eternal truths. Important speeches or lessons given by Gautama Buddha (the fourth Buddha) are known as turnings of the wheel of dharma. The first turning of the wheel of dharma occurred in a region in northern India called Deer Park and consisted of Buddha’s revelations of the four noble truths. This lesson, called the “dharmachakra pravartana,” is said to be the foundation of Buddhism and the origin of Hinayana Buddhism, the oldest approach to Buddhist practice. Theravada Buddhism, a school based on the teachings of elders, is one of the early schools that broke away from the Hinayana form and is still practiced today.

According to some Hinayana schools, the first turning was the essential lesson in Buddhism. However, Mahayana Buddhists believe that Buddha delivered a second great lesson at Vulture Peak Mountain in Bihar, which is known as the “second turning” of the wheel and resulted in the establishment of Mahayana, which has become the dominant approach to Buddhism. Vajrayana Buddhists believe that there was a “third turning” of the wheel that occurred at Dhanyakataka, in which Buddha described the “Buddha nature,” thus leading to the establishment of the Vajrayana school of Buddhism.

## Components of the Wheel

The dharmachakra, like any basic wheel, has three basic primary components, the rim, spokes, and central hub. The central hub symbolizes the ethical discipline needed to follow the Buddhist path, while the rim symbolizes the need for mental and spiritual concentration. The spokes, as a whole represent wisdom and the ability to avoid ignorance.

The first turning of the wheel was Buddha’s revelation of the Four Noble Truths, which describe the primary problem of existence, “dukkha,” or “suffering,” and how this condition can be remedied. The fourth of the Four Noble Truths is the Noble Eightfold Path, consisting of eight principles to which Buddhists are expected to adhere, which together lead the practitioner to escape the bonds of his or her suffering. The dharmachakra is typically depicted with eight spokes, and these represent the Noble Eightfold Path described by Buddha.

- Right Thought (also known as right speech) consists of avoiding thoughts of greed, envy, jealousy, or hatred.
- Right View (also known as right perspective) consists of viewing the world rationally and honestly and trying to understand the function and patterns of the natural world and human behavior.
- Right Action (also called right behavior) consists of attempting to be kind to all living things and includes adhering to a vegetarian lifestyle.
- Right Livelihood consists of avoiding occupations or other activities that cause harm to others or require dishonesty in one's activities.
- Right Speech consists of attempting to be truthful with one's words as well as attempting to use speech to help others and avoiding speech (gossip, lying) that might hurt others.
- Right Effort consists of exerting continued effort to avoid behaviors or thoughts that are negative and the effort required to influence the world in positive ways.
- Right Awareness consists of maintaining a frame of mind in which one is constantly aware of the world around them and their own behavior and never acts without first considering the potential ramifications of each action.

It is also notable that the dharmachakra is often depicted as a ship's wheel, the device used to steer a sailing vessel by altering the position of the ship's rudder. This is likely a later representation of the dharmachakra, but it adds an additional layer of meaning as the teachings of Buddha symbolize tools one uses to steer toward the Noble Eightfold Path and, ultimately, enlightenment.

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## EYES OF BUDDHA

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### Watchful Gaze of the Divine

The Buddha Eyes symbol, also known as the Wisdom Eyes, are a Buddhist symbol now famous around the world but is primarily used as a decorative element by Buddhists in Nepal. The use of the Buddha Eyes symbol is so common in Nepalese Buddhist architecture that it has become one of the default symbols for Nepal

itself. The Buddha Eyes symbol provides an example of an important symbolic archetype in spiritual symbolism, using the eye as a representation of wisdom and the capacity for deities to watch over adherents.

## Buddhist Stupas

In Nepal, the Buddha Eyes symbol most often appears painted on stupas, which are mound-like structures that serve as sites for meditation in many Buddhist sects and may also be used to house Buddhist relics, such as the ashes of former teachers. Stupas are used in India and throughout Asia, wherever Buddhism has become one of the primary traditions. Historians believe that the earliest stupas in India, China, and elsewhere in Asia contained the bodies of important leaders of Buddhist society. Today, stupas most often contain sacred scriptures or items owned by important ascetics or teachers. Other stupas do not house relics but are constructed to commemorate a location where an important event took place.

Historians believe that the first stupas in India were simple burial mounds built primarily of mud and stone and used to bury the bodies of monks and other prominent Buddhists. The integration of the burial mound into China and elsewhere in Asia influenced the design of the stupa, resulting in distinctly Asian varieties. Many stupas in Nepal and several other Asian nations combine the basic burial mound design with elaborate decorative towers. In Nepal, these decorative towers take the form of multitiered spires, often elaborately designed and featuring symbolic artwork. The Nepalese stupa design gave rise to the adoption of the tiered tower throughout East Asia, often called “pagodas” in the English language. In Nepal, these towers are the traditional location for paintings and sculptures of the Buddha’s eyes, and it was these images that inspired the international versions of the symbol.



The Eyes of Buddha, most common in Nepalese Buddhism, represents the watchful presence of the divine and the concept that no part of existence lies outside the influence of Buddha’s teachings and doctrine.

## Meaning of the Buddha Eyes Symbol

In Nepal and Tibet, the Buddha Eyes symbol is said to represent the Adi-Buddha, or “primordial Buddha,” which is viewed as the original self-creating Buddha that existed before the creation of reality as it is currently known. The Adi-Buddha derives from Vajrayana Buddhism, a branch of Buddhist thought that emerged from

Tantric and Esoteric Buddhism as early as the third century and has become a dominant lineage in parts of Asia. Some religious historians have described Vajrayana Buddhism as approaching a monotheistic spiritual structure, though the similarities between Vajrayana and the Western form of monotheism are relatively superficial. Though the Adi-Buddha is considered the origin of everything in Vajrayana, this creation does not occur in the linear cause-and-effect model attributed to creator gods in many other traditions. Instead it takes a more circular approach in which all things are seen as a representation of Buddha's nature without being a purposeful creation of a goal-oriented being.

The Buddha Eyes symbol is often placed on four sides of a stupa, representing the idea that Buddha's wisdom covers the entirety of reality. Between the eyes of the Buddha Eyes symbol is a circular mark called an "urna," which is described in many sources as the Buddha's "third eye," though experts consider this interpretation to be incorrect. The circular symbol actually represents a small curl of hair, seen as a representation of both purity and emptiness. In many Buddhist sculptures, the urna is represented by the placement of a jewel or precious stone.

The urna is one of the 32 physical characteristics of Buddha, which are themselves taken from an ancient idea holding that great individuals could be identified by the possession of 32 basic physical characteristics. The urna, usually depicted as a whorl of white hair, is the 31st of the 32 physical characteristics denoting greatness. Other characteristics include slender fingers, blue eyes, a long tongue, and saliva that improves the taste of food. In some Buddhist societies, individuals born with one or more of these characteristics might still be considered to have some auspicious property.

Below the eyes, there is an unusual mark often mistaken for a stylized depiction of the Buddha's nose. This symbol has multiple meanings, the first of which is the representation of a light or sacred fire emanating from the Buddha's urna. According to legend, the urna of the Buddha radiated a pure white light that represented the teachings that he would bring forth to the world. The symbol also resembles the character used for the number one in the Newar language, one of the traditional tribal languages of Nepal. In this sense, the symbol represents the unity of all phenomena in Buddha's nature.

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## THE LIFE OF BUDDHA

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### Divine Teacher of the Middle Road

In general, Western cultures are more concerned with establishing the timeline of events than cultures in other parts of the world. Buddhism grew out of India at a time when the native Hindu spiritual and philosophical system was in a state of expansion and experiencing a philosophical renaissance. Buddhism is associated with the life and teachings of Gautama Buddha, often simply called “Buddha” by non-Buddhists, whose teachings established the modern practice of Buddhism. Few details of Gautama Buddha’s life are known with certainty, but historians have attempted to find within Buddhist scriptures the historical details of Gautama Buddha’s birth, upbringing, religious teachings, and death.

### Era of the Fourth Buddha

Scholars argue that Gautama Buddha and the Greek scholar Socrates are two of the first individuals in history whose lives were chronicled in a historical manner. However, unlike Socrates, the life of Gautama Buddha has been inextricably linked to mythological events meant to symbolize the individual’s divine associations. The writings of the Pali canon, the scriptural basis of Theravada Buddhism, say that Gautama Buddha lived from 563 to 483 BCE, while Chinese Buddhist research has placed his life between 445 and 365 BCE. Historians can only therefore estimate that Gautama Buddha lived within this three-century period.

Gautama Buddha lived in an era that gave rise to some of the most influential philosophical and spiritual movements in history. At the same time that Buddhism was emerging in India, Lao Tzu and Confucius were spreading the seeds of what would become Confucianism and Taoism in China. Meanwhile, Zoroaster in Persia and the Greek philosophers who immediately preceded Socrates were laying the foundations for the philosophies that became characteristic of the Western world into the modern era. In India, this was also the period when the Upanishads were documented. This collection of philosophical texts contains the spiritual underpinnings of Hinduism, collecting wisdom and philosophy from the preceding 2500 years of civilization in India and Pakistan. This rich period of cultural and spiritual innovation was the substrate that allowed the emerging Buddhist philosophy to flourish.

### The Birth of Siddhartha Gautama

Gautama Buddha is believed to have been born in the village of Lumbini, in what is now southern Nepal. Historians believe that he was named Siddhartha Gautama

and was a member of the Sakya clan, a family that belonged to the Brahmin caste (the priestly/scholarly sect of Hindu society). He is sometimes referred to as “Sakyamuni,” which means “Sage of the Sakyas.” Around 250 BCE, the Indian emperor Asoka erected a memorial pillar in Lumbini village to commemorate Siddhartha Gautama’s birth, but the inscription does not give a date for his birth. Historians have therefore estimated the date of Siddhartha Gautama’s life from a variety of sources, and most modern scholars have settled on a date of around 560 BCE.

The Nidana-Katha of the Pali canon holds that Siddhartha was the son of Sudhodana, a king of limitless wealth, and a beautiful queen named Maya. The queen received numerous omens preceding the birth of her son, including a vision of a white elephant entering her abdomen while her son was being conceived. According to these same sources, the infant emerged from his mother’s side (rather than her vagina) and was immediately capable of walking and speaking.

## Awakening to Nirvana

According to traditional accounts, Gautama was raised in a privileged and isolated environment among his wealthy father’s three palaces (one for each Indian season: summer, winter, and monsoon). At age 16, he married the beautiful Princess Yasodhara, and the couple reportedly had a son named Rahula. Siddhartha had no contact with the outside world until he left his father’s land for a recreational outing when he was approximately 29 years old.

On this serendipitous journey, Gautama encountered a diseased person, an old person, a dead body, and finally a traveling monk. The first three experiences forced Gautama to recognize the inherent suffering of the mundane world, while his meeting with the monk convinced him that the answer to this suffering was to renounce the material world and begin the path to spiritual exploration. Gautama then left his father’s home and traveled widely throughout India, studying ancient teachings and spreading his spiritual ideas. His experiences as a pilgrim gave rise to a central characteristic of Buddhist practice, and many later Buddhists similarly set out to carry their religion into foreign areas, modeling the Buddha’s period as a wandering ascetic. During his travels, Gautama stopped to meditate beneath the Bodhi tree, a large fig tree in Bodhi Gaya India. It was here that he obtained his awakening as his experiences coalesced, and he had a sudden realization of the true path to spiritual freedom. This is the point at which Gautama achieved Buddhahood and was thereafter known as “Sakyamunibuddha,” or “Gautama Buddha.”

While Gautama Buddha’s history is steeped in mythology, historians have pointed out that many wealthy young men in the Brahmin caste, similar to Gautama, left their homes to wander as spiritual ascetics, and this became something



Buddha, seated under the Bodhi (pipal) tree worshipped by monks, princes, and bodhisattvas. Stone relief in the Museum of Sarnath, India, second century BCE. (Bettmann/Corbis)

of a trend for wealthy youth in this period. Many of these individuals may have developed alternative schools of religion related to but distinct from Hinduism and partially inspired by a larger grassroots desire to move away from the social inequities of the Hindu caste system, which was considered by many to be oppressive. Gautama's approach can be described as a nondeistic and noncaste-based reformulation of Vedic philosophy, reframing or discarding the pantheon of gods that became characteristic of Hinduism's approach to the same spiritual principles.

Historians believe that Gautama spent most of his life in northern India, and it was here that he delivered a seminal speech at Deer Park to a group of early converts constituting the first Sangha, or community of Buddhism. According to his mythologized biography, Buddha died around the age of 80, and achieved parinirvana, the completion of the Buddhist path and complete freedom from the material world. However, the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism hold that Buddha remained in the material realm after parinirvana as a bodhisattva, or enlightened teacher, so that he could continue helping others to reach nirvana. Buddha is then credited with delivering two or three further sermons that contained essential teachings that described a more complex conception of spiritual reality and Buddhist practice. Historians believe that all speeches attributed to

Gautama may be at least partially based on historical appearances, though not all historians accept the traditional timeline that holds Gautama delivered several of these speeches *after* his death.

As with the lives of many ancient historical figures, it is difficult to draw a clear line between myth and history in the life of Gautama Buddha, and this process is made more difficult by many Buddhist's emotional attachment to the more mystical aspects of his history. Buddhist scholars place less emphasis on historical accuracy and tend to believe that both the myths and historical details play an important role in furthering the ideals of Buddhism, which are the most important manifestation of the faith.

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## LOTUS

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### Flower of Purity and Life

The lotus is an aquatic flowering plant that has become one of the most common symbols in Buddhism and Hinduism, usually representing purity and transformation. The lotus flower has been cultivated in Asia and Africa for thousands of years and was important to ancient Egyptian and Vedic religious traditions that gave rise to Hinduism and Buddhism. The lotus is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols, or "ashtamangala," used in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

### Species and Cultivation

The sacred lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), also called the Indian or Egyptian lotus, is generally placed within its own family, Nelumbonaceae, though it was originally grouped into the family Nymphaeaceae, which contains a variety of other aquatic plants commonly known as water lilies. *Nelumbo nucifera* is an aquatic perennial herb that produces a crown of large leaves that can reach one to three feet across. The plant grows on stalks that extend out of the water rather than floating directly on the surface as some other aquatic plant species do. Fossils reveal that the lotus is at least 34 million years old within the Indian subcontinent and is native throughout most of Asia and the Middle East. The species also appears in Australia, though the origins of the plant in this region are currently unclear.



The sacred lotus is similar in many respects to several species of water lilies, and many lily species are colloquially called “lotus,” including the Egyptian white water lily (*Nymphaea lotus*) and the blue lotus (*Nymphaea coerulea*). Though not true lotuses, these species have also been imbued with symbolic representations similar to those associated with the sacred lotus.

Archaeologists are uncertain when the cultivation of lotuses and lilies began, but the cultivated plants were popular in China as early as the 12th century BCE, while the cultivation of water lilies in Egypt likely began earlier. In many parts of Asia, the sacred lotus has been raised as a food crop for more than 3,000 years. Lotus seeds are often eaten in addition to the rhizomes, which are subterranean plant structures, sometimes called “rootstocks,” familiar to many around the world from the ginger rhizome that is often mistakenly called a “root.” Lotus seeds, once desiccated, retain the ability to germinate for extremely long periods, and dried seeds more than 1,000 years old have been germinated to produce living plants.

## Symbolism of the Lotus

Historians believe that the lotus has been a spiritual symbol for more than 5,000 years. The lotus is often a symbol of purity, and this may be related to a physiological feature known as the “lotus effect,” a biomechanical mechanism that prevents dust and debris from clinging to lotus petals, even when the plant grows in sediment-laden water. In the 1960s, scientists found that the microscopic surface of lotus petals included a complex system of nodules that prevented water from pooling on the surface of the leaf. As water falls on the lotus leaf, it beads and falls from the surface, thus cleaning dust and debris from the petals. Buddhists praised the lotus for its ability to grow out of impure water but remain unstained and likened this to the attainment of purity through Buddhist revelation or to the purity of the Buddhist life, untainted by the impurity of the material world.

Some historians believe that that the lotus, or more precisely the water lily, was a solar symbol in ancient Egypt, symbolizing the sun’s creative powers. In ancient Egypt, water was considered the primordial substance from which all life emerged, and the lotus and water together thus represented the fundamental moment of creation from the blending of the sun’s energy and the water’s creative potential. The lily therefore became a fertility symbol, often associated with goddesses. Some historians have speculated that the leaves of the lotus gained additional significance as a stylized representation of the female vulva or vagina, thus deepening the flower’s symbolic association with reproduction.

Lotus symbolism in India predates both Hinduism and Buddhism and seems to have emerged within the Indus Valley civilization that occupied the area around the Indus River from 3300 to 1300 BCE. The ancient Vedic religion also

considered the lotus a symbol of eternity and creation, and these meanings became part of lotus symbolism in both Hinduism and Buddhism.

In Hinduism, the lotus, known by the Sanskrit term “padma,” is a symbol of the gods Vishnu and Brahma, and both deities are often depicted holding lotus flowers. The lotus is also a symbol of Vishnu’s consort Lakshmi, a goddess of spiritual and material wealth. Lotus leaves and flowers are incorporated into many Hindu yantras and mandalas, with a variety of symbolic associations. The unfolding of a new lotus bloom is symbolic of birth and often attributed to spiritual awakening or rebirth in Hindu iconography. The term “padma,” used for the lotus in general, and the term “kamala,” used for the red lotus, are sometimes used as synonyms for the vagina.

Lotus symbols are common on Buddhist relics from as early as the second century BCE, likely adopting the symbol from Hinduism. The Buddhist lotus is depicted in three stages: as an unopened bud, a blooming flower, and a seed pod. These three depictions represent various trifold Buddhist concepts, such as the division of past, present, and future. The fact that lotuses grow on stalks suspended from the water has also been used as a symbol of rising above the suffering of the world through the Eightfold Path. In Buddhist legend, it is written that lotus flowers sprouted in the footsteps of Gautama Buddha as he walked.

The lotus became one of the official symbols of the Japanese state after Buddhism became the state cult of Japan, but some evidence suggests that lotus symbolism in Japan predates the arrival of Buddhism and may have played a role in some of the island’s oldest folk traditions. In Japanese Shinto, the lotus is a symbol of resurrection and renewal. Records indicate that the lotus was either endemic to Japan or was brought to the country by the first wave of inhabitants.

In Europe, lotuses (imported from North Africa) were used in funerary rituals in ancient Greece and Rome. In legends, the Greek hero Odysseus encountered a



The lotus is one of the most ancient botanical symbols in the world, and an important emblem of the Dharmic faiths. The symbolism of the flower is often related to the plant’s unusual innate characteristics.

group known as the “lotus eaters,” who were from an area probably close to the modern Libyan coast, and participated in a ritual eating of lotuses, which had narcotic properties. Historians believe that the lotuses described in the Odysseus myth do not refer to the sacred lotus but to the opium poppy, which produces seed pods that resemble those of the sacred lotus and has well-known narcotic properties.

The lotus was not a spiritual symbol in the West until Buddhism was imported to Europe and the United States in the 1800s. As part of the pop-cultural commodification of spirituality, the lotus has become a popular choice among Western tattoo aficionados, among whom faux-Asian and pseudo-spiritual designs are among the most common motifs.

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## WHITE LOTUS SOCIETY

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### Crime and Prophecy in China

The White Lotus Society grew out of a Buddhist movement during the mid-Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) and became an important part of the Chinese Maitreyan movement that lasted into the modern era. Over the centuries, the White Lotus Society has played an important role in sectarian uprisings against the Chinese imperial government, partially motivated by religion but primarily providing a system of organization to broader groups that were united against governmental oppression. The White Lotus Society represented the Han ethnic group in China, and their opposition to the government was more pronounced during the Yuan and Qing dynasties, when Mongolians, rather than Han Chinese, controlled the Chinese Empire.

### The Prophecies of Maitreya Buddha

The Maitreyan movement is based on a specific set of beliefs concerning eschatology, or the events that will occur during the end of the world. According to the prophecy of Maitreya, the world is currently within a middle period, between the arrival of the fourth Buddha, Gautama Buddha (often known simply as Buddha), and the fifth Buddha, or future Buddha, Maitreya. Gautama Buddha preached that

his teachings, collectively called the “dharma,” would be lost from the world after 5,000 years, leading to an overall decline in human society and to an increase in nonvirtuous behavior. The arrival of Maitreya will then constitute a return of Buddhist dharma and values and a golden age for society.

Prophecies hold that Maitreya will achieve Buddhahood in 7 days, the minimum time in which this transformation is possible, because of his having been reincarnated many times in preparation for enlightenment. Maitreya is associated with the lotus flower, and this is the source of the name for the White Lotus Society, originally a Buddhist group focused on the prophecies of Maitreya. According to prophecy, Maitreya’s teachings will focus on the Five Faults and the Eight Antidotes to these faults, as well as the Ten Virtuous and Ten Nonvirtuous Activities. Collectively, these renewed teachings will transform the world into an idyllic paradise in which humans will live for thousands of years in peace and harmony.

### White Lotus Uprisings

The White Lotus Society emerged in the Song dynasty (960–1269 CE), and Chinese historical documents record that the society took part in a popular uprising in 1281, beginning a pattern of activity that would become characteristic of the movement. The society was reformulated in the 1300s under the leadership of Han Shantung, a spiritual Maitreyan Buddhist who was an opponent of the Mongolian Yuan dynasty. The Yuan government saw the White Lotus as a threat and banned the organization, thereby forcing the White Lotus to become a secret organization.

Han Shantung’s son, Han Linerh, led a White Lotus armed revolt against the Yuan government in 1352. Participants in the uprising wore red turbans, and historians often refer to this movement as the Red Turban Uprising. Han Linerh’s Red Turbans helped Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming dynasty, to capture Beijing in 1368. However, after Zhu Yuanzhang took control of China, he turned away from the Maitreyan movement and attempted to destroy the White Lotus Society, believing them to be a threat to his government. In the 1620s, the society was involved in more than 20 armed uprisings against the Ming government.

Also in the 17th century, a new genre of religious literature, called “baojuan,” or “precious volumes,” began to appear in China and became important in the organization of the era’s political and religious movements. These small booklets contained stories, scriptures, and poems generally written for popular appeal with verses that could be recited. Recruitment to the White Lotus Society in the 1600s was facilitated by the distribution of baojuan concerning the prophecies of Maitreya.

In 1794, Liu Song and Liu Zhixie, two members of a White Lotus group, began one of the longest sect-driven uprisings in Chinese history against the

Mongolian Qing dynasty (1644–1912). The rebellion, now known as the White Lotus Rebellion, began as a protest against the tax system but grew to encompass a variety of popular complaints regarding governmental neglect, mismanagement, and oppression. The rebellion spread to five Chinese provinces and lasted for nine years, until the Qing government organized a peasant militia to help find, kill, and capture members of the group. This manifestation of the society contained not only Maitreyan Buddhists but also members of many other religious and social groups united by a desire to see the end of the Qing dynasty and the return to Han Chinese leadership.

### **The Chinese Triads**

Over the centuries, the Buddhist White Lotus Society has become entangled with other Chinese societies that have adopted the same name. During the Qing dynasty, records mention another White Lotus or White Lily Society that came to be associated with the origin of the Chinese criminal organizations known as the “triads.” The name “triads” was given to these organizations under British-occupied Hong Kong in reference to the Three Harmonies Society, or “Hongmen,” a Chinese fraternal organization that is believed to have been one of the original criminal triads.

The Three Harmonies Society was founded in the mid-1700s as a fraternal organization for the Han Chinese in China’s northern provinces. Under the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) fraternal societies were prohibited (to prevent dissidence and uprisings), and the Hongmen became an underground, anti-Qing organization. To prevent discovery by the Qing, the Hongmen met in secret locations and used a language of covert rituals to identify themselves to other members, including the recitation of coded phrases and the use of secret handshakes known only to members.

Under pressure from the Qing government, anti-Mongolian or nationalist organizations, such as the Hongmen, fled into the Chinese underworld, where some became involved in organized crime. The White Lotus Society is mentioned in records of the early triads, though some historians believe that this organization is different from the Maitreyan Buddhist organization of the same name that was involved in earlier rebellions. Other historians suggest that the White Lotus Society of the triads might have been a direct descendant of the Maitreyan Buddhist organization. In legends, it is often claimed that the Hongmen was founded by members of the former Ming dynasty or that it was founded by former Buddhist monks of the Shaolin Temple, a monastic order that has become internationally famous for unique forms of martial arts. Though historians now doubt these origin stories, it is generally acknowledged that the triads began as anti-Qing revolutionary groups, but they spread to Hong Kong and other Chinese settlements in the form of criminal organizations.

In the 21st century, the Hongmen still exists and has more than 300,000 members worldwide, according to official figures gathered by the organization. In Hong Kong and some other places, membership in the Hongmen is still illegal because of the group's long ties to organized crime. Some writers on the history of China's criminal underground have alleged that the White Lotus Society may still exist as an underground organization as well and is perhaps involved in the global criminal activities associated with the triads.

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## ZEN AND CHAN BUDDHISM

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### Meditative Faith in East Asia

Zen and Chan Buddhism are subschools of Mahayana Buddhism that developed in China around the sixth century and have become among the most popular forms of Buddhism in China, Japan, Korea, Europe, and the United States. Zen is a complex concept that refers to a state of awareness and a way of experiencing and connecting with the world and one's own spiritual state. Chan in China and Zen in Japan also involve the integration of Buddhism with Taoist and native Japanese spiritual concepts.

### History of Chan and Zen

The term “chan,” or “ch’an,” is a Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit term “dyana,” which is generally translated as “meditative state.” Chinese Chan Buddhism is an outgrowth of Mahayana Buddhism and has become one of the most popular forms of Buddhist practice. Zen Buddhism is a Japanese school developed from Chan Buddhism, which remains one of the most dominant schools of Buddhism in Japan. In both China and Japan, Chan and Zen, respectively, have been influenced by blending with other native religious principles, which has led to distinctions between the two schools of thought.

The history of Chan and Zen is intimately tied to a Chinese Buddhist legend regarding an Indian or Persian sage known as Bodhidharma, called “Damo” or “Putidamo” in China. Damo visited China in the late fifth or early sixth centuries,

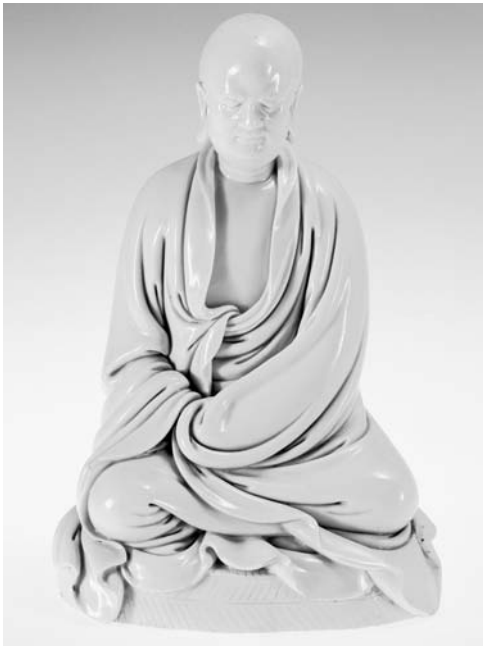


Figure of Bodhidharma, Ming dynasty (17th century), Chinese, porcelain. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA/Boltin Picture Library/The Bridgeman Art Library)

and legends of his life are an important aspect of Chan Buddhist mythology. Damo is said to have traveled to the Shaolin Monastery, hoping to transmit his Buddhist teachings to the monks, but he was turned away. Damo then stayed in a nearby cave for nine years, staring at a wall of the cave in silent meditation. The most common legend says that at one point he became drowsy and cut off his own eyelids to remain awake. The discarded eyelids are sometimes reported to have sprouted tea plants, thus signifying the importance of green tea to Chan meditative practice.

Before Damo's arrival, the Chinese were already in the process of blending Buddhism with Taoism to create a unique, and distinctly Chinese approach to the faith. After his period of meditation in the cave, Damo began teaching new

perspectives on meditation to the Shaolin Monks, who ultimately integrated these teachings to create their unique martial techniques, known generally as "Shaolinquan." Damo was the first of the six patriarchs of the faith believed be responsible for the origin and development of the Chan School. The sixth patriarch, Huineng, was an illiterate man from southern of China who had a preternatural understanding of Buddhist scripture. According to tradition, Huineng was the individual most responsible for the modern method of practicing Chan in China.

Chan Buddhism was imported to Vietnam as early as the 7th century and to Korea between 800 and 900 CE. The Japanese version of Chan, Zen Buddhism, became popular in Japan in the 11th century, though there were earlier attempts to introduce Zen principles to Japanese Buddhists. Eihei Dogen (also known as Dogen Zenji) was one of the first major teachers of Zen in Japan and established the Soto School, which is still the largest Japanese sect of Zen Buddhism. Eihei Dogen lived from 1200 to 1253 and visited China, where he studied with renowned Chan master Rujing before returning to Japan to found his own school of Zen practice.

## Principles of Practice

Chan and Zen are teacher-oriented schools that stress the importance of direct transmission of the dharma, as opposed to the study of written sutras. Zen and Chan teachers are generally considered to be part of lineages that can be traced from Gautama Buddha through a lineage of teachers that includes Damo in China and finally the modern lineage of teachers. Both Chan and Zen teachers are often judged by the quality of their educational heritage. The title of Zen Master, or “Zenji” in Japanese, is not given to living Zen teachers (a popular misconception, leading to incorrect usage of the term) but reserved for teachers who have died after making major contributions to the faith.

Zen and Chan are unique in that they eschew the importance of scripture and teach that salvation can be found by searching inward and discovering the truth of one’s own inherent Buddhahood. Therefore, Chan and Zen practice requires rigorous self-discipline and dedication. In general, the practice of Chan and Zen is considered to be a way of life rather than an intellectual study, and schools tend to place a premium on private and group meditation. In addition, Zen and Chan cultivation stresses teaching through expression rather than explanation, and teachers therefore illustrate essential principles by demonstrating the way that they manifest in one’s activities, thoughts, and behavior.

## Japanese Schools

The two dominant schools of Zen are the Soto and the Rinzai schools. The Soto School is the most popular school of Japanese Zen and was introduced in the 13th century by Eihei Dogen, the first Japanese man to achieve enlightenment through Zen practice. The Rinzai School originated in China in the 9th century CE and was technically the first school of Buddhism to arrive in Japan, though it did not take hold initially and was replaced by the Rinzai School. In the 13th century, Rinzai was reintroduced to Japan and became a major school of Zen practice.

Both the Soto and Rinzai schools stress the importance of meditation, known as “zazen,” though each school approaches zazen in a slightly different

### The Militant Sage

Zen philosophy was a major influence on the samurai caste system of 14th-century Japan. Zen monks often took a vow of poverty, shirking material gain in favor of spiritual development. The samurai caste also valued honor over wealth, and thus even a poor samurai could be an aristocrat if he lived in an honorable manner.



manner. The term “zazen” translates as “seated meditation” and is the heart of Zen and Chan philosophy, with practitioners engaging in daily zazen to focus the mind and to gain spontaneous insight, called “satori.” The goal is to release the mind from intellectual or abstract thought by allowing thoughts and impressions to pass through the mind without concentrating on them.

The Rinzai School tends to use koans as meditative aids when engaging in zazen. A koan is a story, statement, or question used to provoke thought that demonstrates the limits of logical and intellectual reasoning. The earliest examples were developed in Chinese Buddhism, but they became more characteristic of Japanese Zen practice. Koans have become one of the most famous stereotypical examples of Zen Buddhism, reflected in the international fame of such koans as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” which was invented by Japanese Zen teacher Hakuin Ekaku, who was one of the most influential Rinzai teachers in the mid-18th century. In contemplating the koan over an extended period, the student progresses through various stages of understanding, including the Great Faith, Great Doubt, and Great Resolve. The student ultimately recognizes that the koan cannot be solved through reason and comes to spontaneous understanding, or “satori.”

The Soto School does not use koans in their zazen but instead focuses on “shikantaza,” which means “nothing but sitting.” In this form of zazen, the practitioner does not concentrate on any meditative aid but simply attempts to free his or her mind from thought, allowing thoughts to enter and exit the mind without attaching or dwelling on any thought in particular. The shikantaza is a more basic approach that was developed by the Chinese monk Rujing and taught directly to Eihei Dogen, the founder of the Soto School. The Soto School also studies koans, but it does not involve them in their zazen practice, believing meditative aids to be an unnecessary complication to meditation. Rinzai teachers, by contrast, believe that meditative aids are necessary tools for zazen and often argue that true satori cannot be achieved without them.

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# Jainism

Jainism is an ancient Indian religion emerging out of the same Vedic spirituality that gave rise to Hinduism and Buddhism. There are more than 4 million Jains living in the world today, most living in India. Jainism is essentially nondeist, in that they do not worship a creator deity, but Jains believe that the universe has always been in existence and that there is a divine reality binding all of reality and life together. Jains venerate teachers and certain divine beings who have transcended material existence and become teachers and guides to humanity.

## Origins and Evolution

The earliest distinct forms of Jainism emerged between 700 and 500 BCE, but the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of the religion derived from a tradition of spiritual development that extends to at least 2500 BCE. According to Jain mythology, there have been 24 great teachers, called “Tirthankaras” or “fjord makers,” in history who have together revealed the underlying truths of the universe. The first Tirthankara, known as Rishabha, is sometimes considered the founder of Jainism.

Historians are unable to assign reliable dates to the life of Rishabha or the next 21 Tirthankaras. The first Tirthankara whose life can be historically verified is Parshva, who lived between the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. Parshva is credited with developing the central characteristics of Jainism and is believed to have been a prince in Benares (also called Varanasi), one of the oldest cities in India, which is sometimes called a “spiritual capital” because of the city’s importance in Buddhist, Jainist, and Hindu mythology. The 24th and final Tirthankara is Mahavira, who lived in the sixth century BCE in the northern city of Bihar (most scholars date his birth to 599 BCE) and is the most important figure in modern Jainism.

Following Mahavira’s death, Jainism fractured into two different sects, Svetambara and Digambara. The two groups differ in their focus on certain rituals, their beliefs regarding women in the faith, and the practices of their monastic followers. Most practicing Jains tend toward Svetambara, which is the more liberal version of the faith, while Digambara represents the ancient form of Jainism that existed in Mahavira’s lifetime.

## Jain Beliefs

Jainism is one of the dharmic religions, Indian spiritual practices united by shared beliefs in certain core concepts, such as dharma, karma, and samsara. In Jainism, dharma can mean either “religion” or the principles and practice of Jainism. Jains believe in an eternal and perpetually existing universe that has no creator. Individuals are the physical manifestations of nonphysical entities called “jivas,” which some translate as “souls.” All jivas exist within a cycle of continual reincarnation called “samsara,” which is the nature of the physical universe and the cause of all suffering. The goal of practice is to free one’s jiva from samsara by achieving “liberation.” Jivas that are liberated from samsara become sidhas and are no longer reborn, instead becoming perfected and purely spiritual beings that are at one with the infinite universe. While Jainism is usually described as having no gods, in some sense the sidhas function as minor gods, as they are venerated and revered by followers.

Karma, or “action,” is the facet of existence that determines the quality of a jiva’s current and future incarnations. Jains believe that karma is physical and is part of what binds jivas to the physical world. Liberation involves shedding all of the karma an individual has accumulated through this or previous incarnations. The practice of Jain dharma is meant to allow an individual to remove his or her karma. The road to liberation is found primarily in the Agamas, which are the primary texts of Jainism, which are attributed to the teachings of Mahavira.

Jains follow five principles known as “mahavratas” that provide a guide for shedding karma. The mahavratas include refraining from lying and stealing, avoiding attachment to material possessions, remaining chaste in one’s sexual life or abstaining from sex completely, and practicing ahimsa, or nonviolence. Jain nonviolence extends to nonhuman animals; therefore, Jains are vegetarian and refrain from using products manufactured by killing or harming animals. In general, Jains believe in living responsible, practical, and highly compassionate lives, and this has made Jainism one of the world’s most enduringly pacifist traditions.

While Jainists believe in equality among the sexes, the two sects of Jainism disagree about whether men and women are also spiritually equal. In the Digambara, or “sky clad” sect, it is believed that monks must be naked at all times, demonstrating their rejection of materialism and such negative emotions as modesty. Digambara followers believe that women cannot be naked because their nudity is too “disturbing”; therefore, women cannot become truly ascetic and cannot achieve liberation until they are reincarnated as men. In the Svetambara, or “white clad” sect, nudity is not required, and monks wear white clothing. Svetambara followers believe that there is no spiritual difference between the sexes and that both men and women can achieve liberation in their current incarnations.

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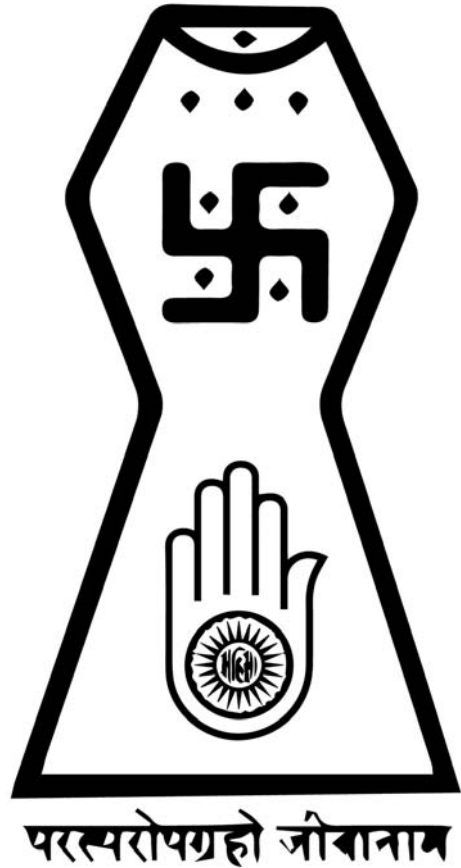
## JAIN EMBLEM

### Syncretic Symbol of Dharmic Faith

Traditionally, followers of Jainism had no unique symbols and used a variety of symbols derived from Buddhism and Hinduism, including a right-turning swastika and the open palm symbol, both considered to have Hindu origins. The most common modern symbol of the Jain faith is the Jain Patrika, sometimes called the “Jain Emblem,” a geometric crest that incorporates several different levels of symbolism and was officially adopted at a 1975 celebration to observe the 2,500th anniversary of the Jain teacher Mahavira’s attainment of liberation.

### Representation of the Three Loks

The shape of the Jain emblem represents the structure of Jain cosmology, which divides existence into three realms, known as “Loks” or “Loka.” At the top is Uddharva Loka, the heavenly or celestial realm, which is further divided into a complex series of abodes that are home to a variety of spiritual beings. At the pinnacle of the heavenly realm is Siddhasila, a domain that is home to the souls of those who have achieved liberation, or “nirvana,” and



The Jain emblem is a relatively modern spiritual symbol that represents both spiritual concepts that are unique to Jainism and a number of concepts and symbols shared among the Dharmic faiths.

are venerated by Jains for their wisdom and spiritual attainment. The Siddhasila realm is represented on the emblem by a semicircle at the top center containing a single dot that represents the liberated souls living in Siddhasila.

The middle portion of the symbol (where the outline is “pinched”) represents Madhya Loka, the middle world or temporal realm. This is the realm of humanity and the material earth, but it is also populated by a pantheon of luminous spirits and earthly spirits that live in the sky and subterranean realms, respectively. The lower portion represents Adho Loka, the “underworld” or “lower world,” which is often seen as a realm of suffering or punishment but also has a population of beings that have both negative and positive qualities and are not similar to the demons or evil beings that populate subterranean realms in some religions.

### **The Three Jewels**

The three dots at the top of the symbol represent the three jewels, or “ratnatraya,” which are the essential principles of Jain practice. The first dot symbolizes Samyak Darshan, which translates as “right view” or “right faith,” and encapsulates the proper way of viewing the world. In essence, Samyak Darshan involves attempting to rationally and clearly explore reality to arrive at a reliable understanding of the universe without being prejudiced by preconceptions.

The second dot represents Samyak Gyana, or “right knowledge,” which represents the true knowledge of the universe gained through Samyak Darshan (right view). Attainment of Samyak Gyana and Samyak Darshan are highly dependent on understanding the Jain concept of relativity and their rational approach to faith.

The final dot represents Samyak Charita, or “right conduct,” conceived as the appropriate behavior and treatment of other living beings for an individual seeking enlightenment and liberation. Together, the Ratnatraya is the path to liberation, which is why the three jewels symbol is displayed beneath the semicircle representing the realm of liberated souls.

### **Incorporation of Other Symbols**

The Jain emblem also incorporates the open palm symbol, famous for its use in Hinduism and Buddhism (where it is sometimes called “the hand of Buddha”). The open palm symbolizes patience and thought before action. In some cultures, the open palm is also an amulet of protection from evil. At the center of the palm is a circle with 24 spokes. The circle represents that cycle of reincarnation (samsara), while the 24 spokes represent the Tirthankaras, or liberated teachers, who created Jain philosophy and practice. At the center of the circle

is the word “Ahimsa,” meaning “nonviolence,” which is one of the central principles of the faith.

The common version of the emblem also features a swastika, which is an ancient Indian symbol, generally representing fortune and well-being and related to ancient solar and sacred spiral symbols. In Jain symbolism, the swastika is surrounded by four dots that represent the four fates, or destinies, of every soul. These fates are to live as a human, an animal, a divine being (liberated soul), and an underworld being. Each individual is destined for one of these fates by virtue of their karma and behavior in life. The Jain swastika also represents the four divisions of the Jain faith, which includes monks, nuns, and male and female laity. In some versions, the swastika is replaced with the om symbol, another ancient symbol derived from Hinduism. In Jainism, the om represents the primordial sound of creation and the principles of focus and practice. Jains in Europe and North America tend to avoid the swastika because of the symbol’s association with the Nazi movement and the Holocaust.

Most versions of the Jain emblem have the words “Parasparopagraho Jivanam” beneath the geometric figure. This is sometimes translated as “live and let live,” but a more precise translation would be the idea that all living beings are supposed to assist one another in life. This is part of the Jain credo of behavior necessary for the attainment of spiritual liberation.

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## JAINISM AND SCIENCE

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### Divine Rationality

Jainism is a rarity among modern religions in that many of the principle tenets of Jain philosophy are complementary to rather than contradictory of the modern scientific view of the universe. Jainism is not a scientific religion. It includes a complex metaphysical and spiritual system that does not fall within the realm of the physical sciences and involves various supernatural entities and faith-based theories about the universe. However, Jainism has developed a system for the philosophical investigation of the universe that is based on the idea of rational inquiry and is therefore similar to the empirical scientific method in certain key ways.

## Jainism and the Scientific Method

The scientific method is a collection of techniques for obtaining and evaluating empirical and measurable evidence about the universe. The process begins with a hypothesis, which is an idea about a certain phenomenon based on rational speculation derived from overall theories about the phenomenon itself or its broader place within the universe. For instance, “Clouds are white because they are made of marshmallow” is a hypothesis about the composition of clouds, but one that is not likely to bear up to evidence because it is not based on a rational theory that explains why sugar and gelatin would be present in the atmosphere.

An important concept in Jainism is the three jewels (Ratnatraya), often described as right view, right knowledge, and right conduct, which are the basic tenets of Jain philosophy and also incorporate a rational view of the universe amenable in some ways to the scientific process. The Jain philosophy of knowledge and morality is based on rational observation of the universe by clearing one’s mind of preconceptions and engaging in observation and investigation. This differentiates Jainism from some religious philosophies in which philosophical precepts are accepted on the basis of faith rather than rationality. By contrast, Jain philosophy incorporates a deep sense of self-inquiry that is believed to be necessary for the development of true knowledge. Behavior and morality are likewise based on a logical view of the human role in the universe and the utilitarian value of nonviolence, and this is the basis of Jain pacifism and vegetarianism.

## Time and Creation

Jains envision the world as a perpetual phenomenon, neither created nor powered by the will of an external entity or energy source. This philosophical stance differs from many of the world’s dominant religions in which the universe is seen as the product of a creator god. At the base of every metaphysical system there must be an eternal unchanging force or else the chain of existence leads to an infinite regression. For instance, if one says, “X made Y,” one might ask, “Where did X come from?” If the answer is, “W made X,” the question becomes, “Where did W come

### To Move or Not to Move

Greek philosopher Aristotle invented the concept of an unmoved mover, a force or entity responsible for causing the universe to begin working but which is itself *unmoved* by this creative effort. Aristotle’s concept of primary causation has become one of the philosophical definitions for God, or the ultimate source of divine power.

from?” One method commonly used to break free from this logical regression is to presume that “X” is the fundamental nature of the universe, an unchanging and permanent generative force from which the rest of reality ultimately formed.

Rather than imagining a separate deity or entity that is responsible for creating the physical universe, Jains believe that the universe itself is the unchanging and permanent reality from which all other things arise. In many ways, this view is commensurate with purely physical, nonreligious theories about the nature of the universe and can be viewed as complementary to the theory of the big bang and the universes that may have existed before this generative event. The Jains also conceptualize time as being a fundamental property of the physical universe, similarly infinite and unending. This view of time is complementary to the one developed through the belief in the thermodynamic arrow in the physical sciences.

### Logic and Relativism

The principle of Anekantevada, a foundational doctrine of Jainism, refers to the concept that no single view or method of viewing reality contains ultimate truth and that there are as many different ways of perceiving truth as there are perspectives of perception. Anekantevada is comparable to the worldview proposed in physics, such as Einstein’s principle of special relativity, which says that any measurement of the physical properties of the universe (such as electromagnetism, gravity, or speed) depends on the perspective of the observer and cannot be independently estimated without taking into account the physical state of the observer.

Anekantevada gives rise to the Jain system of syadvada, which is a system of logical predication. Predication is a tool used to make statements about the class or quality of a thing. A simple form of predication is the declaration of “being,” meaning statements regarding what a thing “is” and “is not.” For instance, the statement “All men are mortals” is a predicate statement that gives information (mortality) about a subject (men). Statements of this kind can be used in logical evaluations that reveal information about the relationships between certain classes of things. For instance:

All men are mortal.

John Doe is a man.

Therefore, John Doe is mortal.

Jain syadvada is a system of logic that is entirely relativistic, deriving from the Jain theory of Anekantevada. The term “syad” means “maybe” or “partially,” and this encapsulates the idea that any observation or opinion only represents partial truth and can never capture absolute truth. Whereas predicate logic may say, “All men are mortal,” Jain philosophy would only say, “Maybe all men are mortal.”



The syadvada manifests in seven observational statements that can be used to construct logical arguments about a phenomenon.

- 1) Maybe it is.
- 2) Maybe it is not.
- 3) Maybe it both is and is not.
- 4) Maybe it is indeterminate.
- 5) Maybe it is and is indeterminate.
- 6) Maybe it is not and is indeterminate.
- 7) Maybe it is, is not, and is indeterminate.

To illustrate the syadvada, consider flipping a coin. If the coin comes up heads, it meets condition 1, meaning that the coin “is” heads. It also meets condition 2 because the coin “is not” tails. During the flipping process, the coin meets condition 4 because its ultimate state is indeterminate. The result of a toss may be different each time and will differ depending on who is tossing the coin, and this reflects the relativistic nature of the Jain system of observation and predication.

Jain relativism bears resemblance to many Western scientific concepts regarding the physical universe. Consider the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle (Principle of Indeterminacy), which says it is impossible to simultaneously measure the position and momentum of a particle. This principle has become an important tool for scientists to understand the behavior of individual particles at the quantum level. Experiments in particle physics reveal that the behavior of particles is (at least from a certain perspective of measurement) based on probability. The theories of quantum dynamics then, while not derived from Jain philosophy, are amenable to both the Jain relativistic view of the world as a whole and to their sevenfold system of predication.

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## TIME IN JAIN COSMOLOGY

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### Cyclic Temporality

Like many ancient religions, Jainism contains a complex mythological cosmology of the universe that inspired their worldview in a variety of ways. The Jain

concept of time provides an excellent example of how ancient cultures attempted to address such complex temporal concepts as the idea of infinity and also provides an example of how the cyclic view of time (also present in Hinduism and several other philosophies) differs from the linear view of temporal evolution.

## The Kalachakra

Time in the Jain universe is eternal and progresses through a cycle called the “Kalachakra,” or “wheel of time.” A single rotation of the wheel takes trillions upon trillions of years and the exact calculation of the time it takes to cycle through the wheel is considered to be impossible. Time is immemorial and unchanging in the Jain view, and the cycles therefore repeat in perpetuity.

The endless stretch of time within the Kalachakra is divided into a variety of intervals, including millennia, centuries, years, months, weeks, days, and hours. In addition to these familiar measures, Jains also use a variety of more unique measurements designed to capture the extremes of the temporal universe. For instance, Jains use a measure called a “muhurat,” measured as approximately 48 minutes, which is based on the time required to take 3,773 breaths. Each breath, in turn, is made up of 256 extremely short periods known as “avali.” The shortest possible division of time is the samaya, which is so brief that it is impossible to calculate how many samaya go into any other measure of time.

In an effort to capture the notion of nearly unimaginably long periods of time, the Jains created a concept called a “palyopama,” which is defined as the time it takes to empty a pit measuring four to eight miles in diameter by four to eight miles in depth that is filled with the hairs of a seven-day-old newborn baby if one removes a single hair every 100 years. For even longer periods, the Jains use sagaropamas, which are equal to approximately  $10 \times 10,000,000 \times 10,000,000$  palyopamas.

## The Cycle of Sorrow

The Kalachakra is divided into two halves, known as the ascending arc (Utsarpini), or the “Cycle of Happiness,” and the descending arc (Deasarpini), or the “Cycle of Sorrow.” Each arc consists of six identical periods, dividing the cycle into 12 distinct eras of physical and spiritual development. Happiness and harmony increase during the ascending arc and decrease during the descending arc. The known universe is in the fifth period of the descending arc, which is dominated by sadness and disharmony.

Susama-Susama (good-good)

- There is absolute happiness.
- It lasts for 400 sargaropamas.

- Humans live for three palyopamas and grow six to eight miles in height.
- Magical wishing trees provide all the food and materials needed by humanity.
- As there was no disharmony, there was no need for government or religion.

#### Susama (good)

- There is happiness.
- It lasts for 300 sagaropamas.
- There is approximately one-tenth as much happiness as in the preceding period.
- Humans live for two palyopamas and grow to four to six miles in height.
- Wishing trees continue to provide food and other goods.
- There is still no need for government or religion.

#### Susama-Duhsama (good-bad)

- There is happiness with some suffering.
- It lasts for 200 sagaropamas.
- Humans live for one palyopama and grow to one to two miles in height.
- Humans begin farming and hunting to obtain food.
- A series of human patriarchs (Kulakaras) develop the tenets of human society and invent the first institutions of crime and punishment.
- The last of the Kulakaras (Rishabahadeva) becomes the first liberated soul, reaching the ultimate level of enlightenment.

Rishabahadeva was the first of the Jain Tirthankaras, a series of 24 mythical teachers responsible for building human society and culture. Rishabahadeva is credited with inventing the concept of religion in an effort to curb humanity's growing tendency for evil. According to legend, Rishbahadeva's son Bharata became the first universal emperor of humanity, and his daughter Brahmi created all the world's alphabets, thus enabling humanity to record history and knowledge. This was necessary because humanity's memory gradually deteriorates during the descending arc.

#### Duhsama-Susama (bad-good)

- There was suffering with some happiness.
- It lasted for 100 sagaropamas.
- Humans live for less than one palyopama (which is still trillions of years) and grow to 1,500 meters.
- All food is grown or foraged.
- Twenty-three Tirthankaras were born and lived during this period, each creating one of the world's religions.

- Mahavira, the last of the Tirthankaras, founded Jainism at the end of the period.

Duhsama (bad): The Present Age

- There is suffering.
- It began three years after Mahavira's death (510–540 BCE).
- It will last for 21,000 years.
- Humans grow to an average of six feet and live a maximum of 130 years.
- Religion slowly disappears, driving humanity into further despair.
- Jainism will disappear at the close of the era.

Duhsama-Duhsama (bad-bad)

- There is absolute suffering.
- It lasts for 21,000 years.
- Humans live for 16–20 years and grow to only 48 inches in height.
- Morality and religion are abandoned.
- Hunger and suffering are the only reality for all of humanity.

Each period occurs twice within every rotation of the Kalachakra, and so there are two concurrent Duhsama-Duhsama periods, one in the descending arc, followed by an identical period in the ascending arc. Similarly, there are two concurrent Susama-Susama periods during the transition from the next ascending arc into the descending arc.

## Cyclic Temporality

The linear view of time, as envisioned by the Abrahamic faiths and the study of the physical universe, envisions time as an arrow progressing in one direction from a theoretical moment of creation. The linear view captures the way that humans experience time, and even within a cyclic temporal system, humans still witness time passing in a more or less linear fashion.

Scientists speculate that the known universe began with a generative event, known as the “big bang,” resulting in the expansion of the universe from a single point of creation. Albert Einstein and many later physicists have further speculated that the big bang was only part of a cyclic pattern that involves generative periods following a “big bang” and degenerative periods resulting in a “big crunch” when the universe collapses to a single point again. If these theories are correct, both the cyclic and linear views of time are essentially correct, with the cyclic model explaining the broader patterns of time in the universe while the linear model describes the way that time is experienced by the limited facilities of humanity.

Jain cosmology holds that the purpose of religion is to address suffering, and this definition of religion is nearly universal. Since time immemorial, philosophers have noted that life necessarily involves suffering, and nearly all religions address this issue in a metaphysical way, providing a reason for suffering, from a divine test to a reflection of cyclic patterns of creation and destruction. Religions also offer a theoretical solution, promising that faith and ritual are the keys to freeing oneself from the misery of the material world. While psychology, science, and philosophy attempt to address the proximate causes of suffering, many find more comfort in the transcendent if theoretical bliss offered through faith.

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# Sikhism

Sikhism is a semimonotheistic faith that developed in India in the 16th century CE and combines elements of monotheism with a belief in an eternal cycle of reincarnation characteristic of the other dharmic traditions of India. There are more than 20 million followers of Sikhism worldwide, with many still living in northwestern India and Pakistan where the religion first emerged.

## Origins and Evolution

Sikhism originated around 1500 CE in Punjab, a region in the northwestern portion of the Indian subcontinent that includes portions of modern India and Pakistan. The seeds of the religion were established through the teachings of nine holy teachers, known as “gurus,” beginning with Guru Nanak, the founder of the faith. Historians believe that Nanak was inspired by both Indian Hinduism and Islam (the two dominant faiths on the subcontinent during the period) but found both faiths lacking in their approach to divinity.

The establishment of the Islamic Mughal dynasty in India led to the persecution of Sikhs in the Punjab, as many of the Mughal leaders considered Sikhism to be a threat to their authority. The fourth and fifth Sikh gurus were arrested and executed for their refusal to abandon their faith and adopt Islam. In the 17th century, the sixth Sikh guru militarized Sikh society, incorporating martial training into the repertoire of Sikh rituals and spiritual and physical practice. The militarized Sikh order became a revolutionary organization and fought against Islamic forces on numerous occasions. Outnumbered throughout their territory, the sixth guru was eventually captured and executed by the government, and the next four gurus continued to operate as revolutionary groups within the Islamic empire.

The tenth guru decreed that Sikhs would no longer require the leadership of human gurus but would take their spiritual leadership directly from the Sikh holy texts while an elected system of administrators organized the Sikh community. At the end of the 18th century, the Sikh armies took control of the Punjab region after a series of brutal battles against imperial forces, leading to the establishment of an independent Sikh kingdom that lasted for just over 50 years until the British colonial armies took control of India.

After India gained its independence from Britain, leading quickly to the partition of India and Pakistan, the Sikhs were trapped between Hindu and Islamic interests. In 1966, India reorganized the administration of the Punjab territory in an effort to provide greater independence to Sikh communities, but many Sikhs were not satisfied with India's administration, and radical independence movements emerged. In the 1970s and 1980s, violence erupted between Sikhs and Hindus on several occasions, most notably the 1983 invasion of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, which had been occupied by a group of Sikhs led by the revolutionary spiritual and political leader Bhindranwale. The following year, two Sikh bodyguards were suspected in the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and this led to a series of anti-Sikh riots that resulted in more than 8,000 deaths and thousands of injuries. Since the late 1980s, relations between Sikhs and the Indian government have normalized, though some tensions continue to exist. The Sikh administration continues to assert that the Indian government has not effectively addressed continued violence and human rights abuses against Sikhs.

## Sikh Beliefs

Sikhism combines elements of Abrahamic monotheism with concepts common to the dharmic faiths of India, reflecting the influences of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam on the founders of the Sikh faith. The Sikhs believe in a single impersonal God, meaning that the Sikh God cannot be related to as a person. Instead, the Sikh God is envisioned as having neither gender nor an identifiable form and being in many ways inconceivable to the human imagination. Similar to the other dharmic faiths, Sikhism involves the belief in an endless cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation that only ends when a person achieves liberation and joins with God. Sikhs believe in the concept of dharma, but they define it as a system of action that constitutes the path of righteousness leading to eventual liberation.

Sikhs do not believe in devoting themselves entirely to faith or worship and believe that each person must remain integrated into the community, honoring God through the activities of their daily lives. All Sikhs are expected to engage in community service and charity, and this is an essential part of achieving liberation. Sikhs must also follow certain moral restrictions, such as avoiding drinking and gambling, and must endeavor to avoid such negative emotional states as anger and jealousy. Sikhs believe that individuals are blinded to the realities of God by their personal concerns and the influence of the material world. The key to achieving liberation, therefore, is to free oneself from these material considerations to reveal the broader spiritual realities of the universe. The unusual blend of qualities in Sikhism represents the history of India and the occasionally problematic

blending of Islam and the dharmic faiths over centuries of conquest, conflict, and coevolution.

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## EK ONKAR

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### Dharmic Monotheism

The phrase “ek onkar” states one of the basic tenets of the Sikh faith and is usually translated as “all is one” or “one creator.” The en onkar symbol takes its shape from the words used for this expression in the Punjabi language, and it is therefore part of the broader category of linguistic symbolism. The ek onkar symbol reflects both the Sikh belief in a single creator deity and their belief in a holistic universe manifested by a single divine influence.

### Origins and Language

At the foundation of Sikhism in the 15th century, the first guru, Nanak Dev Ji, is the one credited with creating the idea of ek onkar and with receiving the divine revelation that convinced Nanak that there was a single creative force behind creation. Raised in a Hindu tradition, Nanak absorbed ideas from Hinduism and Buddhism, such as a belief in the existence of certain universal cosmic realities and in the cycle of reincarnation characteristic of humanity’s place within the world. Nanak was also inspired by Islam, which had become popular in parts of India, and the idea of a single creator god responsible for creation and the salvation of humanity.

An important consideration in the study of Sikhism is that the Sikhs originated primarily in the northwest state of Punjab and were primarily speakers of the Punjabi language. Punjabi is spoken by millions worldwide and is still one of the official languages in parts of India and Pakistan. One of the more unusual facets of the Punjabi language is that it is the only Indo-Aryan dialect that has developed into a tonal language, which is a language in which the tone of a word changes the meaning. Punjabi has three tones, high, mid, and low, that are represented in the Punjabi script by the addition or subtraction of consonant symbols rather than punctuation marks.



Punjabi is a descendant language of ancient Sanskrit and is classified as part of the Indo-Aryan language group. Punjabi is believed to have emerged in the 10th century CE and can be characterized by three stages of linguistic development: Old, Medieval, and Modern. The Garanth Sahib, the holy text of the Sikhs, was written during the Old Punjabi linguistic era, which lasted from the 10th to the 16th centuries CE. There are three different writing systems used for Punjabi: Shahmukhi, Devangari, and Gurmukhi. The Gurmukhi script is the official writing system of Punjab and the most important to Sikhism. The ek onkar symbol is taken from the Gurmukhi script.

### Ceremony and Meaning

The phrase “ek onkar” is used in many Sikh prayers. For instance, the morning prayer in many Sikh gurdwaras (temples) begins with the phrase “ek onkar, sat nam.” In this context, “ek onkar” can be translated as meaning “all is one,” which is intended to recognize the fundamental unity of humans and their God while simultaneously representing the Sikh belief in a single God, rather than a system of gods. The phrase “sat nam” translates as “true identity.” The entire phrase thus means that God and all of creation are in unity, and this unity is the true identity of all persons. Another prayer (sometimes used as a chant) is “ek onkar nam siri wha guru,” meaning “There is one creator and one creation, his name is truth, he is all great, and he is all wisdom.” The phrase “wha guru,” sometimes spelled “wahe guru,” is used to represent the experience of ultimate wisdom.

Sikhism rejected the belief in multiple deities found in some forms of classical Hinduism and the earlier Vedic spiritual traditions that ultimately gave rise to all the native religions of India. The belief in a single all-powerful God overlaps with



The ek onkar is similar to the Dharmic om symbol, and this represents Sikhism’s emergence from within the Hindu priestly tradition. The ek onkar represents the fundamental Sikh belief in a single, all powerful, supreme being.

some sects of Hinduism that have also gravitated toward a similar model. For instance, followers of Brahmanism sometimes use the expression “ek onkar” to refer to the idea that there is only one reality, Brahma, and that all other aspects of reality ultimately derive from Brahma. The concept of ek onkar also reflects a basic philosophical focus on holism and the belief that the diversity of the world can be ultimately understood as multiple manifestations of the same influence: God’s power of creation.

Many of the world's religious symbols are iconographic or pictographic, using abstract images or pictures to symbolize religious concepts or beliefs. The ek onkar symbol, by contrast, is a linguistic or literal symbol that represents concepts through the words used to describe those concepts within the primary language of adherents. Islam, which was one of the influences of early Sikhism, is another religion that has often used linguistic symbolism, and Islamic linguistic symbols may have helped to inspire the ek onkar symbol in Sikhism. The fact that the ek onkar is representative of the Punjabi language is also significant because the Sikh movement was, for most of its history, a regional movement within the Punjab region, and the ek onkar symbol also represents this specific cultural heritage of the religion.

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## KHALSA KNIGHTHOOD

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### Spiritual Militarism in India

The Khalsa Knighthood, also known as the "Khalsa Panth" or the "Order of the Pure/Sovereign," is a spiritual sect within the Sikh religion that developed in the 17th century to defend the religion against the persecutory policies of the Islamic Mughal Empire. The Khalsa Knighthood was at its foundation a military institution and played a role in establishing the first Sikh kingdom in Punjab. Over the centuries, the military role of the Khalsa Order became more symbolic in nature. In the 21st century, the Khalsa has become synonymous with a more traditional conservative approach to Sikhism, while Sikhs who are not a members of the Khalsa often adopt a more liberal approach to the religion.

### Development of the Khalsa Martial Philosophy

While the Khalsa is now considered a central element of Sikhism, the order was not established until relatively late in the development of the religion under the direction of the 10th and final human guru. However, long before the knighthood was established, the Sikhs had a long history of opposing social injustice and governmental and spiritual oppression. The founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, was partially inspired by dissatisfaction with the rigid caste system of Hinduism, under which a person's occupation and social rank was partially determined by

their membership in a religious or social class. In Sikh philosophy, all individuals have equal access to God and can pursue any path in life they wish, so long as they observe certain social and moral guidelines.

From the 16th to the 18th centuries, most of India was under the control of the Islamic Mughal Empire, a military government that originated with the Mongolian warlord Genghis Khan and passed to the control of the Turkish-Mongolian warlord Timur (Tamerlane). The Moghuls and the Sikhs lived in relative peace for more than a century, and many of the Moghul rulers formed connections with Sikh, Buddhist, and Hindu communities. Emperor Jahangir, who ruled from 1605–1627, maintained religious tolerance with regard to Hinduism and Buddhism but became an enemy of the Sikhs, beginning a rivalry that lasted to the end of the Mughal dynasty.

Guru Arjan (the fifth Sikh guru) attempted to rectify relations between the faiths by declaring that the Muslim holy texts should be added to the holy scriptures used by Sikhs. Shortly after Jahangir ascended to the throne, he was forced to quell a rival claim for power from his own son, who had gained the support of several Sikh factions. As a result, Jahangir began a campaign to eradicate the Sikhs and used Arjan's co-optation of the Islamic holy scriptures as an excuse to accuse Arjan of heresy. In 1606, Jahangir had Arjan burned in a public execution to demonstrate his intolerance of anti-Islamic movements.

Arjan's son, Guru Hargobind (1595–1644) started an armed resistance to Mughal oppression, relying on the Sikh community to donate weapons and horses to build an army. Hargobind is credited with establishing the ceremony of the dual swords, representing secular and spiritual authority, respectively, which became a part of the Khalsa Knighthood ceremonies in later eras. Hargobind was captured and imprisoned for his role in the uprising, but Jahangir did not have him executed out of fear that his martyrdom would strengthen the resistance movement. He eventually released Hargobind from prison, hoping to strengthen relations with the Sikh population. Hargobind continued to resist Sikh rule, both politically and through various armed conflicts, for the rest of his life, though he was never able to build an army sufficient to challenge the Mughal Empire's armies.

Conflict between the Sikhs and Mughals abetted somewhat during the period of the 7th and 8th gurus of the faith, and the rule of the Mughal emperor Shajahan, who ruled from 1628 to 1658. Emperor Aurangzeb, who ruled from 1658 to 1707, was fervent in his opposition to non-Islamic religion and believed that the empire should convert all citizens to Islam. In 1675, after an unsuccessful effort to convert Guru Tegh Bahadur (the 9th guru) to Islam, Aurangzeb had the defiant guru beheaded in public. Gobind Singh, the 10th guru, thus ascended to leadership of the faith amid a charged political environment. Gobind Singh's strategy was to fashion the Sikh faith into an army of believers that could stand against the Islamic empire.

## The Khalsa Order

While Hargobind was the first Guru to encourage Sikhs to train their bodies in case of the need to defend their faith, Gobind Singh took this concept further, making martial training and the use of weapons a central facet of Sikh practice and integrating these rituals with the broader spiritual concepts of the faith. Gobind Singh's Khalsa Order became a popular movement, recruiting Sikhs from across the Punjab as well as many Hindus who were also suffering under Aurangzeb's oppressive policies.

Gobind Singh attempted to reformulate and modernize the faith and determined that followers of Sikhism no longer needed the leadership of human gurus, as he viewed this as another version of the caste system of Hinduism. To further this end, Singh renounced his position as Guru and elevated the holy texts of Sikhism to the status of living guru, now known as the "Guru Granth Sahib." From this moment, the texts containing the ideals of the religion became the highest spiritual authority in the faith.

In 1699, coinciding with the annual harvest festival known as the "Vaisakhi," Singh gathered five of his most trusted followers, now known as the "Five Beloved Ones," and baptized them into a newly formed inner circle of the faith, known as the "Khalsa Knighthood." Singh also determined that those baptized into the order would abandon their surnames, which were indicative of caste membership, and take the name "Singh," meaning "lion," if male or "Kaur," meaning "lioness" or "princess," if female.

Gobind Singh's reformulation of the faith resulted in a religion that was fundamentally egalitarian in its manifestation, representing a complete split from the hierarchies of class and caste that dominated Indian society, and also highly militarized, with each member of the faith becoming a soldier in a sacred army. The



Sikh man of the Khalsa order takes part in a Baisakhi (the first day of the Hindu New Year) procession in Brescia, Italy, April 16, 2011. Meaning the "Guru's Own," "Khalsa" was the name given by Guru Gobind Singh to all Sikhs who took the initiation of the double-edged sword. (Roberto Cerruti/Dreamstime.com)

duality of sant and shupa (saint and soldier) became the foundation of the Khalsa Knighthood, and Sikh's of all ages trained in the use of weapons and the skills needed to become warriors of the faith. Military leader Ranjit Singh, a member of the Khalsa Knighthood, led the revolution that finally wrested control of the Mughal dynasty in Punjab and led to the establishment of an independent Sikh kingdom. Ranjit Singh then became the first emperor of the newly established Sikh Empire in 1801.

The Sikh Empire only controlled the Punjab region from 1799 to 1849, after which the Sikh Empire and the rest of India fell under British control following the Anglo-Indian Wars. Though the Sikhs never again gained independence, elements of their martial philosophy developed in the Khalsa Order, and their proud history of resistance against the Mughal dynasty has remained an important facet of Sikh culture into the modern era. At the annual Vaisakhi festival, Sikhs of the Khalsa Order still participate in ritual demonstrations of their martial skills, honoring Gobing Singh and the legacy of the Khalsa Knights.

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## **KHANDA**

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### **Armaments of the Faith**

The Khanda is the most recognizable symbol of the Sikh religion. It was built from a combination of symbols representing sacred weapons of the Sikh tradition. The Khanda is therefore part of a subset of religious symbols that pay homage to the military history of religion. The Khanda is used as a decorative element in Sikh Gurdwaras (temples) and on the Nishan Sahib, which is the official flag of the Sikhs. The Khanda also symbolizes the principles of the Khalsa Knighthood, a society of holy soldiers dedicated to defending the faith and social justice within the Sikh community.

### **Weapons of the Khalsa Knighthood**

The Khanda is composed of four separate elements, each representing a different weapon used by the Sikhs. In the center is a double-edged blade, which represents

a special type of sword, called a “khanda,” from which the symbol takes its name. To either side of the khanda are two single-edged blades, called “kirpan,” which are also traditional ceremonial armaments of the Khalsa Knighthood. The fourth element is a circle, which may represent the “kara,” a symbolic bracelet worn by Sikhs, or a circular ranged weapon known as a “chakram.”

The khanda is one of the oldest types of swords in the traditional Indian armament and was developed between 300 and 600 CE. The sword was commonly used from antiquity into the imperial era under the Mughal Empire (1526–1857). The khanda features a broad straight blade, which was usually single-edged, though the Khanda emblem depicts the less common double-edged variety. The sword often broadened toward the tip, which was sometimes blunted, making it a hacking rather than a stabbing implement. The khanda is used in the Amrit Ceremony, which is an initiation ritual used to baptize an individual into the Khalsa Knighthood. The members at the ceremony stir a steel bowl filled with water and sugar crystals with a ceremonial double-edged khanda.

Khanda are traditionally fashioned from wootz steel (a precursor of Damascus steel), which is a type of steel made from a combination of other metals that features a distinct pattern because of the presence of iron and cementite particles in the metal matrix. It was not uncommon for sword makers to decorate the blade, handle, and pommel of a khanda with various designs, including floral and animal motifs. The handle of a khanda was often fitted with a sharp metal spike that could be used to deliver a secondary attack to an enemy at close range.

The kirpan daggers that make up part of the Khanda symbol are based on the ceremonial daggers carried by Sikh’s since the era of Guru Hargobind, who was the first to organize the Sikhs into a military order. The kirpan is considered one of the Five Ks of the Sikh faith and represents the willingness to lay down one’s life in defense of the Sikh community. The kirpan is a small dagger that measures from a



The Khanda symbol is a militaristic religious symbol commemorating the Sikh religion’s role in the struggle for independence and religious freedom among India’s Sikh population.

### Warrior Weaponry

Fans of the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) will be familiar with the chakram, as the protagonist of the series, Xena, used a similar sharpened disk to battle through hordes of melodramatic villains.

few inches to over a meter in length and is made of basic steel. Ceremonial kirpan range widely in decorative style and shape, though they are usually single-edged with a curved blade, making the kirpan a slicing weapon used in close quarters.

The circle on the Khanda symbol may have multiple layers of symbolism. Some sources claim that the circle represents the kara, a symbolic bracelet worn by Sikhs that is one of the Five Ks of Sikh tradition. Other sources claim that the circle represents the chakram, a circular blade carried by Sikh warriors and used as a ranged weapon. According to historians, the chakram was often carried as a concealed weapon and hidden under the turban until it was needed. To use the weapon, a warrior would spin the blade on his or her hand and then release the weapon, which could inflict a debilitating wound from as far as 100 meters away.

### Meaning of the Khanda

Taken as a whole, the Khanda symbol represents faith and the willingness to defend the Sikh society or religion in battle. The khanda sword is a symbol of belief in God's power or majesty, which is why it is used in the Amrit Ceremony. The circular chakram or kara in the Khanda symbol represents the oneness of God and the unity of god and humanity. This symbol can also be described as representing the integration of the Sikh community, both locally and across geographic boundaries.

The kirpan daggers symbolize the Sikh's readiness to defend his or her faith and also serve as a reminder of the first five Sikhs to join the Khalsa Knighthood. According to legend, after these original five knights were baptized into the order, they allowed Gobind Singh to cut off their heads for the sake of their faith, and the kirpan therefore recalls the bravery and sacrifice of these founding knights. The kirpan in the emblem are also given individual names, Miri and Piri, which symbolize political sovereignty and spiritual sovereignty, respectively, two of the primary goals of the Khalsa Order as the Sikhs were living under the oppressive rule of the Islamic Mughal dynasty.

The Khanda is one of the most important symbols of modern Sikhism and is also the sole symbol used on the Nishan Sahib, the flag used to represent the Sikh

people around the world. This Nishan Sahib is in the shape of a triangle, usually in yellow or orange, with the Khanda emblem appearing in the center in black or another dark color. While the Khanda symbol is based on the military weapons used to defend the Sikh faith against Mughal persecution, these symbolic weapons have also been imbued with secondary significance, representing the peaceful independence and sovereignty of the Sikh people.

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## THE REHAT MARYADA

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### Codifying Religious Adherence

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several Sikh sects attempted to reformulate the faith by blending Sikhism with Hinduism, and these sects developed close ties with the colonial British government in India. Conflict between more traditional sects of the faith and the syncretic Sikh movement culminated in violent clashes over the administration of key Sikh gurdwaras (temples), and the conservative Sikh movement founded the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) to oversee the return of the gurdwaras to traditional Sikh practice. In 1925, the colonial government transferred control of the gurdwaras to the SGPC to avoid further violence between the sects.

Over the next 20 years, the SGPC invited input from Sikhs in India, Pakistan, and around the world to develop a code of conduct and worship for the Sikh religion that would stand as a unified representation of traditional Sikh practice. The result was the Rehat Maryada, or “Code of Conduct,” which was officially adopted in 1945 and describes a variety of behaviors and rituals considered central the Sikh practice.

### Wearing of the Five Ks

The Five Ks are emblems of a Sikh’s adherence to the principles of the Khalsa Knighthood, as conceived by Guru Gobind Singh. At the time the principles were created, they had political and social meaning that has become less important in the modern era, though Sikh’s who continue to adhere to the Five Ks often see them as important links to their cultural and historical identity.



- The kesh refers to the practice of leaving one's head and body hair uncut as a symbol of devotion to God. This practice may have originated within Hinduism, as some Yogi sects have similar prohibitions against cutting hair. Unlike the kesh in Hinduism, where the hair may be unkempt or matted, Sikhs are expected to keep their hair neatly arranged and washed at all times.
- The kangha is a small wooden comb that is used to comb the hair and beard. Sikhs are directed to use the kangha to comb their hair twice a day to maintain a clean and tidy appearance, which is seen as proper for a member of the Khalsa society. The kangha also symbolically represents the process of combing sin away from the body.
- The kirpan is a ceremonial sword that ranges from a few inches to over a meter in length. It represents dignity, self-respect, and honor. When Guru Gobind Singh established the Khalsa Knighthood, the kirpan symbolized the Sikh's willingness to fight and die for the freedom of his or her faith and community. Though the meaning of the kirpan has become more ceremonial and symbolic, it is still a reminder that the Khalsa exists to defend the faith and to protect the weak and oppressed against the forces of tyranny.
- The kara is a solid steel bracelet worn on the right arm, which may have developed from the practice of wearing a metal cuff on the sword arm to prevent injury during battle. For modern Sikhs, the unbroken circle of the bracelet signifies God's unending nature, and the wearing of the bracelet symbolizes one's allegiance to God, desire to avoid sin, and a reminder of God's presence in daily life.
- The kachera is a type of undergarment, made of white fabric, worn by both male and female Sikhs. The kachera developed from a type of warrior's underwear in the 1600s that consisted of white shorts cut to come just above the knee so that they would not hamper movement in battle. The Rehat Maryada still declares that the kachera must not come below the knee, which is a holdover from the former military function of the garment. In modern Sikh culture, the kachera symbolizes purity, moral certitude, and spiritual freedom.

## The Kurahit

The Kurahit, or “prohibitions,” are the behaviors listed in the Rehat Maryada that every Sikh should seek to avoid in the course of his or her daily life. Any Sikh who violates one of the four primary prohibitions may be subject to exile or other social sanctions. In practice, however, modern Sikhs vary in their adherence to

the Kurahit, and many who do not strictly observe the prohibitions still consider themselves members of the Sikh faith. Violation of the Kurahit is considered especially egregious after an individual has been initiated into the Khalsa Order by participating in the Amrit Ceremony.

- Violating the kesh—Sikhs are expected to refrain from cutting or trimming their hair as this is seen as a symbol of impurity and a lack of devotion to God. In some countries, as many as 80 percent or more young Sikhs do not follow the tradition of the kesh, though in some traditional communities cutting one's hair is still considered a major violation of the faith.
- Avoiding tobacco or intoxicants—Sikh prohibitions against smoking of any kind are related to the overall focus on purity of body and mind. Smoking, drinking, and taking drugs are considered forms of bodily pollution and are also thought to reduce one's effectiveness as a defender of the faith.
- Avoiding Halal meat—Halal meat is the name given to meat in the Islamic tradition that has been slaughtered or prepared in the name of Allah. Eating Halal meat is considered to be a form of adherence to another faith and is therefore prohibited. The prohibition against Halal meat results from the ongoing and historical struggle between Sikhs and Muslims in India and Pakistan and the fact that the Khalsa Order was founded with the specific purpose of resisting Islamic persecution.
- Avoiding adultery—As a symbol of purity and dedication to the principles of their faith, Sikhs are prohibited from engaging in adultery and must only engage in monogamous relationships. Prohibitions against adultery exist in many traditions, reflecting both the belief that monogamous relationships are preferred and sanctioned by divine powers and the sociological understanding that the stability of the family unit, and therefore the well-being of children, depends on the ability of married adults to avoid actions that threaten the stability of the family. While the prohibitions regarding smoking, cutting the hair, and eating Islamic foods are not widely adhered to by some modern Sikhs, remaining faithful to one's spouse is considered to derive from the central core of the faith, so adultery is still seen as one of the most significant violations of the faith.

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水 火 木 土 金 孝



# EAST ASIAN RELIGIONS

The East Asian religions include the native traditions of China, Japan, Mongolia, Korea, Taiwan, and Macau. Though Buddhism and Christianity are now dominant throughout this region, Chinese Taoism and Japanese Shinto are examples of native traditions that have remained active and influential to the present. East Asian religions are sometimes called “Taoic” religions because of the pervasive influence of Chinese Taoism throughout the region. Though the East Asian faiths have not become as globally dominant as the Abrahamic or Dharmic faiths, the influence of East Asian philosophy can be seen in thousands of manifestations worldwide.

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# Taoism

Taoism is a Chinese tradition that developed from the ancient folk religious beliefs and nature religions of the Chinese tribes before the unification of China in the early imperial eras. Taoism is one of the oldest spiritual traditions in the world and has influenced Chinese philosophy, art, and society in myriad ways. Estimating the total number of Taoists worldwide is difficult because Chinese people sometimes practice elements of Taoist tradition without identifying themselves as “Taoists.” Currently, estimates range from less than 20 million to as many as 300–400 million practitioners worldwide.

## Origins and Evolution

The roots of modern Taoism can be traced to the period around 2000 BCE, when two seminal texts were beginning to be developed, the I-Ching, or Book of Changes, and the Huang-Di, or Classic of the Yellow Emperor. These two texts laid out the foundations of Chinese traditional medicine and the mystical system of divination that became the foundation of Chinese natural philosophy. All the major strains of Chinese thought, including Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese Buddhism, were influenced by these classic texts. Between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, a number of additional texts emerged that are now considered foundational to Taoism, including the Nei Yeh, or Inner Cultivation guide, which was written around the fourth century BCE and became one of the crucial guides to Taoist mysticism.

The most important text in Taoism is the Tao Te Ching, or Way of the Tao, which was compiled around the third century BCE and is traditionally attributed to the sage Lao Tzu. Scholars have demonstrated that the Tao Te Ching was not written by a single individual but is a collection of wisdom from many different sources. The Chuang Tzu is another central book of Taoism, compiled later than the Tao Te Ching but also consisting of a compilation of wisdom from earlier eras and a variety of different writers. Together these texts form the basis of classical Taoist philosophy, and these various strains of influence began to emerge as a distinct spiritual discipline around the third century BCE.

The first dedicated Taoist schools and temples began to appear during the first century CE. Many of these were alchemical schools interested in using divination and rituals to prolong human life. The interplay between Buddhism and Taoism gradually led Taoists to adopt some aspects of Buddhist practice, including organizing into monastic orders and placing increased emphasis on spiritual afterlife rather than physical immortality. Taoism likewise influenced Chinese Buddhism, with Chinese Buddhists mirroring the worship of Taoists deities and immortals in their treatment of Buddhist arhats and bodhisattvas.

Taoism became the official state religion during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) and remained the official religion of China until the Neo-Confucianism movement (a reformulation of Confucianism with elements of Taoism and Buddhism) began to gain political power and gradually became the favored cult of the Chinese state during the Song dynasty. For centuries, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism competed as state philosophies, though among the Chinese populace all three traditions were often practiced simultaneously. Between the 11th and 14th centuries CE, Taoist philosophical schools and monasteries emerged around China, and teachers from these institutions made significant contributions to the modern Taoist canon of literature, especially in the production of commentaries on the primary Taoist literature. Taoist martial arts also flourished in this period, leading to the development of Taoist qigong (internal work) and the now internationally famous taijiquan (also known as tai chi or supreme ultimate boxing).

After the communist revolution of the 1950s, Taoism was declared illegal, and Taoists were subjected to forced reeducation programs. Though they were repeatedly persecuted, Taoists continued to practice in secret, and Taoism remained popular in secret societies and through the folk customs of rural communities. After the Chinese government began to allow alternative religious organizations to resume their practices, Taoism began growing, and many of the ancient monasteries and Taoist schools became active again. In the 21st century, Taoism is considered one of the three jewels of Chinese culture (along with Buddhism and Confucianism), and the Taoist canon, Taoist monasteries, and other aspects of the religion are protected as part of the nation's cultural heritage.

## **Taoist Beliefs**

The central concept in Taoism is the “Tao,” sometimes translated as “the way,” a complex concept that can be generalized as an attempt to encapsulate the underlying nature of the universe in its entirety. The Tao is not perceived as a god or as a force or substance; the closest definition of the Tao is as a way of being, describing both how humans can live in harmony with the universe and how harmony in the universe exists in the first place. The Tao takes the place of an omnipotent creator

god found in many other systems, but it does not serve the same function. The Taoist universe is neither created nor destroyed, but simply exists as a manifestation of Tao nature.

Taoism was created from an amalgam of religious traditions and spiritual concepts, and, as such, there is no single or correct form of Taoist practice. While some Taoists focus on the broader philosophy of the Tao, other manifestations of Taoism have adopted a more polytheistic model, with individuals honoring and performing rituals to a pantheon of gods and spirits to achieve spiritual and material benefit. The Taoist pantheon consists of a heavenly bureaucracy of gods and spirits that interact with humanity in myriad ways. In some classics of Chinese literature, the organization of the gods is similar to the organization of the imperial government of China, reflecting the historical origins of Taoism. There are also natural gods of rivers, rocks, and trees and celestial gods, representing stars and planets.

The Taoist pantheon also contains groups of mythological immortals, semi-divine beings that, through alchemy or cultivation, have become immortal and possess fantastic powers. While these beings may be venerated and worshipped like gods or Christian saints, they are not creator beings, and they exist within a universe shaped by natural laws and the Tao.

Shenjiao is a form of Chinese folk religion (sometimes considered a subsystem of Taoism) that incorporates elements of Taoism and deities from other traditions into a mystical system of folk rituals designed to manipulate the spiritual and physical worlds. Modern Taoism is often divided into two types of rituals; the major rituals performed by Taoist priests (Taoshi) and the minor rituals performed by folk magicians (Fashi). Taoist temples around the country incorporate both major and minor rituals and therefore support a dedicated clergy of Taoshi and a system of local Fashi.

One of the fundamental concepts in Taoism, and the underlying metaphysical and spiritual philosophy of folk religion in China, is the idea of “qi,” which is usually translated as “breath,” and may be defined as a nonphysical essence, force,

### **The Tao of Possession**

Taoist fashi, or “folk magicians,” often conduct rituals that involve spiritual possession, in which a deity is believed to take possession of a person’s body, known as a “medium,” to communicate with humanity. While this practice has been incorporated into Taoism, spirit possession is a holdover from ancient Chinese folk religion and is not supported by Taoist philosophy specifically.



energy, or potentiality that exists everywhere in the universe and is essential to life and universal evolution. Conceptions of qi range along a spectrum from highly supernatural to entirely physical or metaphoric, but the basic model of a qi-fueled world permeates Taoist concepts of life and the universe. Qi often appears in both negative and positive varieties, and one of the essential aspects of many Taoist rituals is to maximize positive qi while minimizing or eliminating negative qi. This is the basis of many Taoist manifestations, such as alchemy, feng shui, and Taoist medicine.

In scholarly Taoism, and the forms of Taoism that have been popularized in the West, the pantheon of deities and Taoist rituals are often downplayed, and emphasis is placed on the more philosophical abstract conceptions of the Tao. However, this more philosophical study of Taoism is only one aspect of the religion, and the folk aspects of Taoism are essential to a complete understanding of the faith. Even as fewer modern Taoists may believe in the literal existence of Taoists spirits and immortals, the mythology of these figures continues to play a role in the faith and illuminates the philosophy of Taoism in all its forms.

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## ALCHEMY

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### Transformation of Matter

Alchemy is a proto-scientific and philosophical discipline that involves the study of substances and ancient esoteric knowledge in an effort to discover processes that allow for the transformation of the human body and other materials. The study of alchemy has appeared in a number of countries, but one of the earliest known systems of alchemy originated within the folk traditions of China around the second century BCE. The relationship between Chinese alchemy and similar traditions in Egypt and Europe is currently unclear, though many historians have speculated that Chinese alchemy influenced the development of Egyptian alchemy, which is known to have given rise to the European traditions from the mid-second to the third centuries BCE.

Different alchemical traditions have different aims, though there are certain common alchemical goals that seem to have appeared in different cultures,

whether from a shared heritage or through independent origin. First, alchemists around the world have long sought a method of transmuting certain types of materials into other types of materials by harnessing the underlying relationship that unifies all matter. Commonly, in the European tradition, alchemists sought a formula for turning lead into gold or, more generally, the means to transmute nonprecious metals, such as lead or mercury, into precious metals, with obvious benefits in terms of wealth and prosperity. The second global goal of alchemy, and the one that was most prominent in ancient China, was the search for a way to extend the human lifespan, with similarly obvious motivations. Chinese alchemists often believed that it was possible to achieve a transmutation of the human body such that the human would achieve immortality along with a host of other superhuman qualities and abilities.

Chinese alchemy often concerns the development of *jindan*, the “golden elixir,” which was the formula believed to grant immortality. Those who attempted to find this elixir were seen as following the *jindan zhi dao*, or the “Way of the Golden Elixir.” Those who sought this goal adhered to a certain set of doctrines regarding the relationship between the ultimate general nature of the universe, known as the Tao, and the multiplicity of forms and structures that make up the *Wanwu*, or “ten thousands things,” of the world. The search for the golden elixir can be further divided into two general schools of thought, often called “external alchemy” and “internal alchemy.”

## External Alchemy

The school of external alchemy, known as *Waidan*, has its roots in the beginnings of alchemical theories in China, but it did not begin to take on its current form until approximately the third century CE. One of the earliest Chinese texts dealing with external alchemy is known as the *Huangdi Shuiding Shendan Jing* (“Book of the Divine Elixirs of the Nine Tripods of the Yellow Emperor”), which is generally called the “Book of the Nine Elixirs,” and contains detailed descriptions of the rituals and processes used to derive elixirs from base materials.

The *Book of the Nine Elixirs* concerns processes used to induce sublimation (*fei*), or the transition of matter from one state to another. The basic idea was to cause a substance to return to a primordial state. This was based on the concept that all matter once existed in an inchoate state known as “*Hundun*,” which was the fundamental state of the universe before the formation of the cosmos. The *fei* process began by preparing a mixture of lead and mercury, which were seen as representing the essences of yin and yang, or heaven and earth. The prepared mixture was used to coat the internal surface of a crucible, thus preventing any energy from escaping, and recreating (within the crucible) the primordial environment

of creation. The crucible was then used to heat various materials, such as mercury, cinnabar, hematite, and magnetite, in a series of stages, often accompanied by rites and rituals that blended the lines between mysticism and proto-scientific chemistry.

The products of external alchemical processes were ultimately supposed to bestow eternal life, if they were taken at the appropriate times and in appropriate quantities. Ingestion of the elixirs formed through this process was believed to provide protection from illness, demons, and evil spirits. It was also believed that the most powerful elixirs would grant immortality and allow an individual to join the celestial bureaucracy, a society of deities living in the heavens and organized much like the Chinese Empire. Alternatively, elixirs could be carried as totems or talismans that protected the bearer from illness and evil.

## Internal Alchemy

Internal alchemy (Neidan) also has its roots in the earliest alchemical theories, but it is largely based on texts composed between 200 and 700 CE. The practice of internal alchemy peaked during the Tang dynasty (618–906 CE). The most important text in the study of internal alchemy is the *Cantong Qi*, also known as the “Unity of the Three,” portions of which may have been originally composed in the second century CE, though other writings were added to the text over several centuries.

The *Cantong Qi* combines the philosophy of alchemy with the traditional Chinese cosmology contained in the *I-Ching*, or “Book of Changes,” an ancient manual on divination that forms the basis of many branches of Taoist ritual. The *Cantong Qi* refers to a “unity of three,” referring to the confluence of heaven, earth, and mankind and also to the sublimation of the various energies of the body, known as breath (qi), spirit (shen), and essence (or sexual energy, jin).

According to the philosophy of inner alchemy, it was possible to transmute the body such that the individual would expand beyond the material realm and gain immortality and superhuman qualities reminiscent of the gods and immortals of Chinese mythology. The golden elixir of internal alchemy is understood as an inchoate state that exists within all humans, a potential that can be revealed through various forms of practice, meditation, and other techniques to cultivate this underlying human potential. Through the processes of internal alchemy, the individual’s body and being becomes the crucible, burning away physical and metaphysical irrelevancies until all that remains is the purity of existence, or the timeless golden elixir that is at the heart of each living being.

Techniques for internal alchemy were varied and complex and differed according to school or tradition. In some cases, ritual meditations using emblems

of Chinese cosmology were used while other systems recommended special diets, often combined with prayer and exercise. The concepts of internal alchemy became intertwined with Chinese martial arts traditions and are especially associated with the internal martial arts commonly known as taiji, bagua, and hsing-i. These meditative martial arts are focused on the internal cultivation of qi and overlap with the concept that one can perfect or transmute one's physical state through a combination of ritual, mental focus, and meditation.

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## THE CELESTIAL BUREAUCRACY

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### Heaven as Government

Before Buddhism and Taoism, China had a diffuse set of polytheistic religions that developed as ancient hunter-gatherer tribes, and early agricultural settlements began to coalesce into larger communities. This led to the formation of various warlord states that adopted a state pantheon of deities that represented their culture. Often these gods were organized into hierarchical structures that resembled the feudal government of the state. The organizational structure began with tian (heaven) and usually involved a king and queen who were supported by a court of followers and officers. Over the centuries, pantheons of this type have been called heavenly or celestial bureaucracies.

While the mythic beings of the celestial bureaucracy are often called "gods," the equivalent Chinese term "shen" is more nuanced than the Western understanding of godhood. Chinese shen are divine or semidivine beings that range from omnipotent creator figures to minor spirits more akin to the Western concept of ghosts or shades. Some shen are depicted as incorporeal spirits, while others are more similar to humans, possessing physical bodies and traveling to earth to interact with humanity. Some shen are former humans who, through magic or study, became divine beings, while others are born in the divine state, being the children of heaven or of other shen. Religious scholars have compared Chinese shen to Christian saints, but this description fails to capture the multitudinous range of characteristics attributed to the shen in Chinese mythology.

The folk pantheon of China is varied and changing, and this is one of the reasons that the pantheon survived the broader political and spiritual transformations of Chinese society. As Taoism emerged from Chinese folk philosophy and developed into an independent religion, many Chinese people simply adjusted the celestial bureaucracy to accommodate Taoist deities. A similar pattern of adjustment and integration occurred after the arrival of Buddhism, and the modern celestial bureaucracy therefore contains deities from Buddhism, Taoism, and earlier folk religions.

### **The Taoist Pantheon**

The Taoist concept of the celestial bureaucracy began to take shape around the fifth century CE, as Taoism integrated deistic concepts from earlier religions. In essence, the Taoist bureaucracy became a complex heavenly government with various ministries that administered facets of the spiritual and physical universe. At the top of the pantheon were the Three Pure Ones—the Jade Pure, Higher Pure, and Grand Pure—who are direct manifestations of the Tao. The Three Pure Ones are concerned only with spiritual reality and are therefore outside of the bureaucracy, though they are still considered the highest authority on Taoist truth.

The bureaucracy is led by the Jade Emperor, a paternal deity who first became integrated into Taoist mythology in the ninth century. Stories of the Jade Emperor are found throughout Chinese literature and poetry, and he is seen as representing the most benignant and noble qualities of leadership. The Jade Emperor rules over a complex system of celestial heavens (Jade Heaven, Great Heaven, Small Heaven, etc.) through a network of bureaucrats and assistants who disseminate divine authority through the cosmos.

The Jade Emperor's wife, Mazu, the Empress of Heaven, became one of the most popular figures in Chinese mythology and literature. According to one of her many origin myths, Mazu was born in a southern fishing village and displayed magical abilities as a child. One day, Mazu had a vision telling her that her father and brothers were caught in a dangerous storm at sea. Mazu separated her spirit from her body and traveled to the sea to save her brothers and father, but she was only able to save her brothers before her mother awakened her from her out-of-body trance. Mazu became a local hero, and after her death, sailors began carrying the young woman's image as a protective charm. According to a 17th-century legend, Mazu's spirit ascended into heaven, where she caught the eye of the Jade Emperor, later becoming his wife and the Empress of Heaven.

The role of the celestial bureaucracy is to disseminate prayer, and individuals who wish their prayers to be heard must therefore observe the proper channels, in much the same way as petitioning the government. Therefore, it is considered

improper to pray to the Three Pure Ones or the Jade Emperor directly. Individuals pray to minor official deities, who hopefully take their prayers up through the hierarchy to reach higher-level deities who may be able to answer the prayer in question. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the village shen, known as Tudi Gong, or “Earth Gods.” Each village has its own Tudi Gong who functions like a spiritual sheriff and has the responsibility of listening to local prayers and protecting the village from dangerous spirits, demons, or ghosts.

The celestial bureaucracy provides a system for ritual and prayer at both the village and the state levels and thus provides structure for Taoism across China. In addition, for many centuries, the bureaucracy helped to legitimize the Chinese Empire as emperors were seen as the sons of heaven, who behaved according to a heavenly mandate from the Jade Emperor. Though this mandate gave the emperor a divine right to rule, it could also be revoked if the ruler failed to meet his or her responsibilities. Thus the heavenly mandate and the bureaucracy served as a philosophical balance for the governmental system, protecting virtuous leaders and ensuring that corrupt or ineffective leaders would be removed or punished.

## The Immortals

One of the focuses of Taoism has always been the perfection and purification of the body and spirit to achieve immortality. The immortals are seen as a special type of shen, known as “xian,” who were essentially human but had obtained supernatural powers through various means. Taoist mythology contains hundreds of stories of individuals who achieved immortality through alchemy, magic, study, or the intervention of divine beings. Of all the immortals, eight individuals, known as the Baxian, or “Eight Immortals,” have been singled out and given special prominence in Taoist lore. For centuries, the Baxian were venerated in a similar way to Christian saints, and each one became associated with different occupations or subsets of society. The number eight has a variety of symbolic associations in Chinese philosophy, and this is likely the reason that eight central immortals were chosen to represent the xian within Taoism. Each of the Baxian reached immortality through a different path, and their stories became standards of Chinese poetry, myth, and literature.

- **He Xiangu** is the only female of the Baxian. She achieved immortality by adhering to a special diet and avoiding sexual behavior. She is usually depicted with a magical lotus flower and an enchanted flywhisk.
- **Lu Dongbin** was the leader of the Baxian and also one of the most popular. Legends of Lu’s life inspired a wide variety of dramatic plays that are still performed in China. Lu was a scholar and poet who achieved immortality by mastering the secrets of internal alchemy.

- **Zhong Guoluo** is an old man who was a gifted magician. He achieved immortality through studying the Taoist mysteries. He is often depicted with a magical mule that he could fold like a piece of paper and keep in his pocket. Zhong is associated with wine and winemaking and is often called the “Drunken Immortal.” Stories of Zhong’s drunken exploits have also inspired a number of comical essays, plays, and poems.
- **Zhongli Quan** is depicted as an ancient man who achieved immortality by following the teachings of a mysterious ascetic monk. Zhongli is also known as the “cloud master.” He possessed a magical fan that could transmute matter, such as turning water into gold.
- **Han Xiangzi** was a young man born into an aristocratic family who learned the secrets of immortality by studying under Lu Dongbin. Han carried a magical flute that had the power to resurrect the dead.
- **Lan Caihe** appears as both a man and a woman, and stories of the immortal’s life are ambiguous as to Lan’s sexuality. Lan’s road to immortality is uncertain, but he (or she) is often depicted holding a magical set of jieben (a clapping wooden instrument) that can be used to cause merriment and celebration. Lan is therefore often considered a patron of music.
- **Cao Guoqiu** was an aristocrat who achieved immortality through dedicated private study. Cao carried a magical jade tablet that had the power to purify earth and water, and he became known as the patron of acting and theater.
- **Li Tieguai**, or “iron crutch Li,” was a Taoist disciple whose body was mistakenly cremated while he was having an out-of-body experience. Having lost his body, Li took the body of a deformed, crippled beggar. Often depicted as disheveled and dirty, Li uses his magic and martial prowess to fight injustice and is often depicted with his iron crutch and a gourd filled with wine.

The Baxian are mythical folk heroes, each representing different aspects of human psychology and behavior. Unlike many of the heavenly shen, however, the Baxian are often utilized as comic figures who are depicted getting drunk and disrupting the human world or the celestial heavens with their antics. The imperfection of the Baxian serves as a reflection of human faults, as these formerly human individuals are tempted to use their divine powers in inappropriate ways.

The Baxian and the celestial bureaucracy as a whole are most akin to the fables of such Greek heroes as Perseus, Jason, and Heracles (Hercules). Like these Western heroes, the stories, songs, and poems of the celestial shen and the immortals contain lessons on morality, social virtues, and many other aspects of human life. As Chinese religion has transitioned from literal deity worship to symbolic representative worship, the celestial bureaucracy has remained an important part

of the nation's cultural legacy and has produced a rich literary mythology that reflects the history and culture of China.

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## EIGHT TRIGRAMS

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### Eightfold Divination

The eight trigrams, also known as the “bagua,” or “pakua,” are a collection of eight abstract symbols, each consisting of three lines that symbolize the waxing and waning of opposing forces or principles in the universe. Usually depicted organized into an octagonal or eight-sided shape, the eight trigrams have become one of the most recognizable and familiar symbols of Chinese Taoism, though they derive from pre-Taoist cosmological theories. The eight trigrams and their underlying philosophical tenets have been applied to traditional Chinese medicine, martial arts, and the pseudo-spiritual organizational system known as feng shui. Other Chinese philosophical traditions, such as Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, also utilize the symbolism of the eight trigrams.

### The Classic of Changes

Much of traditional Chinese philosophy and spirituality derives at least in part from an ancient Chinese text known as the I-Ching, or “Book of Changes.” The oldest portions of the text derived from the Western Zhou dynasty, between 1050 and 771 BCE, though historians generally agree that the underlying principles contained in the text developed centuries earlier. The earliest written record of the I-Ching comes from a burial site in Hunan, China, dated to approximately 168 BCE, during the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE).

The I-Ching is essentially a collection of texts on divination, the practice of attempting to gain insight or understanding through the use of mystical or occult rituals. Divination is often used to see into the future or to guide important decisions by determining how certain actions or decisions will affect future outcomes. The eight trigrams is one of the ancient divination tools contained within the I-Ching, where it was part of a more elaborate system called the 64 hexagrams. Each of the hexagrams consists of six broken or unbroken lines, representing the



concepts of yin and yang. Each of the hexagrams was further made of two separate three-line symbols, which became known as the eight trigrams.

The dates accepted by historians for the origin of the I-Ching are at odds with traditional Chinese history, which often places the development of the text as early as the third millennium BCE. One of the architects of the text is Fu Xi, one of a group of legendary Chinese leaders and sages known as the Three Sovereigns, who are credited with many of the innovations that led to the birth of ancient Chinese culture. Fu Xi is specifically credited with the most ancient and basic organization of the eight trigrams, which is known as the Xiantian (anterior heaven) arrangement. King Wen (Wenwang, 1152–1056 BCE) of the Zhou dynasty is credited with developing the second-most influential system for using the trigrams, known as the Huotian (later heaven) arrangement.

The eight trigrams were one of a small number of mystical/divination practices that combined to lead to the formation of Taoism in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). By the Six Dynasties period (ca. 220–589 CE), the eight trigrams were already a major theme in Taoist spiritual traditions. The eight trigrams appear in the Tao de Jing, or the “Way of the Tao,” which is the most fundamental text of Taoism and is believed to have been written during the Liusong dynasty (420–479 CE). In modern Taoism, the eight trigrams serve as one of the bases for traditional Taoist alchemy, medicine, and cosmology.



The eight trigrams is a symbol that emerged from pre-Taoist divination and folk traditions in China and has since become emblematic of Chinese philosophy in general, transcending its use in any single religious tradition.

### Meaning of the Eight Trigrams

The eight trigrams are based on the theory of yin and yang, which is a means of describing the universe as a manifestation of complementary and contrasting aspects united in a perpetual cycle of waxing and waning. In the eight trigrams, the fundamental duality of yin and yang is divided into eight stages that represent the flux of yin to yang and back again.

Each trigram is made up of three lines, which are either unbroken or broken into two parts. A solid line represents yang, while

the broken line represents yin. The trigram, known as Qian, consists of three solid lines and represents “pure yang,” while the trigram Kun consists of three broken lines and represents “pure yin.” The remaining six trigrams consist of each possible permutation of one to two solid lines versus one to two broken lines.

The two arrangements of the trigrams give rise to different applications and ways of viewing the relationship between yin and yang. The Xiantian arrangement is envisioned as representing yin and yang in the primordial chaos (Huntun) that preceded the formation of the material universe. In the Xiantian arrangement, each symbol is positioned across from its opposite symbol, thus representing the relationship of each symbol in balance to the remaining symbols. The Xiantian arrangement is essential for feng shui, which is often used in the organization of burial sites.

The Huotian arrangement represents the cyclic nature of the universe by organizing the trigrams into a circular system that symbolizes the flow of energy. The Huotian arrangement places the trigram Li at the top, and then proceeds clockwise to Kun, and then counterclockwise to Xun, representing the wax and wane of yin and yang, respectively. Because the Huotian arrangement organizes the trigrams into a cyclic pattern, it can be used as a chronological tool, with each trigram associated with a specific period of the year. The Huotian system is important in divination, Chinese medicine, and feng shui, where it is the preferred system for organizing residences.

Each of the trigrams can also be associated with a variety of other phenomena, giving rise to a complex system of relationships that provide an energetic map of reality. For instance, the pure yang trigram Qian is associated with heaven, while the Kun trigram is associated with the earth. The other trigrams are associated with the elemental archetypes fire, water, mountain, wind, thunder, and a lake or body of water. Each trigram can also be associated with seasonal patterns, with two trigrams for each of the four seasons. Further derivations associate the trigrams with the cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west) and the four intermediate directions (northwest, southwest, northeast, and southeast) as well as with a variety of other phenomena, including colors, emotions, family relationships, animals, and constellations.

By associating each trigram with a certain phenomenon and then arranging the trigrams in one or the other arrangements, one can attempt to understand the relationships between various phenomena. For instance, in the opposing arrangement of the Xiantian system, the trigram Li, which represents fire and spring, sits across from Kan, which symbolizes water and autumn. In the cyclic arrangement of Huotian, the clockwise progression of trigrams, from Li to Kun to Dui to Qian, represents the directions south, southwest, west, northwest, and so on.

Taken as a whole, the eight trigrams is a complex and mutable system of divination and interpretation that attempts to represent relationships and cycles in the universe through symbolism. Ultimately, the use of the eight trigrams is seen as a way to create harmony and reduce discord through one's personal and spiritual relationships. Even among those in China and around the world who do not place their faith in divination and the supernatural, the trigrams represent an interesting way of representing the various opposing, complementary, and cyclical relationships that can be found in many aspects of human culture and the universe at large.

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## FENG SHUI

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### Organizational Divinity

Feng shui ranks as one of the most globally influential elements of Chinese ritual and spiritual culture outside of Chinese martial arts and has become enormously popular in the United States and Europe as a pseudo-spiritual system for home decoration. The practice of feng shui in China is part of a rich tapestry of home and family rituals that draws upon influences from Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian philosophy as well as elements of ancestor worship and folk mysticism derived from the earliest strains of native spirituality.

### Origins and Meaning

Feng shui translates as "wood/water," and this name belies the system's connections to ancient Chinese theories regarding the power and nature of various elements. The ancient name for feng shui was "Kan Yu," or "heaven and earth," which similarly conveys the idea that the practice seeks to create harmony between the physical and metaphysical realms. Anthropologically, feng shui can be classified as an ancient form of divination, which is a process used to gain knowledge of the future or other unknown phenomenon through supernatural rituals or techniques. Specifically, feng shui is a kind of divination called "geomancy," which is a form of divination based on the arrangement of objects, buildings, or natural elements of the earth in an auspicious manner.

While some writers claim that feng shui dates back at least 5,000 years in China, the general consensus among scholars is that the earliest system of feng shui can be traced to around 2,000 years ago. The earliest known manuals on feng shui were published between the third and fourth centuries CE, but the practice remained largely an element of rural folk culture for centuries. Feng shui is largely based on manipulating qi in the environment, which can be seen as a nonphysical essence that affects the well-being of living things. Over the centuries, the primary use of feng shui was to plan the organization of homes, communities, and other buildings so as to create harmony between human structures and their broader physical environment by organizing with regard to the presence of qi in the environment. During the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), feng shui experienced a peak of popularity and was even used to organize the imperial palace.

Historians have identified two major schools of feng shui from medieval China, called the “Landscape School,” or “Form School,” and the “Compass School.” The Landscape School developed in the mountainous southwestern regions of China, where the major features of the landscape became the basis for geomantic organization. The basic principle was to look for areas that had, by their nature, high concentrations of sheng qi, loosely translated as a “beneficial essence,” which practitioners also sometimes called “dragon’s breath.” The ideal location of a certain structure depended on the type of structure being built. For instance, dwellings were ideally situated in areas with strong concentrations of positive chi and where the features of the landscape protected the home from sources of negative qi.

Imperial adviser Yang Yun Sung is credited with formulating a competing approach, the Compass School, in a publication printed in 888 CE. Yang was an adviser to the emperor, and his feng shui techniques became influential within the Chinese Empire. The Compass School originated in the relatively even terrain of the northeast, where there were few landmarks to use for orientation. Practitioners therefore used a specialized type of geomancer’s compass called a “luo pan” to divine important relationships between the magnetic directions and the flow of qi. Like a Western compass, the luo pan features a freely rotating magnetic dial tuned to the magnetic field of the earth. However, the Chinese version differs in that it is tuned so that the needle points to the south, whereas the Western compass points to the north. The luo pan also features a wooden or metal plate inscribed with feng shui formulae (heaven plate), which is affixed to the wooden body of the compass (earth plate). As the needle turns with regard to the heaven plate, the practitioner can measure the flow of qi in various directions.

In the 900s, practitioners often debated which was the more accurate approach, but general practitioners continued to use both techniques. Modern feng shui specialists likewise utilize both the luo pan and landmarks in practice.

## Practice and Principles

All feng shui practice is based on the same basic principles, many of which are derived from Taoist cosmology. For instance, feng shui often makes use of the five-element system, the eight trigrams, and the concept of yin and yang, all of which are basic to all Taoist philosophy. These basic methods are aimed at harmonizing space with regard to the flow of qi.

One characteristic element that appears in many feng shui systems is the use of dragon symbolism. The dragon is one of the most ancient and widespread symbols in Chinese culture, and dragon symbolism is integrated into many Taoist and mystical practices throughout China and much of East Asia in general. In feng shui, the dragon symbolizes vitality and the desire to draw vital essence from the landscape. Mountains are seen as representations of the dragon's body, and feng shui recommends orienting one's home with respect to a mountain to benefit from the dragon's presence. In areas without mountains, other tall or mountain-like structures may be used as substitutes. For example, it is often seen as beneficial to face one's house to the south, which is believed to be the source of yang and energetic qi, while placing a mountain or other large structure to the north is seen as the source of negative qi and yin. The dragon, or mountain, therefore blocks incoming negative qi before it can reach the home.

While feng shui derives from ancient Chinese philosophical traditions, many feng shui principles, including ideas concerning the orientation of homes, furniture, and decorative elements, have also been informed by observations of human psychology and broader aesthetic considerations. This underlying psychological, logical, and aesthetic element to feng shui practice has helped the system to expand beyond China to become an enormously popular trend in the West. However, many Westernized versions of feng shui contain significant misconceptions and misrepresentations of Chinese culture and philosophy. In some cases, this may be the result of accidental misinterpretation, while in other cases, Western writers have commodified feng shui to make the system more appealing to Western audiences to sell decorating books to audiences interested in "ancient wisdom."

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## TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

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### Healing and Holism in China

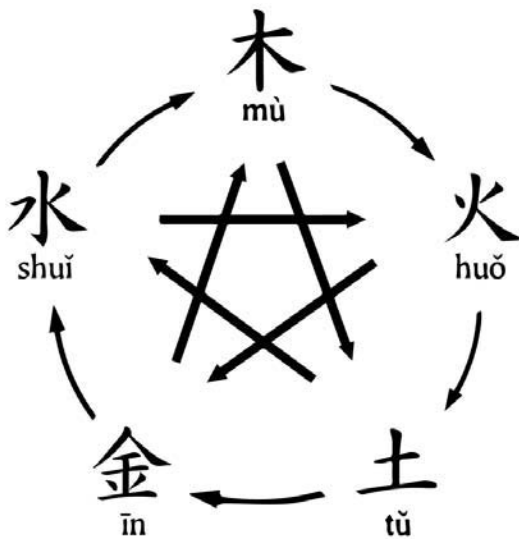
The roots of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) extend into prehistory, when early Chinese cultures first began to discover the effects of certain substances on the physical body. These early discoveries fueled the development of Chinese herbal medicine in subsequent centuries. Chinese traditional medicine is believed to be the third oldest form of medicine known to history, with only Babylonian and Egyptian medicine being more ancient. TCM is also intimately linked to Chinese spiritual and cosmological theories developed within Taoism.

### The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic

The legendary Chinese emperor known as Huang Di (Yellow Emperor) is one of a group of semimythological figures from the first centuries of the first Chinese Empire, known as the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors. Huang Di is traditionally said to have ruled for nearly a century, from 2696 to 2598 BCE, though the dates and authenticity of his life and reign are unclear. In traditional Chinese legend, Huang Di is credited with a variety of innovations, including inventing the bow and arrow and the cultivation of grain. Huang Di is also said to have organized the Huaxia tribe, which were the ancestors of the Han Chinese, China's largest native ethnic group.

Huang Di is also credited with inventing traditional Chinese medicine, though the primary texts on the subject were written long after the period usually given for Huang Di's reign. Legends hold that Huang Di had the ability to heal a variety of illnesses in both humans and animals and that he lived more than 1200 years thanks to his discovery of medicines and techniques for extending life. The basic structure of TCM was initially taken from the Huang Di Nei Jing (Internal Cannon of the Yellow Emperor), a collection of writings dealing with medicine, health, and cosmology. The Huang Di Nei Jing was most likely written in parts that were compiled centuries later, with the earliest parts of the book written between 400 and 100 BCE, while additional materials were added over subsequent centuries.

The attribution of the Huang Di Nei Jing to the Yellow Emperor mirrored the tradition in ancient China wherein authors would often attribute their writings to historical or famous figures who had inspired their writing or work. The Huang Di Nei Jing was the basis of Chinese medicine for centuries and laid out the basic elements of Chinese acupuncture, herbal medicine, and a variety of other techniques still used by TCM practitioners in China and around the world.



Traditional Chinese medicine draws influences from ancient concepts of divination, including a variety of spiritual-numerical theories. The five elements are part of a cycle of creation and destruction thought to metaphorically represent basic physical features of the universe.

yin and yang and can be treated by attempting to restore the balance of these two fundamental elements.

TCM theory also makes use of a later system, known as Five Elements theory, which explains the physical universe as various combinations of the five primordial elements: wood, water, fire, air, and metal. Each element is associated with various qualities seen as representative of those elements as they appear in nature. The element fire is associated with heat, so the temperature of the body may therefore be seen as reflecting the dominance or balance of the fire element within the body. The body can suffer from an excess of any of the elements or from having insufficient levels of a certain element; each of which is believed to cause illness. Each element is also associated with various parts of the body. For instance, wood is associated with the tendons, metal is associated with skin and hair, and water is associated with the bones.

The five elements are also part of a generative cycle in which each element gives rise to one of the other elements. For instance, earth generates metal just as metals are mined from the earth, while fire generates earth just as the ash after a fire becomes soil and detritus. In TCM, the generative cycle is also seen as explaining the relationship between organs and organ systems. In addition, the five elements are part of a restrictive cycle in which each element inhibits the growth

## Taoist Principles in TCM

The principle of yin and yang is one of the basic foundations of Taoism and of TCM, reflecting the theory that every phenomenon can be viewed as the combination of and interaction between opposing yet complementary aspects. In TCM, yin and yang can be applied to the systems and organs of the body. For instance, the external body, the upper body, and certain organ systems may be considered yang, while the internal body, the lower body, and the remaining organ systems are often classified as yin. One of the most basic principles of TCM is that ailments in the body are the result of an imbalance of

### **The Heat Is On**

Moxibustion is a therapeutic Chinese technique that uses burned moxa, a dried form of the aromatic plant mugwort, to treat various disorders. Moxa can be burned on acupuncture needles, thus heating the needle, or can be applied directly to the skin, using heat and chemical inhalants to induce healing.

of another. Water inhibits fire, reflecting the common relationship between these two phenomena, while fire inhibits metal, reflecting the use of fire to melt metals.

Another important facet of TCM is the concept of meridians, which are channels within the body once thought to carry blood, body fluids, and qi, a hypothesized primordial essence or energy central to Taoist theories of the universe. The circulation of qi through the body constitutes the essential presupposition behind the use of acupuncture, which is believed to have the ability to alter the flow of qi, thereby addressing many different health issues. There are 12 primary meridians in the body that give rise to a number of smaller channels through which qi passes into the various parts of the body. The use of acupuncture and massage (called “Tui Na”) to alter the flow of qi is described in the Huang Di Nei Jing and is therefore a foundational technique in TCM.

### **Diagnostics and Treatment**

One common diagnostic tool used in TCM is to divide symptoms into a system of six categories, known as the six evils: dampness, dryness, cold, summer heat, fire, and wind. The evils are related to environmental conditions, and an imbalance of one or more of the six evils can result in a variety of illnesses. A patient may therefore be given such diagnoses as “dampness of the liver” or “excessive cold in the kidneys.” The six evils are also seen as a reflection of the other primary principles of TCM, including the five elements, yin and yang, and the flow of qi in the body.

In general, TCM is holistic and views the human body as a system of delicate balances that must be maintained for the individual to be healthy. The variety of therapies developed using Taoist philosophy therefore work in combination, and a TCM practitioner will typically utilize many different methods in conjunction to bring the body back into harmony. While acupuncture and herbal medicine are the most familiar TCM techniques in the West, practitioners have hundreds of therapies and methods at their disposal, and this reflects the ancient origins and ongoing evolution of TCM into the 21st century.



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## YIN-YANG SYMBOL

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### Complementary Opposition

The yin-yang symbol is one of the most famous spiritual and philosophical symbols around the world and has become an iconic representation of Chinese philosophy in general. The symbol is intimately tied to the spiritual and philosophical tenets of Taoism, but it also represents more ancient concepts that predate Taoism and derive from the ancient folk traditions of China. In general, the yin-yang symbol represents the idea of duality in nature and the view that all phenomena can ultimately be seen as a combination of complementary yet contrasting forces. Together, the combination of yin and yang symbolize the idea of harmony and balance. The yin-yang is also a representation

of the spiral symbol archetype, a class of symbols that represent change, movement, and development.

The yin-yang symbol is also one of a number of spiritual and religious symbols that have been co-opted and commodified within popular culture, and the yin-yang now appears on thousands of products, from jewelry and T-shirts to more unique items like salt and pepper shakers in the shape of the yin-yang fish. These and many other examples exemplify the way that the yin-yang has been divorced from its spiritual and philosophical origins to become an emblem of popular Chinese culture.



Yin and yang are complementary opposites, expressing the fundamental duality of the universe. The yin-yang symbol was most likely derived from observations of swirling water, representing the concepts of confluence and dynamic combination.

## Origins and Development

The philosophical concepts underlying the yin-yang symbol are extremely ancient and were important aspects of Chinese philosophy long before the first appearance of the yin-yang symbol. Like many other aspects of Taoist philosophy, the yin-yang concept is partially derived from the I-Ching, or Book of Changes, an ancient manual on divination techniques that became a foundational text for many different types of Chinese philosophy. The I-Ching covers the philosophy of yin and yang in some detail and uses this concept as the basis for a complex system of divination techniques.

Historians believe that the modern form of the yin-yang symbol became popular during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), though this version of the symbol derived from similar symbols developed centuries earlier. Historians have found a 14th-century text attributed to Zhao Weiqian that contains an image described as the “River Diagram of the Spontaneity of Heaven and Earth,” which bears close resemblance to the yin-yang symbol and may have been one of the more proximate inspirations for the Qing dynasty version. The most common name used for the symbol in China was “Taijitu,” which has been translated as “diagram of the ultimate” or “diagram of absolutes.”

One early metaphor for yin and yang was to compare these two principles to the sunny and shady sides of a river, with the sunny side representing the active yang principle and the shady side representing the more contemplative yin principle. The association between yin-yang and the waters of a river might not be accidental; some historians have suggested that the symbol was inspired by the eddies and currents found in a river, especially from the phenomenon that occurs at river junctions, where cloudy and clear waters are driven together. At these confluences, the difference in opacity enables viewers to observe the two types of water swirling into one another, not unlike the two sides of the yin-yang symbol.

## Meaning of the Yin-yang Symbol

Taoism is named after the concept of the Tao, which is a metaphysical, symbolic, and metaphoric concept based on a holistic view of the universe. All things, it is believed, derive from the Tao, which might be best understood as the nature of reality itself. Yin and yang derive from the Tao as well and represent the concept that all things can be further divided or at least examined as a duality of two aspects. From there, further divisions are also possible, resulting in the five elements, the eight trigrams, and the 108 constellations, to name a few. In Taoism, all of these higher order views of reality are manifestations of yin and yang. The Taoist view is therefore holistic and reductive, attempting to embrace both ways of viewing the universe.

The yin-yang bifurcation of reality symbolizes the many dualities observed in nature, such as the relationship between light and dark, male and female, or active and passive. The fundamental meaning is one of balance and harmonious coexistence rather than antagonism, and the yin-yang does *not*, therefore, represent the duality of good and evil or war and peace. The yin-yang symbol is a circle consisting of two shapes that resemble commas or fish, one black and the other white. The white shape symbolizes the active male principle of yang, while the black shape represents the passive female principle of yin. As representations of the duality of male and female, the yin-yang also symbolizes the sexual union that leads to procreation.

Within the black shape, there is a circular white dot, and there is a circular black dot within the white shape. These dots represent the idea that every phenomenon has within it some element of the opposite phenomenon. Thus, all darkness has an element of light, and all masculinity has an element of the feminine. The contrasting dots are essential to the meaning of yin and yang, which is to portray the complex interaction of complementary opposites, rather than the clash of antagonistic opposites. The dots also represent the fundamental hypothesis that there is no such thing as an absolute, except the Tao, and that all phenomena are nuanced combinations of complementary drives and forces, rather than one-dimensional representations.

The yin-yang diagram also symbolizes the process of change, signified on one level by the curvature of the black and white shapes, which represents movement as the two sides swirl into one another to form a whole. The complementary tension of yin and yang is one of mutual creation and destruction, with yang coming from yin and yin coming from yang in an eternal cycle. Each shape also increases or decreases in size depending on whether the observer is moving from the head to the tail of the shape or vice versa, and this represents the idea of gradual and cyclical change, with yin nature waxing as yang nature wanes, until the pattern reaches its apogee and begins moving in the opposite direction.

In Taoist philosophy, discord and suffering are the result of spiritual or physical imbalance, and this often can be understood or symbolized as an imbalance between yin and yang. Taoist rituals and philosophy provide a system to identify and correct these imbalances in an effort to restore harmony and health. The pantheon of the Taoist gods and the rituals devoted to them are also part of the broader understanding of the universe as a holistic manifestation of Tao nature that can be represented as a combination of yin and yang and various other permutations of dynamic balance between complementary forces.

The popularity of the yin-yang symbol partially derives from the fact that the basic concepts embodied by the symbol are universally recognizable and can be related to a wide variety of examples that are easily identifiable across cultural

boundaries. However, Western learners sometimes misconstrue the meaning of the symbol because many Western religions include a metaphysical view of the universe as a battleground where goodness, often depicted as light, must defeat evil, symbolized by darkness. While Chinese mythology and Taoism have many complex representations of evil, the yin-yang theory provides a different perspective on the relationship between darkness and light. In the holistic theory of yin and yang, all things ultimately have a role to play in the universe, and true happiness and harmony results from finding balance rather than conquering one's opponents.

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# Shinto

Shinto is the native cultural and spiritual system of Japan, which developed from the folk animist religions of the tribes that occupied prehistoric Japan blended with imported spiritual and philosophical concepts. The name “Shinto” was invented around the sixth century CE as a way of distinguishing native Japanese spiritual beliefs from the imported traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism. In the 21st century, there are more than 2 million followers of Shinto, and elements of Shintoism have been integrated into the spiritual beliefs of Japanese Buddhists and followers of other faiths.

## Origins and Evolution

Shinto originated within the prehistoric folk religions and cults of ancient Japan. These systems, which were not unified under a single rubric or system of ritual, were polytheistic, meaning that followers accepted the existence of many separate deities, and somewhat animistic, meaning that believers ascribed spiritual dimensions to nonhuman natural structures, including animals, plants, and other features of the environment. Buddhism was imported to Japan around the sixth century CE, and many Japanese integrated elements of their native folk religion into Buddhist practice and mythology. During this same period, the term “Shinto,” meaning the “ways of the gods,” was invented to distinguish the native belief system from imported religions.

For centuries, the Japanese Empire was essentially Buddhist, but it based the state’s official philosophy on elements of Confucianism as well as native Shinto beliefs. By the seventh century CE, it was widely believed that the imperial lineage of Japan was descended directly from the sun goddess Amaterasu, thus granting divine sanction to the ruling family. The scholar Kobo Daishi blended Shinto and Buddhism in the ninth century CE, leading to a new form of Japanese Buddhism known as Ryobu Shinto. Following this development, non-Buddhist Shinto became more of a folk religion, and Shinto priests were often considered esoteric mystics. Buddhism remained the official state religion throughout the

1700s, though Shintoism continued to exist in various forms around the country and played a role in many Japanese folk traditions.

From around 1600 to 1868, Japan was under the control of a series of warlord military families that were united under the Tokugawa Shogunate. When the imperial government took control of the country again in 1868, the newly established empire conducted major overhauls of Japanese society, known as the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912). During the restoration, the government attempted to purge Buddhism and other “foreign religions” from the nation and to install Shinto as the official state religion.

This led to a new imperial form of Shinto (Kokka Shinto) that was considered a higher level of practice from the more mystical varieties practiced in rural areas and villages. Despite government efforts, Buddhism and Shinto had existed together for such a long period that it was impossible to completely disentangle the two faiths, and both religions continue to exist in an altered form, reflecting their shared development. The official status of Shinto ended with World War II and the formulation of a new Japanese governmental model that officially separated church and state. Despite no longer being considered an essential part of governmental philosophy, Shinto is still considered the native spiritual tradition of Japan and is protected as an important part of the country’s cultural heritage.

## **Shinto Beliefs**

Shinto involves the belief in a large number of gods or spirits called “Kami” that represent the spiritual essence of all life and human culture. Shintoism can essentially be called polytheistic, though the concept of Kami is different from the idea of gods in many other traditions. The Kami represent the essence or spiritual dimension of Japan itself, reflecting essential elements of culture and also the nature of animals, plants, mountains, and other features of the environment. There is no single creator god in Shinto, though there is a general belief in a bifurcation of reality into heavenly and earthly realms. The spiritual traditions

### **Mythical Tricksters**

The fox is a sacred species in Shinto, and foxes are often depicted as shape-shifting tricksters that serve as assistants or messengers of the Kami. Spirit foxes come in two varieties, benevolent spirits called “kitsune” and evil demonic creatures called “nogitsune.” Foxes were common agricultural pests in Japan, which likely inspired many of the fox myths in Shinto tradition.

of Shinto are meant to maintain balance between these essential aspects of the universe.

Shinto mythology contains myths that provide metaphysical explanations for the origin of Japan and many other facets of existence, including the spiritual basis of both life and death. Shinto practice takes a variety of forms, and some followers place little emphasis on the mythology of Shinto tradition and view the religion more as a way of life, using rituals to honor their culture, natural environment, and underlying spiritual realities of the universe. Belief in an afterlife or in metaphysical realities are not primary concerns, and this is the facet of the religion that has allowed Shinto to blend successfully with other religions, such as Buddhism, which places greater emphasis on metaphysics and the afterlife. Shinto followers are not discouraged from following other religions or from blending the rituals of Shinto with non-Shinto beliefs.

Shinto places an emphasis on morality and ethical behavior and holds that all humans are essentially good-natured. Evil behaviors and emotions taint one's essential nature, so rituals and religious rites are used to purify the body and spirit. By living according to the essential morals and principles of Shinto, it is believed that individuals can live harmonious lives without hardship or suffering.

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## KAGURA

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### Musical Ritual and Worship

The term "kagura," translated roughly as "god music," is the general term for all of the music and dance rituals associated with Japanese Shinto. Developed from rural folk traditions, kagura became an important part of Japanese imperial tradition and is now recognized as one of the country's most important artistic traditions. Some specialists now divide kagura into three basic disciplines: mikagura, which involves performances that accompany imperial celebrations and rituals; okagura, which involves performances at the major national Shinto shrines; and satokagura, which may be performed in villages and at smaller shrines around the country.



## Mythological Origins

The precise history of kagura has remained elusive, though it is believed that kagura evolved from the celebratory rituals used in ancient Japan to honor the animistic spirits of nature and deceased ancestors. The mythical roots of kagura are described in two of the oldest written records of Japanese history, the *Kojiki*, or “Record of Ancient Matters,” from 712 CE, and the *Nihon Shoki*, or the “Chronicles of Japan,” written in 720 CE.

The mythological history of kagura can be found in the Ama-no-Iwato (Heavenly Door Cave) myth about the great sun goddess Amaterasu, one of the most important Kami, or divine spirits, of Shintoism. According to the myth, Amaterasu was angered by the other Kami and hid in a cave, thus removing the light of the sun from the earth. The goddess of dawn and spring, Ame-no-Uzume, lured Amaterasu out by dancing naked at the mouth of the cave. Enticed by laughter and merriment, Amaterasu returned, thus bringing the light and heat of the sun back to the earth and two chickens called out from the mouth of the cave to signify the return of the sun. According to Shinto mythology, this was the origin of all music, dancing, and theater, and some of the earliest forms of kagura were reenactments of the Heavenly Door Cave myth. The myth also establishes one of the most important roles of kagura in Shinto, which is to invite one or more of the Kami to join the community, as Ame-no-Uzume used dance and singing to invite Amaterasu to rejoin the world outside the cave.

Kagura is used to pay homage to important local and national Kami, and many kagura performances are held at Shinto shrines. The importance of kagura to Shinto culture has been preserved in the standard three-part structure to Japanese ceremonies, which represent the three spiritual roles of the performance: summoning the Kami, entertaining the Kami, and bidding farewell to the Kami. Each section of the performance involves characteristic types of music and ritual.

## Types of Kagura

The formal ritual dances of the imperial palace, known as mikagura, were among the most prominent genres of kagura in medieval Japan. Mikagura performances were held at all important imperial functions as well as at the Shinto shrines supported by the empire, such as Ise Shrine, a shrine that honors the Kami Amaterasu. Mikagura performances were believed to enhance the prosperity of the empire by inviting good fortune to the royal family, bountiful agricultural production, and general prosperity for all those who pledged themselves to the empire. Mikagura performances are still an important part of the Niiname-sai ceremony, a harvest festival held annually on November 23 and meant to ask the Kami for success in the harvest and to ensure a bountiful growing season for the coming



The Toyama Shimotsuki-matsuri is one of several winter Shinto festivals held in Nagano Prefecture in December. The involves a yudate (boiling water) kagura where sacred water is boiled in large cooking stoves (kamado). Performers ritually splash drops of boiling water on attendees to symbolize the renewal of life. (Hinata Haga/HAGA/The Image Works)

year. Traditional myth says that the Niiname-sai ceremony originated during the reign of the first emperor of Japan (600–590 BCE), though historical records of the ceremony do not appear until the ninth century CE.

Satokagura, sometimes called “folk kagura,” performances are generally meant to honor Shinto Kami who serve as local patrons of villages and small local shrines. Folk kagura performances are more closely related to the ancient roots of kagura, with songs, music, and dances that focus on invoking the favor of animistic spiritual forces. In many satokagura ceremonies, one of the villagers wears a mask, representing a Kami, and dances and performs so as to invite the Kami to visit the village. Often village kagura performances involve reenactments of mythological stories, and thus they are an important source for the preservation of the nation’s oral mythological heritage.

One popular type of satokagura, called “miko kagura,” involves a special performance by a temple maiden, known as a “miko,” who was traditionally female, though males more often take part in modern miko kagura performances. During the performance, the miko goes into a trance, thus allowing a Kami to use his or her body to speak to the village. The miko kagura performance evolved

from ancient ceremonies in which temple priestesses were believed to have special spiritual abilities to communicate with divine spirits.

All kagura performances, regardless of their purpose, involve the recitation of ritual songs accompanied by traditional music, usually performed on drums and flutes. Many kagura ceremonies involve the recitation of poems, some of which have been preserved through kagura ceremonies for centuries. Kagura poems meant to praise the Kami or to ask the Kami for aid are called “torimono,” while poems meant to entertain the Kami while they are visiting humanity are called “saibari.”

Whether performed at a local shrine or at an imperial ceremony, the kagura rituals have been an essential vehicle for the preservation of Shinto mythology and ritual. Today, kagura performances have become an honored genre of Japanese theater while helping to maintain elements of Japan’s ancient heritage. Modern kagura is no longer strictly spiritual in nature but is seen as being part of a set of spiritual rituals that bind Japanese society together, even if many Japanese no longer believe in the Kami that inspired the various kagura rituals, songs, and dances.

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## KAMI

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### Spirits of Japan

In Japanese Shinto, the term “Kami,” generally translated as “that which is hidden,” is used to refer to the pantheon of deities or spirits honored in Shinto ritual and mythology. The definition of “deity” fails to capture the complex and multifaceted concept of Kami, which can be applied in many different ways, from the general to the specific. While Kami is used to refer to the spiritual figures of Shinto myth, it also refers to the divine element within all things, especially natural features like rivers, trees, and mountains.

### Kami Development

Historians believe that the ancient Japanese people developed an animist spirituality based around the existence of spirits (in this case Kami) associated with the

natural environment, including the sun, moon, trees, rivers, and other environmental features. Culture and spirituality were intimately linked during this period, and there was no single Shinto religion as it is known today, but rather a variety of religious sects and cults with varying ideas about the relationship between the spiritual and physical realms.

Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth century CE and gradually became an important part of the Japanese cultural landscape. Among the Japanese peasants, many adopted Buddhist spirituality without abandoning the animistic beliefs of their ancestors, blending proto-Shinto and Buddhist mythology and cosmology together. Subsequent waves of immigration from India also brought elements of Hinduism, Taoism, and Confucianism to Japan as well, and deities from all of these traditions became Kami within Japan, thus expanding the concept of Kami to include godlike figures in addition to natural spirits.

Between the sixth and the eighth centuries CE, religion evolved into a branch of government, and a variety of rituals and rites were integrated into official state functions. These spiritual ceremonies were often closely affiliated with Buddhism but also showed strong Shinto influence. It was during this period that the Japanese people began to believe that the emperor was descended from Amaterasu, a Kami associated with the sun and the universe as a whole.

The establishment of state Shinto during the Meiji Restoration resulted in major changes to the Kami pantheon, including the adoption of certain key Kami as representatives of the empire and the idea of a universal Kami meant to symbolize a unifying spiritual force or entity binding the various strains of Shinto together. While the Meiji period helped to provide Shinto with an independent identity, the populace did not entirely embrace the government's urging to abandon ties to Buddhism and continued to favor a mixed-spiritual system, honoring Kami that emerged from the ancient animist traditions as well as those representing Buddhist and Hindu influence from later centuries.

## Great Kami

The Japanese Kami are sometimes divided into two separate categories: the Ama-tsu-Kami, or “heavenly Kami,” and the Kuni-tsu-Kami, or “earthly Kami.” This division reflects the belief that the world is the result of the ongoing attempt to balance heavenly and earthly influences. In Shinto tradition, neither the heavenly nor the earthly Kami are seen as evil, but the two are always in conflict, reflecting the blend of material and spiritual influence that is seen as responsible for the manifestation of the earth.

Six Kami have been elevated to become Okami, or “Great Kami,” reflecting their dominant importance to Shinto culture and tradition. Five of the Okami are

heavenly Kami, while Sarutahiko—patron of the Japanese martial art aikido and a symbol of strength—is the one earthly Kami considered important enough to become one of the Okami. The most important of the heavenly Okami is Amaterasu, who is both a sun goddess and seen as responsible for the creation of the cosmos and the universe itself. Worship of Amaterasu derived in the ancient animist cults of Japan but became the most common element of imperial Kami worship as well. The most well-known myth about Amaterasu is the Heavenly Door Cave myth that has become popular in Shinto theatrical performances.

Among the other Okami are the goddess Izanami and god Izanagi, who are believed to be responsible for the formation of Japan. Izanami and Izanagi were divine beings summoned from the primordial heavens by the first Kami who emerged after the earth and heavens were created. Izanagi and Izanami were husband and wife, and myths about them reflect the cultural customs surrounding gender relationships in Japan. When the pair mated, they gave birth to the eight sacred islands of Japan and are thus the parents of the Japanese people.

Izanami and Izanagi myths are also used as the spiritual basis of death and birth among humans. According to the myth, Izanami died in childbirth while giving birth to a Kami associated with the element fire. Saddened over the death of his wife, Izanagi traveled to the underworld, known as the “land of sorrows,” to see her. Izanagi looked at Izanami and saw her decomposing body, and this shamed and angered Izanami, who sent demons to kill her husband and decreed that 1,000 people would die each day. After defeating the demons, Izanagi used his own power to ensure that 1,500 people were born each day, thus countering the mortality brought about by Izanami’s anger and reestablishing the appropriate balance in the universe, with life always winning over death, though death remains a permanent part of reality.

## Fields of Heaven

Another important early concept in Shinto is the idea of Takamagahara, called the “High Field of Heaven,” which is one of three realms that make up the universe. Takamagahara and the other planes of existence emerged from the infinite void of the universe, a chaotic mass consisting of all elements blended in an inchoate state. The other two realms are Ashihara, or “Land of Reed Fields,” which is the realm of humanity, and Nenokuni, the underworld or land of the dead. Three primordial deities were born from the material of Takamagahara, symbolizing the forces of spiritual and material birth, and these three deities are seen as the original Kami that gave birth to all later Kami. It was the primordial trinity of Kami that created Izanami and Izanagi and thus initiated the creation of Japan.

The myth of Takamagahara and the primordial Kami is one of the oldest Shinto myths and is seen as having only symbolic relevance in most modern strains of Shinto. It is notable that Shinto followers never seem to have believed that humans or human souls could join the Kami in the heavenly realm, like the “heaven” myth of the Abrahamic faiths. Instead, the Takamagahara myth says that the divine beings descended from heaven to be close to humanity and to cooperate with humans to bring divine balance to the earthly realm.

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## TOMOE

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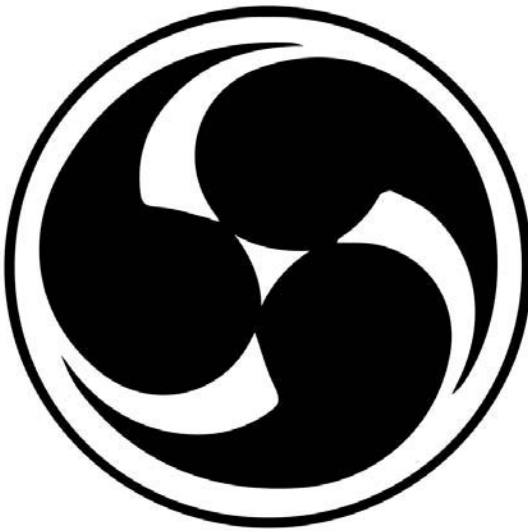
### Thunder and the Japanese Empire

The tomoe is one of the most recognizable symbols of Japanese Shinto and medieval Japanese design. It consists of a comma- or apostrophe-shaped figure that has been integrated into a large number of design motifs. The most common use of the tomoe shape is in the mistu-tomoe design, which consists of three tomoe arranged in a circle. The futatsu-tomoe, or double tomoe, design is also a common element in military crests and Shinto religious symbols. A variation on the mitsu-tomoe, known as the “Hidari Gomon,” has been adopted as the symbol of the nation of Okinawa.

Variations of the tomoe constitute one of the most ancient Japanese artistic motifs, though the exact origins of the symbol are unknown. Likewise, historians have not agreed upon a single standard interpretation of meaning, and significant debate exists regarding both the historical and modern interpretations of the tomoe and mitsu-tomoe. Most historians believe that the tomoe was originally an artistic representation of the magatama, a curved comma-shaped bead that has been discovered in Japanese burial sites from around 1000 BCE. The magatama is a symbol of life and may once have represented a mother’s womb. Similar meanings have been transferred onto the tomoe and multi-tomoe variations.

### Representation of Thunder

Some scholars have suggested that the mitsu-tomoe developed from an ancient Japanese symbol used to represent thunder and thunderstorms. The Japanese god of



The mitsu-tomoe or threefold tomoe is the most common variety of tomoe in Japanese Shinto symbolism. As one of Japan's oldest symbols, the tomoe has come to incorporate a variety of meanings and was often incorporated into military designs and Imperial regalia.

or family gatherings. Traditional Japanese artwork contains numerous examples of symbols used to ward off evil influences, including carved dragons posted on poles near villages and homes. The symbol is also often found on ridgepoles and the tiles used on homes and temples as a ward against fire. This suggests to some historians that the symbol has associations with water and perhaps rain.

Some historians have suggested that the swirling tomoe in the mitsu-tomoe were meant to signify a whirlpool or eddy in a body of water, with the three tomoe signifying the confluence of currents. Whirlpool symbolism has been found in many cultural traditions and is usually associated with the idea of unity or the idea of blending different elements together to create a dynamic whole. In a related vein, some have suggested that the symbol may have originated as an artistic

thunder, usually called "Raiden," is often depicted using drums adorned with the mitsu-tomoe to produce the sound of thunder in the sky. The mitsu-tomoe is still often used to decorate the heads of traditional drums, and some believe that this signifies an ancient relationship between the mitsu-tomoe and the sound of thunder represented by the beat of a drum.

The mitsu-tomoe symbol is also often displayed on lanterns and banners at festivals, and supporters of the thunder symbol hypothesis have suggested that these symbols were once used to ward off storms and potentially dangerous lightning from disrupting festivals

### Thunderous Mortality

Fans of the video game series *Mortal Kombat* might be familiar with the Japanese god of thunder and lightning called "Raijin" or "Raiden." The name of the god is also used in Japan to refer generally to lightning storms and the sound of thunder.

representation of a water wheel, an ancient mechanism designed to harness the energy of moving water and use it to perform other actions, such as for grinding grain or fibers used to make paper.

Chinese symbolism had a significant impact on Japanese design for much of Japan's history, and historians therefore often look to China as a potential source of the iconography and symbolism that permeates Japanese culture. In the Shang dynasty (1523–1080 BCE), Chinese bronze antiques and textiles show that the Chinese often used spirals to symbolize both thunder and water, and some historians have speculated that the mitsu-tomoe was derived from these Chinese spiral symbols.

### **Yin-yang Symbolism**

Some historians believe that the tomoe symbol, especially in the futatsu-tomoe, or double tomoe form, was derived from the Taoist yin-yang symbol of China. In the Chinese yin-yang symbol, the two comma-shaped forms appear in different colors (usually white and black) and represent the opposing and complementary sides of the universe, such as masculine and feminine or light and dark. While the Japanese futatusu-tomoe is reminiscent of this design, both tomoe are generally depicted as being the same color, and this would seem to contrast with the Chinese symbol's associations with duality.

The addition of the third tomoe in the mitsu-tomoe is puzzling if the symbol is meant to represent the same concepts as the Taoist yin-yang symbol. Some have suggested that the third tomoe represents the primordial force that ultimately gives rise to the dual aspects of nature. The yin-yang theory of the tomoe is disputed, however, because some historians have expressed doubt that the Japanese adopted Taoist symbolism and then altered it in such a way that the original meaning became obscured. The Japanese often used Chinese symbols in a more direct way, and depictions of the yin-yang in a more recognizable form are also common in Japanese design.

### **Spiral of Life and Threefold Nature**

The mitsu-tomoe and futatsu-tomoe both seem to be versions of the spiral symbol archetype found in cultures around the world. In general, the spiral represents movement and change and is often used as a symbol of eternal nature, whether applied to the universe as a whole, to the soul, or to some more specific phenomenon. In many cases, the spiral is used to represent the process of life, with the various prongs of the symbol representing different stages of life, such as birth, life, and death or childhood, middle age, and old age. Examples of similar symbols from other cultures include the triskele, a three-legged spiral known from Greek and ancient Celtic design, which is often thought to have represented the stages or



cycle of life. The swastika, which derives from ancient Hindu designs, is another symbol that originally represented the spiral of life, this time using four spokes instead of the three spokes of the triskele and mitsu-tomoe.

Other interpretations of the mitsu-tomoe build on the spiral symbolism, associating each tomoe with a different spiritual concept. For instance, in some Shinto representations, the black tomoe together represent the visible aspects of existence, and the white design formed by the negative space between the tomoe represents the three hidden aspects of existence. Another theory is that the mitsu-tomoe is essentially a symbol of a threefold view of the universe, such as dividing the universe into the heavens, earth, and shadow world, or subterranean realm. A variety of other religions use three-pronged symbols in similar ways, such as the Hindu trishula symbol.

As with many symbols, the generality and ambiguity of the tomoe may have contributed to the symbol's longevity. As various Shinto sects and other facets of Japanese society adopted and used the tomoe in different ways, the symbol's specific meaning may have become less important as it gradually became emblematic of Japanese culture itself.

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## TORII GATE

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### Designation of Sacred Space

The torii gate is a structure erected at the entrance to a Shinto shrine (Jinja), symbolically creating a division between secular or profane space and the sacred space inside the temple grounds. The torii came into general usage in the 10th century CE, but it may have developed from more ancient structures that were used in similar ways. The origins of the torii gate are somewhat obscure, and historians have developed several competing theories to explain the development and usage of the gates in modern Shinto. The stylized shape of the gate has become the most widespread and recognizable symbol for the Shinto religion in Japan.

### Torii Design

A torii gate is an archway, or open-gate design, that appears in relatively the same form across Japan, though materials and decorative styles vary according

to region. The basic design consists of two rounded pillars, known as “hashira,” which support a two-layered top crossbeam system, consisting of an upper beam, known as the “kasagi,” which is joined to a supporting beam, called a “shimagi.” The kasagi and shimagi are often fit together as a single unit, but the kasagi is the more decorative and may be colored differently from the supporting shimagi. Below the kasagi and shimagi is another horizontal support known as the “nuki.” In some torii designs, the nuki is connected to the shimagi at the horizontal midpoint by a smaller vertical beam called a “gakuzuka.”

The design of the torii is similar to the basic structure of a Japanese himorogi, or “sacred fence,” which is basically a rope or string between two poles used to divide sacred spaces from spaces for general use. The ropes strung across the himorogi, called “shimenawa,” are usually decorated with small cloth banners called “shide.” Some historians believe that the torii gate represents an attempt to develop a permanent form of the himorogi fence. A temporary type of torii, known as a “shimenawa torii,” consisting of a rope and pole arrangement, is sometimes used in place of a more permanent gate. Some permanent torii gates are also decorated with a shimenawa rope in addition to the wooden horizontal beams.



Torii gate at the entrance to Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto, Japan. Inari is one of the most popular Shinto deities and a patron of business and commerce. Thousands of Shinto followers affix business cards to the torii gates, railings, and doors of Inari shrines to ask for Inari’s help in their business ventures. (Natalia Pushchina/Dreamstime.com)

There are more than twenty different styles of torii in Japan, and they vary in the style of construction, materials, colors, and details of certain elements. For instance, in the Myojin style, which is one of the most popular styles of torii construction, the ends of the kasagi are curved upward and away from the shimagi. The curved kasagi of the Myojin style is often replicated when the stylized image of the torii gate is used as a symbol. Different types of shrines sometimes have characteristic types of torii. For instance, the famed Inari Shrine features rows of wooden torii gates painted with a bright vermilion and black design. Another example is the Gongen-style tori, which is one of the most unique, and features four half-height legs as additional vertical supports.

While traditional torii are usually constructed from solid wood, concrete and metal torii became more popular after the Meiji Restoration. The traditional color of the torii is red, and many torii gates are painted in combinations of red and black. Other colors may also be used, including green, blue, and yellow. Torii gates also vary widely in size, with small gates marking family shrines or small village shrines and extremely large torii gates used at some of the major public shrines across Japan. Some of Japan's larger torii gates have become protected landmarks and significant tourist attractions.

## Development of the Torii Gate

Some scholars speculate that the Japanese torii is an attempt to imitate either Chinese or Indian Buddhist design, such as the elaborate gates and pillars that appear on some Buddhist temples. Some have speculated that the word "torii" may have derived from the Sanskrit term "torana" or "turan," which means "arch" or "portal."

After the import of Chinese Buddhism, around the sixth century CE, Japanese Shinto and Buddhism became blended together, forming a unique tradition known later as "Shinbutsu Shugo." During this period, temples commonly had both Shinto and Buddhist elements, and torii gates were often decorated with carvings or statues of Buddha alongside representations of various Shinto Kami. During the Meiji Restoration (beginning in 1868), the Japanese Empire made Shinto the official state religion and attempted to separate all Buddhist elements from the native faith. As a result, many of the Buddhist statues, carvings, and drawings were removed from Shinto shrines, temples, and torii gates.

In Japan, the linguistic character used for "torii" also has the meaning of "bird perch" or "place for birds," and some have speculated that the torii developed from perches used to hold sacred birds during certain ceremonies and rituals. The chicken features prominently in the Ama-no-Iwato (Heavenly Door Cave) myth, which is one of the most widespread myths regarding the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu. In the myth, two chickens call out to signify the goddess's emergence

from a cave after Ame-no-Uzume dances before the cave to lure Amaterasu from hiding, thus returning the light of the sun to the world. This portion of the myth is reenacted in a dance known as the “torimai,” or “chicken dance,” and the chicken’s role in calling forth the sun has made the animal a sacred symbol in Shinto. The torimai dance is also symbolic of fertility and the emergence of new life.

The primary significance of the torii gate in Shinto is to divide the sacred from the profane, or secular, world. Many different spiritual traditions have used gates, doors, and signposts of various types in this manner to signify areas set aside for spiritual reverence. Over the centuries, many Shinto practitioners have come to use the image of the torii as a symbol of their religious affiliation. As a symbol of a gateway to sacred space, the presence of a torii can also be used to signify sacred knowledge. For instance, the use of the symbol on a book might symbolically represent the presence of sacred knowledge within. Whatever the origin of the symbol, over centuries of use in various ways, the torii has transcended its spiritual function to become emblematic of Japanese culture and history.

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# Confucianism

Confucianism is a spiritual and philosophical system that developed in China between the fourth and third centuries BCE that was inspired by the teachings of the Chinese scholar Kong Fu-Zi, more commonly known by his Latinized name “Confucius,” mixed with elements of ancient Chinese philosophy and ritual developed between 2000 and 500 BCE. While Confucianism has a spiritual aspect, humanist philosophy is the focus of the discipline, and Confucianism played a major role in the development of social and political philosophy in China.

## Origins and Evolution

Confucianism was inspired by the Wu Ching, or “Five Classics,” ancient texts that describe rites, rituals, divination, political ideals, and aesthetic and cultural principles derived from many different writers over hundreds of years. The earliest portions of the text that became the Wu Ching may have been composed as early as 2000 BCE. Confucius lived from 551 to 479 BCE. He was a scholar and philosopher who taught a complex system of morality, ethics, and political philosophy to a group of select students.

After Confucius’s death, his ideas were committed to text by his followers and blended with original thoughts and ideas inspired by his teachings. Mencius and Hsun-Tzu were two of the most prominent students of Confucius, and they became the primary Confucian teachers between the third and second centuries BCE. Confucianism became the official state cult of the Chinese Empire during the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), leading to the formation of the Confucian canon, consisting of the Wu Ching and the Si Shu, or “Four Books.” These works became the basis for imperial philosophy and the state examination system through which individuals could become civil servants.

During the fall of the Han dynasty, Confucianism fell out of favor, and Taoism became the official state religion. The Confucian canon, however, remained an important source of scholarly education and governmental procedure. In the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), Confucian scholars produced a new formulation of the philosophy by blending Confucianism with elements of Taoism and Buddhism.

This new form, called “Neo-Confucianism,” again became the state cult, replacing Taoism and Buddhism as the foundation for imperial organization. Neo-Confucianism had two major branches: the Li School, following the teacher Chu His, and the Hsin School, following the teachings of Wang Yang-Ming. Both of the major Neo-Confucian schools were more metaphysical in their approach than traditional Confucian philosophy, utilizing such concepts as qi, an ancient Chinese concept regarding a nonphysical potentiality within the universe, sometimes seen as an “essential energy.”

Like many other strains of Chinese philosophy, Confucianism was denounced during the communist revolution in China during the 1950s because it was seen as representative of the older imperial system. Despite this ideological shift, Confucianism has remained popular in China, and the Confucian texts are still considered essential to classical education. Modern Confucianism includes both the more metaphysical Neo-Confucian schools and reform schools that seek to explore the original teachings of Confucianism before the philosophy changed under influence of Buddhism and Taoism. Confucianism is considered one of the three jewels of Chinese culture, along with Taoism and Buddhism, and as such is considered one of the primary pillars of Chinese heritage.

## **Confucian Beliefs**

Confucianism is a hierarchical philosophy based on the idea that effective leadership and fealty to one’s leaders facilitate the development of a harmonious society. Ancestor worship and reverence for leaders, ancestors, and other cultural figures are important aspects of Confucian philosophy and form the basis of Confucian rituals. While early Confucian thought included a basic cosmology of the universe as a division between heaven and earth, sometimes bordering on a monotheistic concept of heaven, metaphysics and cosmology play a relatively minor role in Confucian philosophy, and Confucian ethics can be combined with other concepts of gods, deities, and spiritual reality.

While Confucius, Mencius, and other teachers of Confucianism are venerated as important sages, they are not worshipped as gods, and Confucianism never developed a dedicated priesthood or a system of worship based on divinity. Confucian temples exist, but they are used for ceremonial communal meetings to honor ancestors and as institutions of community integration. Confucianism is essentially secular in its formulation and is marked by a focus on ethics, especially the concept of “jen,” which may be translated as universal love and humane behavior. Within Neo-Confucianism, scholars developed the idea that the universe had essential nonphysical realities (similar to the concept of the Tao in Taoism or Dharma in Buddhism) and that these were the basis for all reality.

Confucianism rejects a class-based social hierarchy and instead posits that all individuals can become a *jun zi*, or “gentleman.” This concept of the perfect individual involves living according to certain moral and ethical guidelines, displaying humane attitudes toward humans and all life, and engaging in appropriate rituals for one’s occupation and social standing. Confucianism is sometimes considered patriarchic because it limits the role of women and places emphasis on male leadership. Feminist scholars have criticized Confucianism for maintaining ancient gender roles within the Chinese family.

Some religious scholars argue that Confucianism is not a religion because it is essentially secular and does not address metaphysics or faith, elements that are sometimes considered definitive of religious systems. While Confucianism is largely irreligious in many ways, the system does provide a moral and ethical framework similar to that provided by religion in many societies and integrates a ritual structure that acknowledges the existence of heaven or a spiritual aspect to the universe. Confucianism may therefore be considered a form of religion in which the spiritual nature of the universe is recognized but purposefully undefined. Therefore, Confucianism occupies a middle ground between purely secular philosophy and spiritual philosophy and indicates how morality and ethics can be based on humanism and utilitarian virtues that transcend spiritual concepts.

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## CANONICAL CONFUCIANISM

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### Literary History of China

The Confucian canon consists of nine books that are collectively believed to contain the written record of Confucius’s moral, political, and social philosophy as well as the ancient wisdom that Confucius used as the basis for his philosophy.

The Four Books (*Si Shu*), which combine ancient Chinese wisdom with material attributed to Confucius and a few of his primary disciples, were organized into standard editions during the Song dynasty and became the core philosophy of the Chinese government. The Five Classics (*Wu Ching*) consist primarily of ancient



### Symbolic Authorship

East Asian authors in the Classical Era often avoided placing their own names on their published books and instead gave the author credit to the philosopher or teacher who had inspired them. This custom of honorary authorship has made it difficult for historians to determine who was responsible for writing many of the Chinese literary classics.

wisdom, reformulated and edited by students of Confucius. The legendary history of the Wujing holds that Confucius himself roughly organized the texts into their modern versions, though many scholars now believe that Confucius's students, rather than Confucius himself, were more likely responsible for editing and compiling the texts into their modern format.

Chinese scholar Zhuzi (Chu Hsi, Zhu xi) was the individual most responsible for transforming Confucianism into the official philosophy of the Chinese Empire. Zhuzi lived from approximately 1130–1200 CE and became a dedicated student of Confucian thought. His primary contribution was his work in editing and compiling the material that became the Four Books and establishing a structure for the study of official Confucianism, beginning with extensive study of the Four Books, in a specific sequence, and moving on through a sequence of the Five Classics.

In the Yuan dynasty (1280–1341), Zhuzi's system for studying the Confucian canon was integrated into the Imperial Examination System, a state-sponsored set of tests for individuals hoping to work in local or national governmental positions. Zhuzi's Imperial Examination curriculum remained essentially unchanged until the Imperial Examination System was abandoned in 1908.

### The Sishu (Four Books)

- The Great Learning (Daxue) was the first of the four books in the Imperial Education System and also the shortest and most basic of the Four Books. The primary intention of the Daxue was to continue where elementary education left off, thus serving as a single-volume graduate course in government. The Daxue provides information on “moral cultivation,” and portions of the book are taken from the Five Classics, with commentary attributed to Confucius and some of his prominent disciples.
- The Analects (Lunyu) is the book most often attributed directly to the teachings of Confucius, as relayed through his students. The Analects contain a variety of lessons on morality, governance, and filial piety. Often seen as

somewhat unusual in its organization, the Analects consist largely of short, direct “sayings” accompanied by an analysis of meaning and significance.

- The Mencius (Mengzi) consists of a series of conversations between Confucius and his most prominent student, Mencius (ca. 370–280 BCE), who played a major role in developing the core beliefs of Confucius into their modern form. The Mencius stresses the importance of benevolent, strong governance as the key to a stable society and also places significant emphasis on the inherent morality of humanity, believing that, when allowed freedom, humans will opt for the moral path.
- The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong Yong) is generally attributed to Confucius’s grandson Zisi and focuses on cultivating and maintaining balance in one’s personal life. The Doctrine of the Mean is the longest and most complex of the Four Books and is believed to be most effective once a scholar has completed a thorough study of the three preceding books. The Zhong Yong also repeats text from the Book of Rites (one of the Five Classics) with commentary on its meaning and importance.

### The Wujing (Five Classics)

The Five Classics predate the Four Books, and until Zhuzi’s work in compiling the Four Books, they were considered the core of the Confucian philosophical system. Portions of the Wujing were written in antiquity, though the modern versions have been extensively edited and recompiled over centuries of study and development.

The Book of History (Shangshu) is a collection of 58 documents detailing the history of China from antiquity through approximately the fourth century BCE. The book covers China’s legendary Xia dynasty, which is believed to have been the first unified kingdom of China, though there are no archaeological records to confirm the dynasty’s existence. The Shangshu is considered the oldest extant written history of China.

The Book of Poetry (Shihjing) is a collection of 305 poems, including songs and funerary rites, which together constitute one of the most important documents of Chinese literary history. The Shihjing contains poems ranging from the 10th to the 7th centuries BCE, and legend holds that Confucius himself selected these 305 poems, hymns, odes, and songs from a larger collection as the representative examples of literary excellence.

The Book of Rites (Jiyi) covers social and political norms as practiced during the Zhou dynasty and promotes the idea that adherence to rituals of conduct promotes harmony in society. While the compilation of the book is attributed to Confucius, historians have found evidence that much of the work was compiled after Confucius’s death. The Jiyi was the source and inspiration for two of the Four

Books, the Daxue and Zhong Yong, both of which provide extensive commentaries on the Jiyi and its meaning.

The Book of Changes (I-Ching) is one of the world's oldest books on cosmology and divination and was derived from mystical texts written over more than a millennia. The Book of Changes is one of the most important books in the history of Chinese philosophy that influenced not only the Confucian philosophical system but also Taoism and Chinese Buddhism. The ancient cosmological theories presented in the Book of Changes therefore represent one of the most important roots of all subsequent Chinese philosophy on metaphysics and cosmology.

The Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu) provides a history of the State of Lu from the eighth to the fifth centuries BCE. Traditionally attributed to Confucius, as Lu was Confucius's home state, scholars now believe that the book was written by a series of scholars from Lu and later compiled by Confucius's students. Like the Book of History, the Spring and Autumn Annals are basically a work of historical compilation, though the study of the books is believed to impart important lessons about the nature and role of both the government and the citizenry in the formation of a harmonious state.

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## **DOUBLE HAPPINESS SYMBOL**

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### **Symbols of Fortune**

The shuangxi, or "double happiness," symbol is often associated with Confucianism, though the symbol has many other associations in Chinese culture, including being a common blessing symbol for weddings and other occasions. The creation of the xi symbol is also an example of how Chinese language, superstition, and custom have combined in the symbolism and iconography of Chinese culture. The symbol's association with Confucianism is related to the idea of correctness and harmony in the proper Confucian life.

### **Luck and Fortune**

Fortune is an imagined external force that has the perceived ability to affect human life. From fortune-tellers and horoscopes to the bad and good omens of superstitious beliefs, fortune is an ancient pseudo-spiritual concept that seems to have

emerged independently in cultures around the world. The Chinese have many customs designed to promote good fortune and to recognize the presence of auspicious events, defined as events that are favorable or conducive to success or good fortune.

All cultures are superstitious to some degree, and superstitions often exist outside of organized religion. For instance, there are no explicit references to breaking a mirror in Christian texts, and yet many Christians still observe the superstition that a broken mirror results in bad luck, a remnant of ancient beliefs that the mirror displayed one's soul as well as an image of the body. In China, many ancient superstitions have likewise persisted into the modern age and have been absorbed and explained through the major spiritual and philosophical traditions of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

Fortune is so central in Chinese thought that it has given rise to a sublanguage of symbols, characters, and expressions that are used to refer to either good or bad fortune. This fortune language is stimulated by an idiosyncrasy of China's tonal languages, in which two words can have similar pronunciation, differing only in the tone of the spoken word, which changes the entire meaning. Because of this linguistic characteristic, associations between words can make certain words (and associated objects or concepts) lucky or unlucky. An example is the word "zhong," meaning "clock," which is phonetically similar to the word used to mean "end." For this reason, the clock is associated with death and the end of life, and it is considered bad luck to give a clock as a birthday or wedding gift.

During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), good luck characters, words, and symbols began to appear on clothing, toys, household goods, and a variety of other items and were seen as tokens or charms to court good fortune. The use of lucky talismans and insignia may have ultimately derived from the ancient use of totemic symbols and statues to curry favor with their gods, though many of China's fortune symbols have not retained these more overt spiritual associations. The tradition of decorating with lucky symbols survived through the centuries and became an important part of China's material culture into the modern age.



The double happiness symbol is not Confucian in origin, but has been embraced by Confucian followers to represent the philosophy's focus on societal well-being and harmony.

## Double Happiness

The Chinese character xi translates as “happiness,” and the shuangxi is a combination of two xi characters, meaning “double happiness.” Unlike xi, shuangxi is not an official Chinese character and does not appear in dictionaries or official compendia of the language. Rather, shuangxi is a folk symbol, the origins of which are unknown, though it has become one of the most recognizable and widely used characters in China. The number two has a number of positive associations, such as the pairing of husband and wife, heaven and earth, and yin and yang. For this reason, the doubling of symbols has become common in China, representing the desire to double up on the intended benefits of the charm.

The folk history of the xi symbol is related to a romantic fable set in the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) about an elderly man who tried to find a husband for his daughter by asking scholars to complete an unfinished poem he posted to his door, offering his daughter’s hand to the person who created the best finishing line for the poem. The winner of this contest was a young scholar who had just taken the imperial examinations, and on the day of his wedding, the young scholar found that he had also received top honors on his exams. Overjoyed by his two great joys, the man scrawled the character for happiness twice, and the double happiness symbol has remained one of the most common wedding symbols from that day on.

Confucianism is a reflection of Chinese ethical and moral philosophy, and the double happiness symbol has also become one of the characteristic symbols of Confucianism. Though the origin of this association is unclear, the singular symbol xi developed from a pictogram of an instrument known as the standing drum or pillar drum, and this may reflect the relationship between the experience of music and the sense of joy. The relationship between the drum and Confucianism may be deeper because the pillar drum is one of the instruments most often used in state ceremonies in China. By adopting a symbol that is both associated with happiness and with imperial and official ceremonies, Confucianism reflects one of the core goals of Confucian philosophy: to achieve harmony in the relationship between the citizenry and the state.

When the shuangxi symbol is used in the context of Confucian philosophy, it is often taken to mean “harmony” or “harmony and happiness,” and it represents the harmony that an individual must have both internally and with others to live a balanced and prosperous life. As with the other Confucian symbols, the shuangxi is not exclusive to the faith but represents concepts that are more basic to the Chinese worldview. In its use at weddings, double happiness represents the combination of bride and groom and the hope that the wedding is auspicious and that the new couple enjoys all possible good fortune in their life together. In adopting the symbol, Confucianism draws upon the positive associations with the double happiness symbol and yet subtly

alters the meaning, using the symbol to refer to the correct virtues and qualities that enable an individual to achieve this measure of happiness in his or her life.

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## THE LIFE OF CONFUCIUS

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### The Great Sage of China

The life of Confucius has been the subject of significant scholarly debate as historians and Sinologists have attempted to verify the existing records of his life and work. Most of what is known about Confucius comes from the *Shih Chi* (Shiji), known in English as the “Records of the Historian,” by Sima Qian (Ssuma Ch’ien), who lived from around 145 to 85 BCE. While historians have been able to verify some aspects of Confucius’s life as chronicled in the *Shih Chi*, some of the biographical details contradict other historical records from alternate sources. Though Confucius was not particularly famous during his lifetime, his students went on to occupy important government positions, and, through them, his moral philosophy came to dominate China’s political philosophy for centuries, developing into one of the most successful and influential state cults in history.

### Birth and Early Life

The name “Confucius” is the Latinized form of “Kong Fuzi,” literally translated as “Master Kong.” Fuzi was not the first name of the individual known as Confucius, but it is an honorific title given to respected teachers and is usually translated as “master.” Confucius received his Latinized name from 16th-century Jesuit monks studying Chinese culture, and the name has persisted in Western versions of history and scholarship since that time.

Kong Fuzi was born Kong Qiu (also spelled “Ch’iu”) around the year 551 BCE, in Lu, a small state in what is now Shandong Province. In some accounts, Kong Qiu was born into a wealthy noble family, while other records hold that Kong Qiu was raised in poverty by his mother after the death of his father. Some records indicate that Kong Qiu was the son of Kong Shuliang, the governor of a small city in Lu.

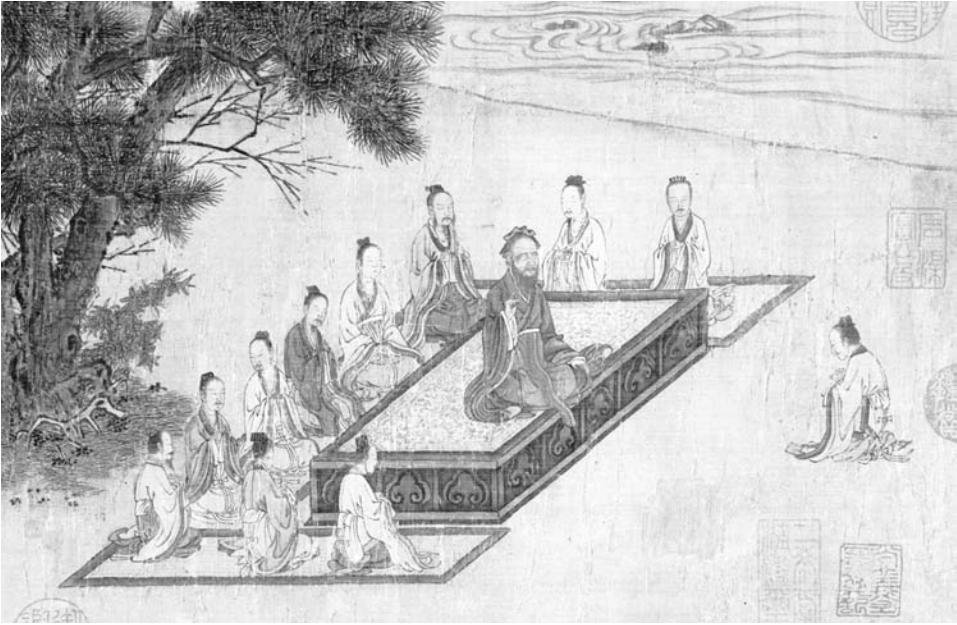
According to Confucian mythology, Kong Qiu's mother had visions preceding the birth of her son, including seeing images of a "Qilin," a mythical creature akin to the European unicorn, which had the legs of a deer, the body of a horse, and a single horn growing from its head. In the vision, Kong Qiu's mother received an omen telling her that her son would be a "king without a crown," thus signifying Kong Qiu's eventual importance to Chinese culture. The legend of Kong Qiu's birth was not written until centuries after his death and may be considered more of a legendary tribute to Confucius's cultural importance.

Kong Qiu was educated in the six arts traditionally taught to nobles: music, calligraphy, calculation, charioteering, music, and ritual. It is believed that his family owned a small plot of land that was given to the family after the death of his father. Records indicate that Kong was married and had between one and three children, and it is also recorded that Kong became a minor official in Lu, serving one or more noble families in various capacities. In some accounts, Kong served as Superintendent of Parks and Herds for a noble family, and he may have also worked as a tutor, helping to instruct noble children preparing for imperial employment.

## Learning and Teaching

Confucius lived during a portion of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1027–221 BCE) when the power of the empire was in decline. During Confucius's life, the Zhou Empire had almost completely crumbled, with the imperial armies controlling only a small area surrounding the capital while minor warlords controlled the rest of the country. Confucius's philosophy was partially inspired by the cyclic instability of China's government, which generally involved periods of growth until the empire became overextended and minor territories chafed under taxation and other forms of central control. Inevitably, this led to revolts and civil war until a new dynasty was installed. Confucius came to believe that this pattern was avoidable through proper governance and a philosophy that promoted harmonious relations between the government and their leaders as the central goal of society.

At the time, China's imperial system was supported by a complex system of religious and social rituals that served to provide a quasi-spiritual justification for the empire's existence. The imperial lineage was said to serve under the "Mandate of Heaven," an imagined divine directive to build, maintain, and expand the empire. Confucius studied the spiritual principles of his era, but he did not integrate a complex spirituality into his own philosophy, preferring the maxim that heaven was beyond human comprehension and that humans were therefore advised to concentrate on their conduct in the physical universe.



Song dynasty (960–1279) silk painting showing Confucius lecturing his disciples in the “Classics of Filial Piety,” ca. 500 BCE. (Howard Sochurek/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

Confucius’s spiritual beliefs also became an essential part of his philosophy, as Confucius came to believe that government must function by example and that leaders must be chosen for their merit, rather than divine endowment. Confucius’s lack of spiritual focus has led some scholars to classify Confucianism as a political, rather than spiritual, philosophy. However, Confucius believed strongly in heaven and in the organization of the state cult through rituals, many of which were pseudo-spiritual, and this establishes Confucianism as a pseudo-spiritual philosophy that, in many cases, replaced the role usually taken up by a state religion.

In most accounts, Confucius served as prime minister under the prince of Lu when he was around 50–51 years old, and the state prospered under Confucius’s guidance. However, the prince began neglecting Confucius’s teachings, so the teacher left Lu and traveled the country for more than a decade in search of a leader who was wise enough to implement his social and political reforms. Confucius took a number of students during his life (some say thousands), including 77 students that Confucius described as “great scholars.” Confucius died in his home state of Lu around 479, and, according to biographers, considered himself a failure. In the decades after his death, Confucius’s students implemented the Confucian philosophy across the country, and within a century, Confucius was known as one of China’s greatest teachers and his political theories became the foundation of the Chinese government.



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## SHUI

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### Water in Chinese Philosophy

The Chinese character shui, meaning “water,” is an ancient symbol that, like many other characters, has a wide variety of symbolic meanings in addition to its primary literary function. Many of the philosophical associations linked to the shui symbol come from the I-Ching, a venerable philosophical book of rituals and divination that is one of the foundational works of Taoism and that also inspired elements of Confucian philosophy.

### The Shui Pictogram

The shui character can be described as a pictogram, which is a type of graphic character that derives its meaning from its physical resemblance to an idea or object rather than through abstract association. The strokes used in the shui symbol represent a stream or river flanked by branching rivulets, and this is what associates the symbol with the concept of water. The most common shui symbol used today differs from the ancient shui symbol, which was a more literal and artistic attempt to represent the stream and rivulet concept.

The shui character (or a derivative character called a “radical”) may also be combined with other characters to derive a wide variety of water-related words, such as “jiang” and “he” (river) and “yong” (swim). It is currently unknown when or where the shui character first developed, but it is believed that pictograms of natural phenomena were among the earliest Chinese characters. Over the years, the ancient pictographic characters have become far more stylized, and many have changed sufficiently that it is difficult to determine the initial image or object that inspired the character.

### Importance of Water in Chinese Philosophy

Water is essential to all life, and even a cursory view of history reveals that humans have been creating complex philosophical and spiritual concepts regarding water since the dawn of human history. In ancient Chinese folk religion, water was associated with a host of water spirits and monsters representing the blessings and

dangers of water, respectively. Over centuries, reverence for water led to more general principles regarding the nature or character of water, and water began to serve as a philosophical model, often representing life itself.

In ancient Chinese folk cosmology, water is one of the five elements and is often associated with the philosophical duality of yin and yang. Water represents stillness, passivity, and wisdom. The underlying assumption that leads to connections between human virtues and the nature of water is the idea that the same laws that govern the material of the natural world apply equally to human life, culture, and behavior. The Chinese recognized an important duality in water, in that it seemed to embody stillness and passivity and yet inexorably moved toward its goal, penetrating whatever boundaries stood in its place. When water deviates from its course, such as when floodwater expands beyond the boundaries of the river, disaster occurs. Water finds its path by following its nature, and though it yields to barriers and obstructions, it inevitably breaks through over time, returning to its natural course. These observations of water in nature led to symbolic associations between water and the concept of determination or resolve.

## Water in Confucianism

In the Confucian text known as the *Xunzi*, the philosopher Xunzi asks Confucius why wise men study water. Confucius explains that all of the traits that the wise man seeks to embody can be found within water. For instance, the fact that water will find an even plane when placed into any vessel is seen as a metaphor for law and justice, which must always be balanced and even. The fact that rivers may twist and bend but always follow their course is seen as a reflection of the principles of correctness, while the cleansing power of water represents the idea of goodness. Finally, Confucius said that, by giving life without action, water embodies the principle of *wu wei*, or “action without action,” seen as the character of a phenomenon in balance with natural forces.

Confucianism and Taoism developed within the same environment, and both borrowed heavily from the same ancient philosophical and mystical traditions, including the fundamental theory of the five elements. Among the body

### Active Inaction

The Chinese concept of *Wu Wei*, translated as “without action,” is central to Chinese philosophy. It represents the idea of living one’s life in complete harmony with natural and social forces. *Wu Wei* does not mean “doing nothing,” but rather refers to allowing oneself to engage in natural actions such that one accomplishes action without trying.

of writings attributed to Confucius and his students, there are many quotes using water as an analogy or metaphor to discuss human traits. Argument by analogy is central to Confucian philosophy, and many facets of the natural world, including fire, mountains, and wind, were used as analogies for proper Confucian behavior and composure. Water was a favorite metaphor of Confucius, Mencius, and many of the other Confucian teachers, and this has helped to associate Confucianism with the shui character and the symbolic nature of water.

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## XIAO

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### The Sanctity of the Family

The Chinese character xiao represents the concept of “filial piety,” one of the fundamental principles of Confucianism. The term “piety” refers to the quality of being obedient or dutiful, and “filial” refers to the generation after the parental generation or, more basically, to the behavior of sons and daughters. Filial piety therefore involves the relationship between children and their parents and other ancestors. In Confucianism, the idea of filial piety became extended to the relationship between citizens and leaders in the Confucian model for an ideal harmonious society.

### Origins and Ancestor Worship

Parents give life to their children, and in many cultures, children are therefore encouraged to recognize a debt of life owed to their parents. In the ancient pastoral and early agricultural traditions, children played an important role in a family, eventually taking up their parents’ professions and helping with the work needed to feed and maintain the family. As parents age, the children were expected to take care of their parents in addition to taking care of their own children, thus keeping the generational cycle moving. This basic concept of the family, with each generation recognizing their debt to the previous generation and, especially, their own parents and grandparents, forms the philosophical basis of filial piety.

The principle of filial piety is also related to the phenomenon of ancestor worship, a spiritual concept that has emerged independently in many cultures around the world. Ancestor worship involves the belief that the dead continue to exist in

some manner and can continue to influence the lives of the living. Ancestor worship was part of the ancient folk religions that developed in China and elsewhere in East Asia, and some element of this belief system has remained in East Asia since, permeating modern culture. For instance, on the seventh month of the lunar calendar, many Chinese people recognize a series of Ghost Festivals in which families pay homage to their deceased ancestors through rituals and community feasts. Similar festivals and rituals can be found in Japan, Korea, Tibet, and elsewhere in Asia that represent modern versions of ancient ancestor veneration traditions.



The xiao symbol represents one of the most fundamental concepts in Confucianism. It symbolizes the relationship between parents and children that is seen as the basis of a harmonious society.

### Filial Piety in Confucianism

During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), a seminal Chinese text known as the *Xiaojing*, or the “Classic of Filial Piety,”

helped to transform this basic understanding of family roles into a model for society and government as a whole. The text is purported to be a direct recording of a discussion between the famed teacher Confucius and his student Zeng Zi in which Confucius extolled the virtues of parental devotion and its relationship to the functioning of a harmonious society. The popularity of the text spread rapidly among the elite in China and filtered into the populace through the education system, where the text was often used when teaching young children to read.

In the *Xiaojing*, filial piety is described as a reflection of primordial laws governing all nature and emanating ultimately from heaven. Confucius additionally says that filial piety is the “source of civilization,” thus reflecting the basic understanding of the role of the family in the constitution of more complex social structures. Filial piety begins with the understanding that an individual’s body and soul are the gifts from his or her parents. An individual is thus bound to live in such a way as to bring honor to his or her parents and to be intelligent in preserving resources so as to be able to contribute to his or her parents’ well-being as well. This basic level of observance is seen as the filial piety of the masses.

Confucianism sees a connection between the expression of filial piety at the family level and the creation of harmonious enterprises at the corporate or

state levels. By embracing the value of obeying one's parents, an individual also embraces the proper attitude toward a rightful ruler. In the Confucian view, rulers at each level should function as parents toward their subjects, protecting them and granting them material benefits, and, in return, the subjects should use their material wealth wisely and should contribute to the well-being of their leader as they would to their own parents. The filial piety of the ruler was thus seen as a higher level of observance.

The Confucian concept of governance through filial piety reflects the broader focus on social roles that is characteristic of Confucianism. Behaving in concert with one's role in society was seen as an expression of morality and the semidivine concept of one's fate or purpose in the universe. Confucius also believed that leaders and subjects alike owed piety toward the sages or learned teachers who helped to demonstrate morality and harmonious behavior to society as a whole. The sages teach others to extend the feelings of love and respect within the family to all other individuals, thus promoting harmony within society and preventing war, hardship, and social strife.

### **Transformation of Society**

In the second and third centuries, some Chinese scholars objected to Buddhism on the basis that it was a foreign religion that violated the social tenants of filial piety. This conflict partially arose because Buddhism encouraged individuals to leave their families in pursuit of spiritual truth, joining monasteries or traveling as aestheticians for this purpose. Buddhism views the current life as a reflection of one's previous incarnation and judges one's actions by the potential for transforming existence in subsequent reincarnations. By contrast, Confucians view an individual as a link in a lineage from the earliest ancestors to the line of future descendants and view familial relations as an expression of natural laws and morality. Chinese Buddhists adapted by creating a special doctrine of filial piety within Buddhism that was not found in the Indian versions of the faith. This involved the writing of a new series of documents that purported to represent the filial piety views of the great Buddhist teachers, and these documents helped Buddhism to avoid conflict and to blend with the more ancient principles of family veneration in Chinese culture as a whole.

The Xiaojing and the teachings of Confucian scholars transformed Chinese society during the Han dynasty and left its mark on all subsequent periods in Chinese culture. At times, filial piety was considered one of the most important expressions of an individual's ability to lead, and individuals could win lucrative governmental positions if they were seen as exemplars of filial piety in their families or communities. The ethics of family roles became a dominant strain of

philosophical thought carrying into the modern era. The xiao symbol is a remnant of this important facet of Chinese sociological and cultural development and is still used to represent the core Confucian values in China.

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# Falun Gong

While some have called Falun Gong a religion, depending on how one chooses to define the practice, Falun Gong might also be called a meditative exercise system or a type of New Age pseudo-spiritual cultivation. The Chinese Communist Party banned Falun Gong in 1999, and it is therefore difficult to determine the total number of practitioners worldwide, with estimates ranging from 1 million to more than 100 million. Falun Gong is still practiced in China and has spread to other countries as well, with thousands of practitioners in Europe and the United States.

## Origins and Evolution

Falun Gong was created by Li Hongzhi, a former government clerk from northern China, who reportedly spent much of his youth and early adulthood engaged in spiritual education. According to one biographer, Li studied with at least one prominent Buddhist master and several different Taoist masters, learning meditation, exercise techniques, martial arts, and several different schools of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy.

Qigong is an ancient form of Chinese meditative exercise that is related to the ancient folk religions in China. Li grew up during the 1950's qigong renaissance in China, when many new schools of the art emerged around the country. In 1992, Li introduced the Falun Gong system to the public, a blend of qi gong and moral philosophy based largely on Buddhism but with elements of Taoism and native folk philosophy. The Communist Party became concerned that Falun Gong was a cult, and some sources held that Falun Gong practitioners outnumbered members of the Communist Party.

Li relocated to the United States in 1998 and began teaching Falun Gong in New York City. On April 25, 1999, more than 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners in China participated in a demonstration against government persecution of Falun Gong. As a result, the government initiated a major crackdown, arresting thousands of followers and sentencing some members to prison sentences of up to 12 years. Some reports indicate that government soldiers and police also killed, assaulted, and tortured members of Falun Gong groups. The Chinese government



then issued a warrant for Li's arrest, forcing him to remain in exile in the United States.

## Falun Gong Beliefs

Falun Gong practice involves performing Li's unique qigong exercises and engaging in behaviors and techniques to improve one's moral character. One of the focuses is to remain morally righteous by avoiding such negative emotions as greed and lust and such negative behaviors as theft, violence, or adultery. Li teaches that the fundamental nature of the universe is composed of Zhen (truthfulness), Shan (compassion), and Ren (forbearance) and that one must act in concert with these virtues to achieve enlightenment. The Falun Gong concept of the universe is essentially similar to Buddhism; the souls of individuals are locked into a cycle of reincarnation, called "samsara," that results from the accumulation of karma, a negative substance that accumulates through one's negative deeds, emotions, and attachment to the material world. Karma must be purged through cultivation, and Li teaches that Falun Gong is the highest level of cultivation exercise, which may be thought of as a distilled, concentrated form of the same teachings taught in Buddhism and Taoism.

Interviews in the Western press have revealed that Li Huangzhi also holds a number of more esoteric metaphysical views. For instance, Li has stated his belief that individuals should avoid modern medicine because illness is essentially related to negative karma and can therefore be addressed solely through qigong practice. In addition, Li has also espoused the belief that extraterrestrial visitors have been living on earth and using technology to manipulate global politics and that there will eventually be an apocalyptic end to the universe, known as the "Dharma ending" period.

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## FALUN GONG EMBLEM

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### Synthesis of Taoism and Buddhism

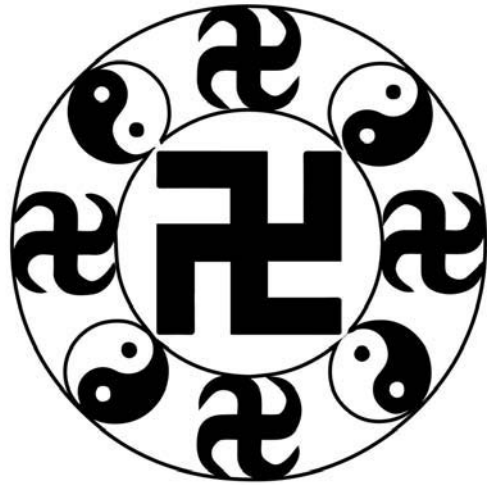
The Falun Gong emblem is composed of a combination of Chinese symbols, including the Buddhist wan symbol and the Taoist yin-yang, representing the fusion of spiritual ideas embodied by the Falun Gong system of spiritual development.

## Cyclic Worldview

The Falun Gong emblem is known as the “falun” and is a version of the ancient Buddhist symbol or concept of the dharma wheel, or “wheel of life.” The dharma wheel has been depicted in a number of ways; the most notably used is the image of a ship’s wheel. The number of spokes on the outer edge of the wheel varies depending on the tradition and meaning of the symbol. The Falun Gong emblem has eight spokes that represent the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism.

In Falun Gong cosmology, the universe is imagined as a collection of galaxies that are always in motion, spinning around a central axis. The falun is thus envisioned as a spinning circle, reflecting the rotation of the cosmos. At the center of the falun emblem is a symbol known as the “wan,” which looks like the Hindu swastika but is left-facing rather than right-facing. The central wan is surrounded by four smaller wan symbols alternating with four yin-yang symbols.

All of the included symbols in the falun emblem are seen as rotating along with the rotation of the emblem as a whole. The falun emblem therefore serves as a microcosm of reality, representing the fundamental processes believed to give rise to all other phenomena. As the falun emblem spins clockwise, it absorbs energy from the universe, and this direction of rotation represents the process of self-salvation and the inner methods used to achieve spiritual enlightenment. The falun can also spin counterclockwise, representing the radiation of energy, and this direction of motion is associated with the process of offering salvation to others.



The Falun Gong emblem incorporates the swastika and yin-yang symbols common to Chinese Buddhism and Taoism respectively. Much of Falun Gong philosophy is derived from a combination of Buddhist and Taoist concepts.

## Combination of Chinese Philosophies

By combining the dharma wheel and wan symbols from Buddhism with the Taoist yin-yang, the falun emblem represents the belief in Falun Gong that the essential road to salvation and enlightenment can be found through the combination of these essential philosophies. In Buddhism, the wan symbol generally represents

eternity and continuity, and it is also considered a symbol of good fortune. The yin-yang symbol, one of the central symbols of Taoism, represents the duality of nature, which is seen as a more complex way of viewing the essentially unified or holistic reality of the universe.

According to Li Hongzhi, Buddhism and Taoism represent the pinnacle of human philosophy and the highest levels of spiritual practice. Li has said that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are basically lower levels of the same spiritual impulses and lessons that gave rise to Buddhism, and each of these faiths begins to appear more Buddhist as practitioners reach higher levels of awareness. Similarly, Chinese Confucianism is seen in the Falun philosophy as another manifestation of the Taoist spiritual school. Thus, according to Li, by encapsulating Buddhism and Taoism, Falun represents the ultimate levels of human spirituality and morality.

### **The Colors of the Falun Emblem**

The disk, or circle, forming the background of the falun emblem is generally red, and the wan symbols are gold. The yin-yang symbols occur in two varieties: red and black and red and blue. According to Li's teachings, the colors perceived in the emblem depend on one's level of spiritual attainment, so different practitioners will therefore see different colors. For instance, the background disk of the emblem is generally described as red, but it may appear to other practitioners as blue, gold, or purple.

The yin-yang symbols on the falun emblem differ from the standard Taoist version of the symbol, which uses the color white to symbolize yang and the color black to represent yin. Falun Gong substitutes red for the white yang color, which is justified by the belief that the color white manifests as red at higher levels of consciousness. The red and black yin and yang symbols represent the standard school of Taoism, which is understood as the school of Taoism that is now known around the world. The other two yin and yang symbols occur in blue and red, substituting blue for the black yin color. This symbol is said to represent the primordial school of Taoism and the most basic manifestation of yin and yang before the formulation of modern Taoist practice. Like all other elements of the falun emblem, the yin-yang symbols are said to change colors with higher levels of cultivation.

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## QIGONG

### Ancient Moving Meditation

Qigong (also “chi gong” or “chi kung”) is a form of exercise that originated in China that is aimed at harmonizing the body and mind through a combination of movement and breathing techniques. Within Falun Gong, practitioners utilize a unique set of qigong exercises as part of their general philosophy of moral and physical cultivation. Falun Gong qigong was developed from similar schools of exercise common in China and utilized in both Buddhism and Taoism.

The ultimate aim of qigong practice is to cultivate qi, a complex concept largely developed within Taoism that concerns the existence of a nonphysical essence or potential energy thought to be partially responsible for the energetic and creative potential of life. The Chinese typically divide qi into three basic varieties, known as heaven qi (tian qi), earth qi, (di qi) and human or bodily qi (ren qi). The human body can absorb qi from “heaven,” which also refers to the air and the cosmos, and from the earth, thus transforming tian and di qi into ren qi.



Falun Gong followers practice qigong in Wanchai, Hong Kong, May 9, 2001. Qigong did not originate as a Falun Gong practice, but is one of the oldest forms of meditative exercise developed in China. (AFP/Getty Images)

The human body continually produces and circulates qi through a system of channels called “meridians.” Inhalation draws heavenly and earthly qi into the body, while exhalation passes qi from the body into the environment. Qigong, which translates as “qi cultivations,” is a system of movement and breathing intended to harmonize the flow of qi within the body and the exchange of qi between the body and the environment.

## Falun Gong Qigong

Falun Gong was one of several alternative philosophical and spiritual schools that emerged in the 1980s and practiced qigong partially from the goal of reintegrating a more spiritual focus into qigong practice. This became part of the Chinese government’s justification of the 1990’s ban on Falun Gong, and official reports claim that Falun Gong promotes the practice of mysticism and potentially disruptive, cultlike rituals.

The Falun Gong qigong techniques are a distilled form of qigong techniques common to many Taoist and Buddhist qigong schools. Founder Li Hongzhi, who claims to have studied with prominent Buddhist and Taoist qigong practitioners, developed a simplified system based on five basic qigong techniques and began teaching his system to the public in 1992. The five basic exercises of Falun Gong qigong are as follows:

1. Buddha Showing a Thousand Hands involves a gentle stretching of the body intended to relieve areas where the body’s qi has become blocked. The motion stimulates the flow of qi in the body and prepares the body and mind for additional practice.
2. Falun Standing Stance is a standing meditation with the arms raised and curved to symbolize a wheel. The standing stance involves four positions, each of which is held for several minutes and accompanied by regular breathing. This stance is said to increase qi flow while stimulating the development of wisdom.
3. Penetrating the Two Cosmic Extremes involves sweeping arm motions that help to bring heavenly qi into the body and thereby purify the body’s systems. The exercise is also believed to facilitate opening the meridians at the top and bottom of the body, pushing qi from the body through the head toward the cosmos and through the feet into the earth.
4. The Great Heavenly Circuit utilizes circular motions of the arms over the body, circulating qi and healing any abnormal conditions within the body. The Great Heavenly Circuit is an intermediate level exercise that is generally practiced only by those who have already mastered the previous stances.

5. Strengthening Divine Powers is a seated exercise that is intended to bring about a sense of deep tranquility and to help with the development of one's human and even superhuman powers. The practitioner uses the "Buddha hand signs" to turn the qi, and the mind is cleared of all thoughts to further facilitate qi generation. Strengthening Divine Powers was once considered a secret form taught only to advanced practitioners, but it is now performed by any Falun Gong adherent at the intermediate level of practice.

## History of Qigong

Qigong is one of the world's oldest known systems of exercise and wellness and was practiced before written records of Chinese history. Some historians speculate that qigong developed directly from the ritual dances and movements performed by shamans in China's ancient animistic religions. Descriptions of qigong reminiscent of modern schools of practice have been found in literature from China's Warring States period (475–221 BCE). By the first century CE, qigong had been integrated into both Buddhism and Taoism and began to take on spiritual characteristics from its association with religious rituals. A tremendous flowering of qigong practice occurred through the various schools developed in the Taoist and Buddhist traditions.

From the Liang dynasty (502–556 CE) to the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911 CE), practitioners began using qigong as part of broader martial training programs, coupled with other forms of martial arts practice. Gradually, qigong began to be seen as a component of martial arts training and fell out of favor as a nonmartial form of spiritual cultivation or exercise. The integration of qigong into the martial arts led to the development of special martial techniques called "neigong," or "internal work." Neigong systems developed within many martial schools, representing the most essential and often secret techniques used for internal cultivation. Many martial arts practitioners consider neigong to be a subset of qigong practice.

### Internal Martial Arts

It has been customary in Chinese martial arts to divide various martial techniques into internal schools, which are focused on the development and control of qi, and external schools, which are focused on the cultivation of the body. While the internal art tai chi has been popularized in the West as a nonviolent, meditative practice, authentic tai chi actually involves equal focus on meditative cultivation and combat training. Tai chi developed from military training techniques.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Chinese government attempted to create a distilled and scientifically valid qigong system to complement traditional Chinese medicine. This led to the development of numerous secular schools promoting the art as a form of exercise without significant martial or spiritual significance. After the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), secular qigong practice sponsored by the Communist Party of China and qigong programs were often mandatory for employees of the government and certain corporations. Government promotion led to a mass increase in the popularity of qigong, and from the late-1970s to the end of the 1990s, qigong became extraordinarily popular in China, with between 70 and 200 million practitioners nationwide.

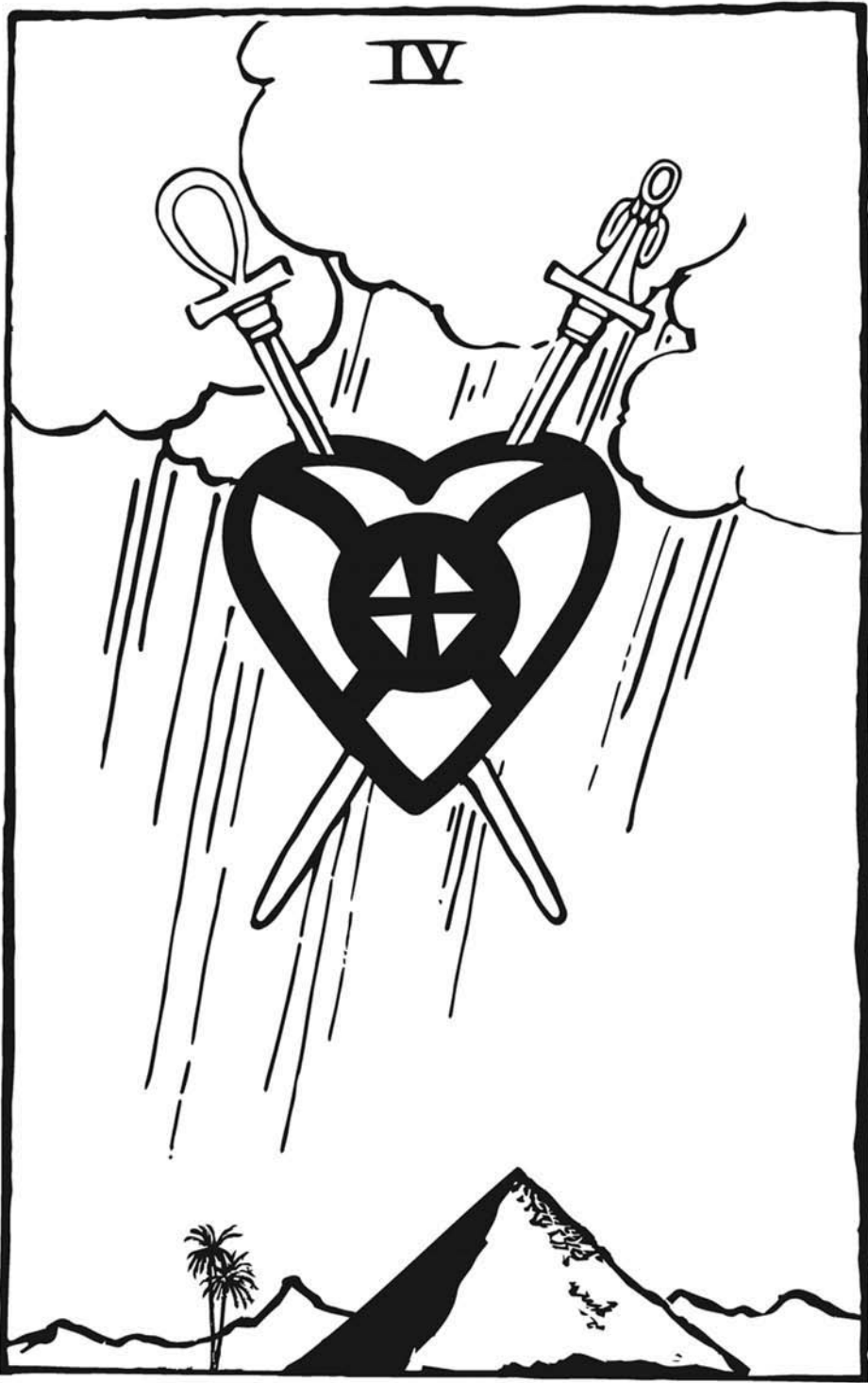
Though qigong is occasionally disparaged as a form of mysticism or New Age healing, qigong practice has been part of Chinese culture since antiquity and has coevolved with Chinese culture. Today, the Chinese government and scholarly community consider qigong to be part of the nation’s cultural heritage and have begun using scientific methods to study the psychological and physical effects of qigong practice.

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# AFRICAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

There are two major families of religious traditions that developed in Africa. The indigenous African religions are the spiritual and philosophical traditions that originated within the African continent, sometimes called “traditional African religions.” The size and diversity of Africa often necessitates the division of African religions into broad geographic categories, including East Africa, West Africa, Southern Africa, Central Africa and North Africa. Most of the indigenous traditions of Africa have been irrevocably altered since the European colonization of Africa and the subsequent conversion of Africans to Catholicism, Christianity, and Islam.

The second family of religions from Africa are the diasporic religions, syncretic faiths that emerged as a result of the Atlantic slave trade between the 16th and 19th centuries. Most of the religions in this category are related to West African spiritual traditions, and many were derived from the traditions of the Yoruba or Fon ethnolinguistic groups. The diasporic African traditions are characterized by a mythology that blends African tribal spirituality with elements of European Christianity or Catholicism and indigenous Amerindian spiritual beliefs. The most prominent representatives of this category are Haitian Vodoun, Cuban Santería, and Brazilian Candomblé.

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# Native Religions of Africa

Africa is the second-largest continent in the world and is home to hundreds of different ethnic and linguistic groups, each of which has a unique culture and history. Ethnographers have identified nearly 400 separate spiritual traditions in Africa, many of which are still practiced in some countries and have contributed to the cultural and social environment of modern Africa. There is no single characteristic African religion, and only a small number of native African religions have had a major impact on global culture. These more influential traditions include the West African Fon and Yoruba religions—which led to the diasporic African religions of Vodoun, Santeria, and Candomblé—and the spirituality of the ancient Egyptians, which had a major influence on the cultures of the Middle East and Europe.

Religion in modern Africa is dominated by the inherited faiths of the African colonial period. Islam, Catholicism, and other forms of Christianity are the primary traditions of Africa in the 21st century, the result of hundreds of years of occupation, forced conversion, and proselytization by missionaries and outreach organizations. Though nonnative faiths dominate Africa, in many areas, Africans continue to practice some aspects of native religions or have blended Abrahamic and native spirituality to create unique traditions that reflect both streams of influence.

While Africa is home to a staggering diversity of religions, there are certain characteristics that are common among many of the native African traditions. Most African religions are oral traditions that do not rely on spiritual texts. Music and dancing play an important role in most forms of African spirituality and are an important part of religious rituals. The legacy of African spiritual music can be heard in the rhythmic syncopation of the various music styles developed by transported African slaves in the New World, such as Brazilian samba and American blues.

Many African faiths involve complex systems of spirits that mediate between god(s) or a spiritual realm and the world of humanity. Priests, priestesses, and adherents of the faiths use rituals, ceremonies, singing and dancing, and a system of mystical divination to determine the wishes of the spirits and to communicate with them. Many of the African faiths are somewhat animistic, ascribing spiritual

**First in Spirituality**

Humanity emerged first in East Africa, and the earliest forms of religion likely evolved among the first prehistoric societies of Africa before humans migrated across the world. Therefore, while each region has developed unique religious characteristics, elements of this primordial spirituality are reflected in the entirety of human religion.

qualities to animals, plants, and other features of the natural environment. Some African faiths involve ancestor reverence or the worship of deceased ancestors who may remain with the living as spirits or guides. Evil and malevolent spirits also play a role in many native African faiths as well and are often held responsible for illness and other misfortunes that afflict humanity. Special ceremonies and rituals are reserved to placate evil forces and keep them at bay.

**Regional Divisions in African Religion**

North Africa consists of the modern nations of Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, and Morocco. Many of the coastal areas in North Africa were heavily influenced by European, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean culture. North Africa also contains portions of the Sahara Desert; many of the territories in this region are arid and inhospitable. As a result, migratory nomadic tribes developed who traveled according to variations in climate. North Africa was home to ancient Egyptian spirituality as well as the native religion of the Berber ethnic group, who developed a complex system of ancestor worship and spiritual and political hierarchies that influenced early Islam in the region.

West Africa consists of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Togo, Nigeria, Senegal, and Gambia. This region was a major source of slaves during the Atlantic slave trade, and many of the native religions of the region live on through the African diasporic religions of Vodoun, Santeria, and Candomblé. Other spiritual traditions from this region include the native religion of the Igbo people, called "Odinani," and the Akan religion of Ghana and parts of the Ivory Coast. Many of the West African religions share a belief in a series of minor deities or spirits that interact directly with humans, and a number of the West African faiths involve belief in some central creator god and therefore tend toward monotheism.

Central Africa includes portions of Angola, Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. The

Bantu ethnic group has played a major role in the history of the region, establishing a series of powerful dynasties that ruled much of the area from 1200 to 1300 CE. Central African religions are marked by a focus on animist beliefs, polytheism, and shamanic ritual practices.

East Africa encompasses the countries of Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Zambia, Malawi, Burundi, and Zimbabwe. The landscape of East Africa is varied and diverse, ranging from open, arid grasslands to dense temperate and tropical forests. Anthropological evidence suggests that East Africa was the cradle of human civilization; some of the earliest human remains have been found in Tanzania and Ethiopia. Agricultural settlements and the domestication of animals like the donkey (*Equus africanus asinus*) began more than 7,000 years ago in East Africa and became characteristic of much of the region. Animal rearing and breeding became a spiritual activity among the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, one of the most prominent of the surviving native populations from the region.

Southern Africa consists of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, and Lesotho and comprises the southernmost tip of the continent. The terrain of the region is highly variable, consisting of tropical forest, grassland, coastal plains, and deserts. The Bantu ethnic group from Central Africa exercised significant influence over Southern African culture because of a series of Bantu migrations into the coastal territories of the region. Most Southern African spiritual traditions are polytheistic and often involve complex mythological fables that are used to pass on moral and cultural lessons. The Zulu people of South Africa are one of the most well-known cultural groups in the region. They developed a unique form of polytheistic animism that is still practiced today.

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## ADINKRA SYMBOLS

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### Spiritual Language in West Africa

Adinkra symbols are visual designs created by members of the Akan ethnolinguistic group in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Though citizens in these countries generally speak the colonial French language, many also speak Akan, a native language that is part of the Kwa family of languages. Adinkra symbols represent

expressions or phrases used among the Akan people and are common in native textiles, pottery, and art.

A number of the Adinkra symbols represent spiritual concepts and have therefore become important spiritual symbols for native religions and for syncretic blends of native spiritual traditions and Christianity. The Adinkra symbols eventually evolved beyond their original ceremonial use and are now worn for any occasion, representing a link to the cultural roots of Akan civilization in the modern population.

### **Emergence of Adinkra Symbolism**

The term “Adinkra” translates as “good-bye,” reflecting the original usage of the Adinkra symbols in funerary customs, especially for tribal royalty. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Adinkra symbols first emerged among the former Ashanti nation of Ghana (ca. 1700–1950 CE). According to Akan legend, a king of the rival Gyaman Nation ordered his artisans to copy the designs featured on a sacred religious item owned by the Ashanti Kingdom, which was believed to endow the Ashanti with protective magic. This led to the proliferation of Adinkra symbols throughout Ghana.

The Adinkra phrases used on funeral garments represent the individual being buried and are related to parables and stories that communicate essential philosophical ideas. The cycle of life and death is symbolized by the Adinkra symbol “Owuo Atweede,” which is generally constructed to resemble a ladder that has four steps. Each of the steps represents one of the four stages of existence: birth, childhood and adulthood, old age, and death.

### **Symbols of Onyankopon**

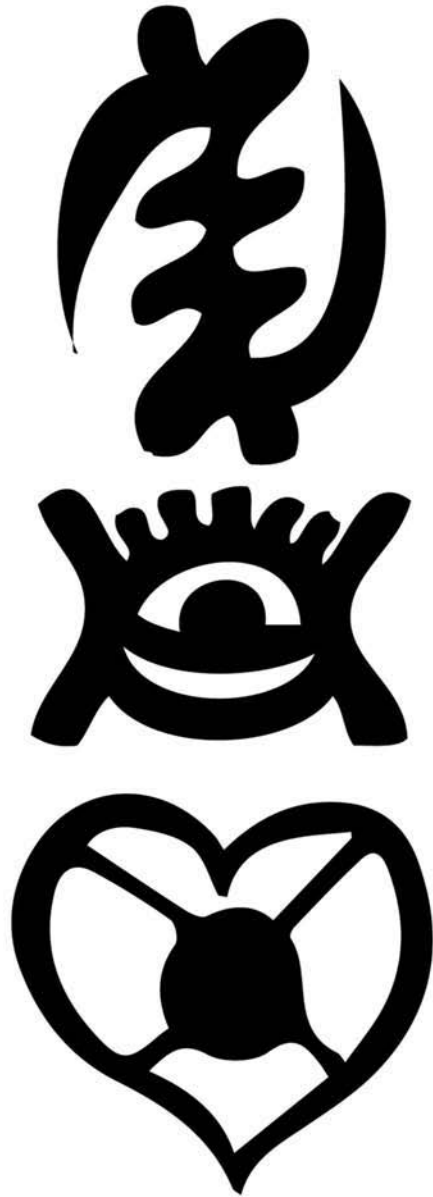
One of the most important Adinkra symbols for spiritual purposes is the symbol known as “Onyankopon Adom Nti Biribiara Beye Yie,” which translates as “By God’s grace, everything will be well,” and is represented by the symbol of the heart with a circular cross in the center that is suspended by four arms reaching the inner edge of the cross. Onyankopon is one of the names used to refer to the supreme god, the one responsible for the creation of the physical and spiritual universes. The name “Nyame” is also used to refer to the creator god, though it is sometimes used specifically to refer to the god of the sky.

The West African Akan and other indigenous groups in the region created a complex pantheon of deities that operate below the creative and protective power of Onyankopon. These included the Abosom, a pantheon of powerful spirits often associated with such major environmental features as water, the sky, or the forest. The Abosom may grant certain boons to humanity, but they were often capricious,

cursing or harming humans through their actions. The Abosom are often envisioned as being connected to Onyankopon and to derive their power directly from the supreme spirit. The Asuman are another group of spirits usually associated with certain spiritual charms or sacred items. These spirits are narrower in their scope and application, being invoked only for a specific purpose. Below the Asuman is another lower pantheon of spirits associated with animals and plants and the spirits of departed ancestors that remain in the physical realm to watch over humanity.

One important feature of Akan spirituality is the concept of humanity, which is defined less by the quality of being born into the species *Homo sapiens* and more by fulfilling one's role in the society and culture of which one is a part. A human was a being that participated in a natural set of relationships that connected the individual to his or her community, and further to the rest of nature and the universe, both spiritually and physically.

Humans were possessed of a "kra," which is often translated as a "soul" or "human essence." The person is thus conceived as a combination of this spiritual essence and a physical being. The kra manifests from the supreme being Onyankopon and remains with the body until death, at which time the kra must return to its point of origin, Onyankopon, and the individual must account for his or her deeds. While the kra is specific to humans, the Akan also conceive of a spirit called "sunsum" that is the basic



Three of the many Adinkra symbols used by the Akan in Ghana and other parts of Africa. From top to bottom: the "Gye Nyame" or "supremacy of god" symbol, the "Kojo Baiden," or "cosmic omnipresence" symbol, and "Onyankopon Adom Nti Biribiara Beye Yie," meaning "By God's grace, all will be well."



component of all matter, uniting humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects as part of the same basic fabric of existence.

Adinkra symbols relating to the belief in a supreme god have been useful to those of the Akan and other West African groups who converted to Christianity, and some Christian churches in West Africa use Adinkra symbolism in addition to traditional Christian symbolism. Such symbols as “Nyame Ye Ohene,” which translates as “God is King,” and “Nyame Nnwu Na Mawu,” meaning “God does not die and therefore I do not die either,” are amenable to Christian messages regarding the meaning of faith and the power of God.

While many Adinkra symbols are spiritual in nature, others represent common wisdom and life lessons that are seen as important. For instance, the popular symbol known as “Sankofa” means “return and fetch it” and is often symbolized as a duck or goose stretching its neck to reach its back. The Sankofa symbol represents the importance of learning from the past, reminding individuals to stop and return to the past to retrieve the wisdom they need to move forward.

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## CATTLE IN MAASAI SPIRITUALITY

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### The Divinity of Animal Husbandry

The Maasai people of East Africa live in a pastoral society, and many aspects of their culture have been organized around the process of breeding, herding, and protecting livestock. Cattle are so essential to Maasai existence that the typical expression of greeting has become “I hope your cattle are well.” Among the Maasai, cattle and other livestock serve as the primary source of food, currency, and social and cultural status. Both individuals and villages are measured by the size and quality of their herds. In addition, many aspects of Maasai spirituality and mythology focus on the importance of cattle in their history and culture.

### Cattle Mythology

Maasai mythology is full of tales of how cattle herding first began in their society and the deliverance of cattle from divine sources. Because of the centrality of herding in Maasai culture, cattle myths are often entwined with creation myths

about the origin of the world, humans, and the natural environment. In addition to cattle, many plants in the Maasai environment, especially grass, have been imbued with spiritual and mythological significance. Myths regarding the origin of cattle also help to explain the scarcity of cattle, providing a mythological explanation for the fact that Maasai tribes must struggle to maintain sufficient numbers in their herds.

According to myth, the Maasai god, called “Ngai,” is envisioned as a supreme being whose actions are difficult or impossible to understand for lowly humans living on earth. Ngai is a primordial being, without gender, who is directly responsible for forming Earth and all earthly creatures. This occurred in the dawn of time when Ngai split existence into the earth and the sky. Since this time, the word “Ngai” has been synonymous with “sky.”

Ngai initially took all of the cattle with him into the sky but could not keep the cattle there, as the cattle needed grass to survive. Therefore, Ngai needed to ensure that the cattle would be protected somewhere on the earth and chose the Maasai to be their protectors and guardians. Ngai delivered the cattle to the Maasai through a rope formed from one of the aerial roots of the fig tree, known to the Maasai as the “oreti” or “oreteti.” As thousands of cattle descended this rope from heaven, a warrior from a neighboring tribe, known as the Dorobo (Torrobo), cut the rope, preventing the Maasai from receiving additional cattle. For this reason, the Dorobo were considered a cursed people and one of the ancient enemies of the Maasai.

In another version, the first Maasai, known as “Maasinta,” received a vision from Ngai. In this vision, Ngai instructed Maasinta to construct a large enclosure and told him that he would soon be receiving a gift called “cattle.” Though Maasinta had never seen a cow before, he did as he was told, and when the corral was finished, Ngai told Maasinta to wait silently near the enclosure. The next morning, Maasinta heard thunder, and Ngai lowered a long leather bridge from the sky into Maasinta’s corral. The cattle descended this leather bridge, resulting in a thunderous sound so loud that Maasinta’s house nearly toppled over.

Though he was frightened, Maasinta heeded Ngai’s warning and remained silent. Maasinta had a housemate, however, named Dorobo, who, upon hearing the cacophony, cried out. Ngai, thinking that Maasinta had violated his instructions, removed the leather bridge, and the flow of cattle stopped. Ngai told Maasinta that he would never again deliver cattle and bade Maasinta to cherish the cattle that he had received in the same way that Ngai cherished the people. Maasinta was so angry with Dorobo that he cursed him, declaring that Dorobo would remain poor throughout his life and would never be able to drink the milk of the cattle, which would be poison to him. From that time on, Dorobo’s ancestors (representing some of the non-Maasai tribes of East Africa) lived in the forest and were not involved in cattle husbandry, while the Maasai revered the cattle as a gift from Ngai.

### **Holy Cows**

Bovines are sacred in many religious traditions, reflecting the importance of cows and their kin in agriculture. In Hinduism, eating beef was prohibited because of the sanctity of the species, which was likely a reflection of how cows were relatively scarce in ancient India and prized possessions of upper-class farmers.

### **Cattle in Maasai Ritual**

The Maasai have a special reverence for grass because of its importance to their traditional pastoral existence and because it is the sacred food of their cattle. The Maasai often use grass in their rituals, throwing clumps of grass as a blessing. A clump of grass held in the hand has additional significance, serving as a symbol of peace. Clumps of grass are also tossed among the roots of the sacred oreti tree whenever they encounter one, serving as a way of honoring Ngai's patronage.

The Maasai consider cattle husbandry to be the only appropriate vocation for someone born into the tribe. Participation in any other occupation is considered a debasement of their culture and an insult to Ngai, who intended the Maasai people to be protectors of cattle. The cultivation of plants is considered an especially egregious violation of cultural norms, as plants are sacred and are dispersed solely through Ngai's wishes. In this way, Maasai spirituality plays a role in discouraging the development of agricultural communities and provides spiritual justification for the tribe's nomadic pastoral existence.

The cattle themselves are seen as a manifestation of Ngai, and consumption of cow's blood and milk is believed to reflect and reestablish the essential unity between the Maasai and their god. Traditionally, the Maasai subsisted entirely on a diet of cow's milk, blood, and sometimes meat, though cattle are not often eaten until they have become too old and enfeebled to provide milk. Instead, the Maasai traditionally subsisted on meat from sheep and goats. The Maasai also do not eat wild animals, which are considered sacred, with the exception of a few antelope species that are classified in the Maasai understanding as "wild cattle."

Milk, which is consumed both fresh and curdled, is the traditional staple of the Maasai diet. Milk is traditionally carried in long, intricately decorated gourds that have been blessed through a ritual application of cow's urine, which serves as a mild antiseptic preservative. Milk is consumed at all major rituals and is also often mixed with chalk to create a white paste used as ceremonial body paint. Ritual drinks also



A young woman milks a cow in a Maasai village, Amboseli, Kenya, November 2, 2012. The cattle are kept inside the village surrounded by thorn bush fences during the night. The cows are milked by the woman and the animals are then herded by men and young boys. (Britta Kasholm-Tengve/iStockphoto.com)

sometimes include cow urine, the consumption of which has been shown to reduce the harmful effects of high cholesterol in the traditional Maasai diet.

Cow blood is also an important component of the Maasai diet and an essential element of many rituals. Blood is taken from the cattle by affixing a noose to the animal's neck to cause the animal's jugular vein to swell. The Maasai then use a loosely strung bow to puncture the vein with a small dart wrapped in twine with a one centimeter tip. The blood that flows out is collected in a gourd and then the wound is treated with a compress of dung and mud to stop the bleeding. The animal is not seriously injured by this process and continues to produce milk and blood for years. Cow blood may be consumed on its own, and many rituals call for the consumption of fresh blood. In other cases, the blood is mixed with milk to create what the Maasai call "nailanga'a" a drink that is consumed as a general food product and also as a component of many important ceremonies. Blood is believed to be one of the most powerful elixirs to promote health and strength, and, as such, the Maasai also ration some blood for individuals who are sick, women who are nursing, and warriors preparing for battle.

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## KUBA MASKS

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### Impersonating the Gods

The Kuba, or Bakuba, is an ethnolinguistic group in Central Africa that consists of people from at least eight different tribal groups, including the Bushongo, Lele, Njembe, and BaTwa peoples. The Kuba developed a powerful kingdom in the 17th century that became a cultural hub in Central Africa. The artistic, spiritual, and cultural traditions of the Kuba remain an important influence on many living in the region. Kuba masks were artistic and spiritual objects made for cultural and religious rituals and represented deities and important ancestral figures in the Kuba tradition.

### The Kuba Kingdom

The Kuba civilization began in the 16th century from a combination of migrant groups from the Bantu language group who settled a portion of the Congo region, fleeing military pressure by indigenous groups and Portuguese colonists along the Atlantic Coast. In the 17th century, the region was taken over by the Bushongo, whose name roughly translates to “throwing knife people.” The Bushongo absorbed the other groups living in the Congo region and built a powerful imperial government based on a divine lineage of kingship and an economy centered around fishing, hunting, and agriculture. As they grew more powerful, the Bushongo also traded in spices, slaves, and precious metals.

The Kuba Kingdom became destabilized in the 19th century, largely because of internal conflicts, and was unable to withstand colonial pressure. In 1885, the Kuba Kingdom was absorbed into the Belgian Congo under King Leopold II. While the Kuba Kingdom never regained independence, they remain a powerful political force in the country. The complex aristocratic, spiritual, and artistic traditions developed by the Kuba in the 18th century still exert an important cultural influence throughout Central Africa.

### Bumba and the Cosmic Vomit

The religion of the Kuba Kingdom was a blend of Western Christianity and indigenous spiritual traditions as practiced by the Bushongo and the other tribal groups

that formed the core of Kuba society. One of the beliefs that the Kuba derived from the Bushongo was the belief in a generative creator god or spirit named Bumba who was responsible for creating the moon, stars, sun, and the other planets of the cosmos. In one of the most common versions of the legend, Bumba had been alone so long in the universe that he became ill, a sickness that led him to vomit forth the sun, then the moon and stars, and finally the earth and the creatures that live upon it. Bumba's loneliness was cured by watching these first animals, plants, and humans build their society.

In addition to Bumba, the Kuba also believed in a complex pantheon of lesser spirits, including the spirit representa-

tives of important ancestors as well as spirits of the animals and natural features of their environment. Though formalized religious structure became more important in the aristocracy of the kingdom, at the village level, the Kuba were essentially animistic, and their religion was highly mystical and shamanic. The artistic products of the Kuba civilization often incorporated animal and natural motifs, representing the centrality of local ecology in Kuba spirituality and culture.

### Ancestors and Kings

The Kuba established a divine lineage of kings said to take their power directly from the gods of Chembe. Because of this, kings were considered minor deities in their own right and were believed to have supernatural power. Each king was honored by the carving of a wooden figure known as a "ndop," which served as a spiritual representation of the king. The wooden ndops were human in appearance but also combined elements of the king's spirit animal. After they were carved, the ndops were rubbed with oil, and the king slept near his ndop to imbue the figure



Kuba mask worn during a play retelling the myth of Bushoong royal origins, performed at major funerals, royal ceremonies, and initiations. Kuba-Bushoong Culture, Democratic Republic of Congo, 19th–20th century CE. (Werner Forman/Corbis)

with his spiritual aura. When the king left the kingdom for any reason, the ndop was treated as a stand-in for the regent and was honored and cared for to protect the essence of spiritual authority contained within.

The aristocratic structure of Kuba society was maintained through ceremonies involving songs and dances that commemorated important societal development, including funerals, marriages, births, and important days of the year. Kuba artisans created elaborate masks for these ceremonies that represented mythical figures and important animal spirits. Each ceremony had a specific type of mask associated with it as well as a specific compliment of songs and dances. Two of the most important masks were made for use by the Kuba kings and related to the story of Woot, the mythical first human and the first in a series of honored ancestors acknowledged by the Kuba. Woot was said to have been produced from Bumba's creative ejecta, and his arrival on the earth marks the beginning of human culture.

One of the masks worn by kings was known as "Ngady Amwaash" and represented Woot's sister and wife, Mweel, honored as the first human woman on earth. The Ngady Amwaash mask also symbolizes women in general and the role of the feminine in Kuba culture. The mask is carved with triangular shapes and deep lines below the eyes, which are often thought to represent tears and symbolize the difficulty of women's lives.

Each king had a mask called a "mwaash aMbooy," which represented Woot as an old man with a white beard and also symbolically represented the wisdom that comes from age and experience. The king's mwaash aMbooy mask was copied by leaders of the Kuba villages, who wore similar masks to honor Woot as their first ancestor. The mwaash aMbooy mask is generally made from raffia (a woven plant fiber) with attached shells, beads, feathers, and leopard skin. The mask symbolizes the royal power of the lineage and also the symbolic association between the king and the elephant, a powerful water and forest spirit, thereby signifying the close connection between the royal lineage and the pantheon of nature spirits.

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## ZULU DIVINATION

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### Divine Healing in Africa

Divination is the process of reading signs, symbols, and divine messages to interpret the present and at times read the future. The practice is common in many

African cultures and has been used since antiquity as a complement to traditional medicine and religious rituals. Divination is closely related to the process of fortune-telling, but it tends to be more ritualistic in execution.

Zulu diviners, known as “izangoma,” play an important role in Zulu folk medicine, often using their abilities to diagnose illness. Illnesses may then be treated by specialists in herbal medicine, known as “inyangas.” Though these roles were traditionally kept separate, in modern Zulu culture, many izangoma also serve as inyanga, diagnosing illness through divination and then dispensing herbal concoctions. The efficacy of Zulu divination as a diagnostic tool has not been well researched, though some of the methods used are as much practical as spiritual and thus allow for functional diagnoses of many ailments.

### Called by the Shades

Individuals who become izangoma in Zulu society do not believe that they have chosen their vocation; they believe that they have been called to service by the shades, sometimes translated as “ancestral spirits.” The diviners therefore consider themselves servants of the shades and believe that they form an important bridge between the world of their departed ancestors and the world of the living. It is believed that it is impossible to determine the will of the shades unless the shades choose for you to receive this knowledge.

In theory, any individual may be called to become a diviner, though in practice, studies indicate that more than 90 percent of diviners are women. Some sources suggest that women are more often chosen because they may be called to service by either their own lineage of shades or by their husband’s lineage, whereas men are only contacted by their own lineage of shades. Individuals are often called by the shades within their dreams, which are generally described as frightening and puzzling. The afflicted individual then calls upon a diviner who comes to diagnose the reason for their nightmares. If the diviner believes that the nightmares are the result of the shades, this indicates that the individual has been called to train as a diviner.

Diviners may also recognize the call through a variety of physical symptoms, which include hiccups, belching and gas, yawning, and sneezing. Acidic gas with a sour character may indicate the activity of the shades within the body, as the shades reside in the “gallbladder” and are therefore believed to have the power to affect digestion. The individual may also have difficulty sleeping and may suffer from bouts of activity at unusual times, reflecting the active shades within his or her body.

Once a new potential diviner has been identified, experienced diviners perform rituals that generally involve the slaughtering of an animal and ritual application



and ingestion of blood by the patient. This ritual is meant to help discover exactly which shade has called to the future diviner. In the case where the diviner is a woman, the shade may originate in either the woman's lineage or her husband's. The origin of the shade is economically important because the family of the shade that called the diviner will be responsible for supporting the diviner through his or her career and providing animals for sacrifice and ceremonies.

Following this, the individual becomes a novice diviner, or "ithwasa," and spends a period of up to two years training with an experienced diviner. The teaching diviner first treats the apprentice's body to help him or her recover from the physical and mental strain caused by the possession of the shades and then begins training the ithwasa in various rituals, chants, and other practices. During this time, the ithwasa serves as a domestic servant to the teacher and is responsible for cooking and cleaning as repayment for the training he or she receives.

## Methods of Divination

Anthropological studies of Zulu culture by Reverend H. Callaway, a missionary who undertook a detailed study of Zulu mythology in the 1860s, revealed several different "classes" of diviners, each of which utilized characteristic methods and techniques. Though subsequent studies have revealed a more nuanced subdivision of divination, Callaway's investigations provide a useful comparison of several broad classes of diviners and divination techniques that are still reflected in modern Zulu culture.

One type of diviner, called a "thumb doctor" or "Iziniyanga Zesitupa," conducts divination by asking a series of questions to which respondents would point using their thumbs when his questions were accurate. The thumb doctors are generally considered the least powerful of the diviners because their diagnoses derive from a dialogue rather than from direct divine insight through the shades.

Another divination technique is to cast sticks or bones, by tossing them on the ground or onto a patient's body, which can then provide information about the illness or malady represented in the resting orientation of the cast objects. The "Omabakula Izinti" diviner uses a collection of three or more sticks to divine the will and knowledge of the shades. When conducting a diagnosis, it is said that one of the sticks will leap from the diviner's hand and will land near to the part of the body where the problem is occurring. When the diviner asks questions about the illness, the sticks will move about and land in such a way as to indicate the correct answer.

Divination bones, called "Dingaka," are another divining tool; they consist of segments of animal or human bone. The diviner casts the bones on the ground, assigning a name and meaning to each one. In some cases, the bones will be



Objects used by Zulu diviners, including sticks, bones, cowry shells and dice, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Divination is one of the oldest forms of spiritual ritual, designed to help users gain knowledge of the future by reading messages from divine forces. (Roger De La Harpe; Gallo Images/Corbis)

assigned to represent types of creatures or individuals. When a patient comes to ask the diviner a question, the diviner tosses the bones on the ground. If the question is about an ailing human, the bone representing the human will move. Diviners typically consult the bones several times for a single diagnosis and may cast the bones in different places to achieve more accurate answers. For instance, a diviner may cast the bones inside the patient's home, outside the home, and in a special or sacred location. If the bones give the same answer each time, the diviner will be convinced of the accuracy of his or her divination.

Other diviners receive information from the shades by entering a trancelike state, sometimes aided by the ingestion of an herbal substance called "impepo," a medicinal flowering herb common in Zulu ceremonies. In this heightened and altered state, the diviner is believed to be capable of making a direct connection with the shades, and from this connection he or she can develop clairvoyant visions that allow him or her to determine information about illness and other problems.

Some diviners of exceptional ability and skill are thought to be in nearly constant contact with the shades and can receive messages from them at will. These diviners simply listen to inquiries from those who come to see them and receive the answers to the questions from the shades, instantly arriving on the correct

answer without any additional process. This skill is considered the height of divination prowess, and only a small percentage of diviners are believed to have this constant connection between the worlds of the living and dead.

Divination is not only found in Africa. It has also been used in many other cultures around the world. While the methods and materials differ between cultures, divination always has the same goal: to connect to and utilize supernatural powers. Divination therefore represents the attempt to create functional, utilitarian applications of divinity and thus bridges the gap between theoretical metaphysics and practical culture.

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# Ancient Egyptian Religion

The religions of ancient Egypt exerted a major influence on global culture that can still be seen today. Egypt was one of the great cradles of civilization, leaving evidence of surprisingly advanced discoveries in science, philosophy, and astronomy. Its influence eventually spread throughout Africa and into Western culture through the Greeks and Romans and later the Abrahamic faiths. The fact that the massive Great Pyramids and Sphinx of Giza are still considered among human culture's greatest achievements is a good metaphor for how strongly this culture's influence has been felt throughout history.

## Origins and Evolution

The earliest known archaeological evidence of Egyptian religious practices comes from the prehistoric period, before the establishment of the great Egyptian dynasties. Ritual burial and funerary structures provide evidence of an ancient belief in a spiritual realm after death. Egypt developed a complex system of deities, some associated with certain towns or regions and some considered to have more universal significance. Many of the Egyptian deities were also associated with certain animals, and the burial of animals suggests animistic beliefs that imbued some creatures with spiritual significance.

The Old Kingdom Period (3100–2520 BCE) saw the first unification of Egypt under the Pharaoh Narmer and the beginning of a new phase in Egyptian religion: the idea that the royal lineage were gods, god-kings acting as representatives of the gods, or that they were at least imbued with divine power. The first religious texts appeared during this period, as did the first great burial tombs, including the Great Pyramids, and many dynastic and spiritual monuments, such as the Sphinx of Giza, which was modeled after Pharaoh Khafra of the Fourth Dynasty.

Over the centuries, certain gods of the Egyptian pantheon were given special significance. In many cases, these gods were originally local gods who represented a region or city, but they became universal gods when rulers from that region became leaders of the empire. During the Old Kingdom, the falcon god,

Horus, and the god of the underworld, Osiris, were among the most prominent deities. Following a period of war, drought, and social uprising (First Intermediate Period), a new lineage of kings emerged from Thebes, bringing the Theban god Amun to prominence, as well as the sun god, Ra.

The Middle Kingdom Period (2050–1650), and with it the first set of Theban dynasties, ended with the invasion of Egypt by the Hyksos, a west Asian ethnic group that migrated into the Nile Delta. The Hyksos chose the god Set as their patron, which was originally a god of Upper Egypt associated with the giraffe and other animals, including jackals, donkeys, and foxes. The Hyksos dynasties (Second Intermediate Period) ended with a war that brought a new lineage of Theban rulers to power (New Kingdom Period 1550–1070 BCE). The Thebans established a new state cult based on a combination of the god Amun and the sun god, Ra, creating the universal god Amun-Ra. The priest class became powerful and influential during this period, with different sects focusing on different gods from the pantheon, resulting in a proliferation of individual deity cults across Egypt.

In the middle of the New Kingdom Period, the Pharaoh Amunhotep IV and his wife, Nefertiti, became the focus of a religious controversy when Amunhotep rejected the “old gods” in favor of a new single god named “Aten,” who was originally a solar deity associated with the sun god, Ra. Amunhotep took the name “Akhenaten” to reflect his devotion to his chosen religion, called “Atenism.” While some scholars have called Atenism one of the world’s earliest monotheistic religions, others have pointed out that the religion was actually henotheistic, which is a system focused on a single god while accepting the worship and existence of other gods. Atenism did not catch on and threatened the priestly class who did not support Akhenaten’s rule. As a result, his descendant, King Tutankhamun, returned to the old gods, and the tombs of Akhenaten were defiled after his death in response to the pharaoh’s perceived heresy.

The death of Ramses XI was the end of the New Kingdom and the beginning of a series of invasions and civil wars that ultimately brought an end to native rule (Third Intermediate Period). The last native Egyptian dynasties of the Late Period (712–323 BCE) defended the nation from the Assyrian Empire, but the culture of Egypt gradually changed, influenced in part by the immigration of large numbers of Persian Jews into Egypt. In 525 BCE, Egypt was conquered by the Persian Archaemenid dynasty, leading to a blending of Egyptian and Persian religions (including Zoroastrianism and related faiths). Finally, Egypt was conquered by Macedonian Greeks, leading to the establishment of the Ptolomaic dynasties (305–30 BCE) during the Hellenistic period. In this age, Greek and Egyptian religions fused and developed a syncretic blend of Euro-African spirituality. Cults of

such Egyptian deities as Isis and Horus spread to Greece and Rome, while Greek and Persian cults emerged in Egypt.

The old gods of Egypt survived the Greek and Roman empires, but the old religion began to dissolve around the fourth century CE under the influence of Islam and Christianity. By the time of the Islamic conquest of Egypt (639 CE), most of the cults of the native religion had already faded from prominence.

## Beliefs and Rituals

Egyptian religion was polytheistic, with a pantheon of gods representing various facets of their cosmology and beliefs. In practice, however, the Egyptian faith could also be henotheistic, with individuals focusing their devotion on a patron god while accepting the existence and worship of other deities as well. Each god generally had layers of symbolic representations, and most were associated with one or more animals (jackals, falcons, or crocodiles), natural features (water, the sun, rain, or wind), and cultural institutions (hunting, farming, or childrearing). The Egyptian gods were patrons, and the worship of the gods often occurred through cults dedicated to one or more gods. There were also evil or malevolent gods and spirits who used their influence to bring death and misfortune to humanity, but these gods were often considered to be part of the natural balance, seen as an extension of universal laws.

Egyptian gods were often grouped into related families of deities known as “pesedjets,” and various pharaohs chose different pesedjets to represent their rule. The most influential pesedjet was the Ennead of Heliopolis, a group of nine gods that consisted of the creator god Amun and his children. The pharaohs were also considered divine and sometimes envisioned as the manifestation of gods or as humans imbued with divine power. The pharaoh Seti, for instance, claimed to be a living god and integrated himself into the pesedjet that was honored during his rule.

One of the most notable (and famous) features of Egyptian religion was the focus on death and the afterlife. The elaborate burial customs of Egypt included mummification of prominent figures and pharaohs (and often their attendants, servants, pets, and friends) as well as the construction of burial tombs and chambers filled with vast treasures and objects of spiritual significance. In general, Egyptians believed in a nonphysical life force that pervaded all humanity and animals, which combined with a nonphysical manifestation of the intellect (known as the Akh) and another element representing a person’s unique spiritual nature. These three elements and the physical body constituted a person.

Following death, an individual was subject to judgment against an abstract set of principles that represented the individual’s role or fate in the context of

the universe. Those who were judged unworthy ceased to exist, while those who lived according to their destiny could live on in some form of afterlife, the details of which changed over the course of Egyptian history. It was also commonly believed that the dead still required sustenance after death, and families would “feed” deceased relatives for years. The dead were often treated like guardians, and they were asked for guidance and protection.

Egyptian religious structure was based on a priestly class that established temples to the various gods and presided over communal rituals. Individuals also had shrines within their homes that could be used to honor the gods and ask for favor. Belief in magic and mysticism was common among the populace, with families calling upon mystics to read portents and guide them through difficulties. Magic was also used in healing, though the Egyptians had a complex system of physical medicine as well.

Through more than 4,000 years of cultural evolution, Egyptian religion survived because of the mutability of the Egyptian system. With each wave of cultural development, the Egyptians redefined and reimagined their gods and cosmology to reflect their changing understanding of the world. The god of the sun in one incarnation could become the god of the city in another, and thus the Egyptian system proved resistant to dissolution. While Abrahamic monotheism eventually eclipsed the old gods, remnants of the religion remain in the modern era, reflected in subtle mysticism that still exists in Egypt and has become a source of fascination and esoteric spirituality around the world.

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## ANIMALS IN EGYPTIAN RELIGION

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### Nonhuman Divinity in Egyptian Culture

Animals played an important symbolic and totemic role in Egyptian religion from the foundations of Egyptian society. Representations of animals in Egyptian spiritual life can be seen through the development of animal cults, the veneration and sacrificial burial of animals, and the domestication of certain animal species.

## Development of Animal Cults

It is often mistakenly believed that the ancient Egyptians worshipped animals, but this was not the case for most of Egyptian history. The polytheistic pantheon of deities worshipped in Egypt likely emerged from an earlier animistic religious tradition among the hunter-gatherer tribes of prehistoric Egypt, in which animals and other features of the natural environment were seen as having a spiritual essence. Certain animals were revered for the food they provided, while others were revered because of the dangers they posed, for instance, cobras, lions, and hippopotami (which remain one of the most dangerous African animals in terms of human fatalities).

The domestication of animals began more than 12,000 years ago, long before what is now called “Egyptian culture” emerged from the early prehistoric tribes. Over the millennia, both wild animals and domestic beasts (especially those used as food or agricultural labor) became imbued with symbolic and spiritual import. Archaeological evidence suggests that Egyptians began ceremonially burying animals as early as the fourth millennium BCE, and it is believed that before this development proto-Egyptian religion already involved ritual animal sacrifice of many varieties.

Rather than worshipping animals directly, the Egyptians utilized animals as representations or avatars for their deities, with each god or goddess associated with one or more species. Statues of animals found in temples devoted to certain gods as well as artistic depictions of gods as figures with human bodies and animal heads are common features of Egyptian religious art, but they are not generally believed to represent the literal belief that the gods had animal heads or appeared as animals. Rather, this artistic tradition represented the belief that animals were linked to various deities and could therefore serve as ritual vessels for worshipping the gods.

The animal or animals chosen to represent a certain deity were often linked to the deity by virtue of the animal’s behavior, ecology, or use in Egyptian culture. For instance, the god Anubis is associated with the jackal, an opportunistic canine that was common in the Egyptian deserts and plains. The jackal is a scavenger that had a tendency to scavenge flesh from the bodies of dead humans, and this led to the jackal’s association with death and graveyards. It was also believed that the jackal, in eating the bodies of the dead, helped to carry human souls or bodies into the next world. The god Anubis, fittingly, was the guardian of graveyards and the symbol of the transition to the next life. Likewise, the god Horus, who was one of several deities linked to the falcon, was associated with the sky and hunting, both of which also reflect falcon behavior.



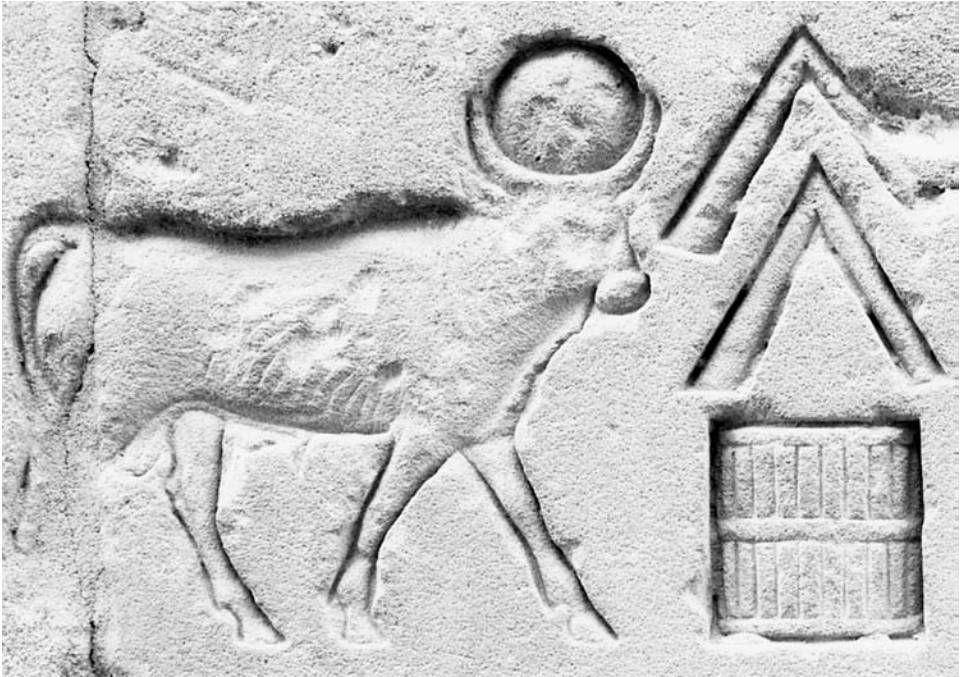
In other cases, the situation could be reversed, and the gods could serve as foci of rituals aimed at bringing about harmony between humans and the wildlife of their world. For instance, offerings made to the god Sobek, who was associated with the crocodile, may have been intended to ask Sobek to prevent crocodile attacks on fishermen. Similarly, the deadly cobra, which was feared and respected for its venomous bite, was associated with the goddess Wadjet, and offerings to this goddess may have been intended to prevent cobra-related injury.

While the average Egyptian may have believed in many different deities, it was common for Egyptians to belong to cults dedicated to one god or a small group of gods. The cults dedicated to various deities also tended to conduct their rituals through the ceremonial domestication, sacrifice, and burial of the sacred animals that represented their patron gods. At various points in Egyptian history, this tendency led to the development of animal cults that focused almost exclusively on worship through sacred animals, and the archaeological remnants of these animal cults inspired the misconception that Egyptians worshipped animals directly.

### **Animal Husbandry and Burial**

One of the most prominent types of animal cults in ancient Egypt were the cults of the divine bulls, religious sects that worshipped various gods through the veneration of sacred cattle. In general, bulls became a symbol of the divine kingship during the First Dynasty, and the most prominent bull cult emerged during this period. It focused on Apis the bull, which represented the creator god Ptah and later Osiris, the god of burial and ritual. In the city of Memphis, the cult of Apis kept a sacred bull calf near the temple that was the focus of certain rituals. The bull chosen to be the sacred representative of the cult needed to have certain characteristics, including being entirely black with a white diamond-shaped mark on its head and several moon-shaped markings on its back and flanks. The Apis calf was an “oracle,” and visitors would come to ask the bull questions, which were answered by observing the bull’s behavior. Upon the death of each sacred bull, the animal was ceremonially buried and another chosen to take its place.

The Apis cult was long lasting, existing from the First Dynasty into the Hellenistic period when Apis and Osiris were transformed into the syncretic Greco-Egyptian god Serapis. Other bull cults emerged in other cities, including Heliopolis and Armant, while cults to other domestic animals, such as rams, sheep, and pigs, existed in other parts of Egypt. Few animal cults achieved the prominence of the Apis cult, which became so popular that Pharaoh Cambyses dedicated an elaborate bull-shaped sarcophagus to the temple in the sixth century BCE.



Apis bull, Temple of Philae, Aswan. In ancient Egyptian mythology, the sacred Apis bull was believed to be an earthly manifestation of the creator god Ptah. The sanctity of bulls and cattle emerged in many cultures around the world, honoring the important social and economic role of cattle husbandry in human society. (Dreamstime.com)

Some animal cults demonstrated their dedication to the gods by capturing, breeding, and maintaining menageries of the species associated with their patron deity. For instance, devotees of Horus might breed and keep dozens of falcons near a temple to Horus, which could be fed and then sacrificially buried to honor the god. Similarly, baboons were captured and kept in honor of the god Thoth, who was associated with the moon. The goddess Bastet is famously associated with the wild and domestic cat, among other animals, and evidence suggests that thousands of cats were bred and raised by members of the Bastet cults.

#### **Tribe of Babi**

The name “Baboon” is taken from a French term meaning “to grimace,” but the roots of the term may be even older. Archaeologists have discovered a cult to an ancient god named “Babi,” who was seen as the king of baboons in Egypt. Babi was a symbol of fertility and aggression, qualities seen as representative of wild baboons.

The rearing of animals near the temples became an industry, as the animals were then likely sold to worshippers who would offer dead animals at the temples to honor their patron gods. Sacred animals kept in this way were not buried in sarcophagi, but they were still embalmed, wrapped, and ceremonially buried as offerings to the gods. Archaeological evidence indicates that sacrificial animals were often buried with written prayers and petitions to the gods to prevent disaster or to grant good fortune. Tombs utilized by the animal cults sometimes contained thousands of cremated and mummified animals, and some scholars believe that any body of a dead sacred animal may have been taken to the temple and added to these ceremonial burial chambers.

## Domestic Animals

Animal domestication is one of the most famous aspects of ancient Egyptian culture, especially concerning the domestic cat (*Felis domesticus*). Archaeological evidence suggests that cats were first domesticated 10,000–12,000 years ago in the Middle East, and researchers believe that all domestic cats are descended from the Middle Eastern wildcat (*Felis sylvestris*). The initial reason for domesticating cats was likely to control vermin. The Egyptians also praised the cat's potential to kill dangerous venomous snakes that could otherwise invade a person's property.

Cats were used as sacrificial animals early in Egyptian history, but it was during the 10th century BCE that the cat cult rose to national prominence through the patronage of Pharaoh Shoshenq I, who chose the goddess Bastet (the goddess most associated with cats) as one of the patron deities of the city of Bubastis in eastern Egypt. Archaeological evidence has found thousands of cat statues and mummified cat bodies associated with this religious movement. In the city, killing a cat, even accidentally, was considered a crime. Early Greek visitors to the city wrote about the reverence that the Egyptians gave to their feline neighbors and companions.

This facet of Egyptian culture has led to the misconception that the Egyptians worshipped cats, most notably perpetuated by Western fans of the domestic cat. Like other sacred animals, cats were not worshipped but symbolic of the deity they represented. While Egyptians may have partially kept cats for pleasure, they also ritually killed thousands of cats as sacrifices, indicating that feline reverence was not always benevolent.

The domestic dog was also popular in Egypt, and the bones of domestic dogs have been found dating to before the fifth millennium BCE. During the Old Kingdom Period, the dog is found in many murals and other works of art, indicating that dogs had become common in Egyptian culture. Several extant dog breeds, including the Ibizan hound, Pharaoh hound, greyhound, and whippet, were developed

first by Egyptian dog breeders. Leather collars found in archaeological sites indicate that Egyptians named their dogs; collars have been found engraved with such names as “North Wind” and even “Useless.”

Dogs were kept as pets, for hunting, and as guardians, helping to defend villages and homes from lions and other dangerous wildlife. Several prominent pharaohs kept dogs as pets, and the mummified remains of dogs have been found in burial chambers and sometimes even within a person’s sarcophagus, indicating that some Egyptians were actually buried *with* their dogs. Anubis, who was associated with the fox and wild canines, was also associated with the domestic dog. Mummified dogs have been found in burial chambers dedicated to the Anubis cult.

In addition to cats and dogs, Egyptians also kept monkeys, snakes, and various birds as pets as well as such agricultural animals as donkeys, cows, sheep, and pigs. Each of these creatures was associated, at one time or another, with a spiritual ritual and with one of the deities in the Egyptian pantheon. Egypt is notable for being one of the first civilizations where animals were kept inside the house and may therefore be the birthplace of what is now considered pet keeping. Though some animals may have been cherished pets, more often animal life constituted a form of “fuel” for human culture, both in the literal sense of providing food for the body and as “spiritual fuel” to curry the favor of the gods.

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## ANKH

### The Key to Immortality

The ankh is a spiritual symbol derived from ancient Egyptian mythology that has become popular in New Age and neo-Egyptian spirituality. In the shape of a “tau” or “looped cross,” the ankh is generally taken to be a symbol of life or of the universe as a whole. Thought to be one of the oldest symbols in Egyptian culture, the ankh also became the most widespread, appearing during every period of Egyptian history to the modern era. The ankh symbol was adopted into Western use during the 1960s and has since become the most widely recognized African symbol in the West.

## Origin and Early Representations

While it is known that the ankh has been around since ancient times, historians have been unable to discern its exact origin or meaning. Theories about the origin of the ankh have been proposed based on the shape and appearance of the symbol, which resembles an oval linked to a *T*. Some have suggested that the shape may have first represented a type of sandal worn in ancient Egypt. The term “ankh” still refers to a type of hand mirror that has the same basic shape, though most historians believe that the name of the mirror was chosen because of its resemblance to the symbol, rather than the other way around.

One of the most common suggestions about the ankh is that it represents the joining of the female genitalia, represented by the oval, and the male genitalia, represented by the *T* or cross. This explanation would seem to fit with later use of the symbol as a representation of life, regeneration, or the forces that generate life. The ankh is sometimes thought to be related to another Egyptian symbol, the “tyet” or “knot of Isis,” which resembles an ankh with the shorter horizontal arms folded down. The tyet is also associated with an obscure set of meanings, including that it represents the blood of Isis. Like the ankh, the tyet seems to have been used to represent resurrection, eternal life, and the role of Isis in protecting life.

## Meaning and Use

As a symbol of life and regeneration, the ankh was primarily invoked to promote the welfare of mankind. Numerous examples have been found of ankh designs used on talismans and amulets, which historians believe were worn to protect against misfortune and to promote long life and health. While the ankh is the most common symbol of eternal life, the Egyptians had a wide variety of symbols that revolved around this idea. Ancient Egyptians seem to have been fairly obsessed with warding off death and preserving their lives, and many of their rituals were intended to serve this function.

The tombs of kings and religious leaders were often decorated with ankhs that are believed to have represented the hope of invoking continuation after death or reincarnation in the next realm. The ankh was also prominently featured in important temples and buildings associated with spiritual and social functions. The word “ankh,” was prominently included in the ceremonial names of rulers, such as Tutankhamen, better known as King Tut. Tutankhamen’s name translates roughly as “the living image of Amun,” one of the most important local deities in the New Kingdom Period, and thus his name combined these two powerful spiritual symbols and meanings.

In artistic representations, gods and leaders were often depicted holding an ankh by the loop end. Egyptologists believe that this may symbolize the belief



The god Amun makes the gift of life (ankh) to the pharaoh Thutmose IV. While often thought of as the Egyptian equivalent of the Christian cross, the ankh is a far more ancient symbol that has come to have a wide variety of symbolic meanings. (Neil Harrison/Dreamstime.com)

that the ankh was a key to immortality, providing the power needed to unlock reincarnation or avoid death. In Egyptian mythology, a scepter topped with an ankh could be used to bring individuals back to life. In the artistic depiction of deceased kings, individuals are often depicted holding two ankhs across the chest. This usage seems to symbolize the ankh as a talisman of protection, guarding the body and the spirit from misfortune.

The ankh was also important to the priestly class, as noted by the number of ankhs featured on the buildings that make up the House of Life, a group of structures that housed the archives of spiritual books, songs, and writings that contained the collected knowledge of the priest class in Egypt. In a way, the ankh may have been indicative of Egyptian spirituality as a whole, encapsulating some of the central features of the religion as it evolved through the centuries.

### **The Spread of the Ankh**

The ankh became the most widespread symbol in Egypt and was used to celebrate nearly any occasion. Evidence suggests that Egyptians used the ankh as a symbol of greeting and also used it at the end of a letter to wish the recipient “eternal life.” While many of the symbols associated with the Egyptian dynastic period disappeared after Egypt adopted Christianity, the ankh remained as a link to their

ancient beliefs. Because its specific meaning was never defined, the ankh was easily transferable to new ways of thinking about eternity and the continuation of life, and this may be one reason why the use of the ankh endured the shift to monotheism in Egypt.

The ankh came into general Western use in the 1960s as part of a widespread interest in the mystical and spiritual traditions of ancient cultures. In Europe and the United States, the ankh was popularized in art and fashion as a symbol of African heritage, denoting a resurgence of interest in African aesthetics and design. In American pop culture, it is sometimes believed that ancient Egyptians possessed esoteric spiritual knowledge, much of which has been lost in history. This belief led to the emergence of Kemetism, a form of New Age spirituality that derives its name from the term “Kemet,” one of the native names for ancient Egypt. Kemetism is tied to the Black identity movement in America and represents the desire to “reconstruct” elements of ancient Egyptian religion in a modern form.

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## ISIS WORSHIP

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### Ancient Goddess of Salvation

Isis is one of the most ubiquitous goddesses in Egyptian history, appearing first during the predynastic period and remaining an important part of the pantheon until at least the fifth century CE. The Isis cult became one of the most influential and important religious movements of the Hellenistic period and may have influenced the early spread of Christian culture in Europe.

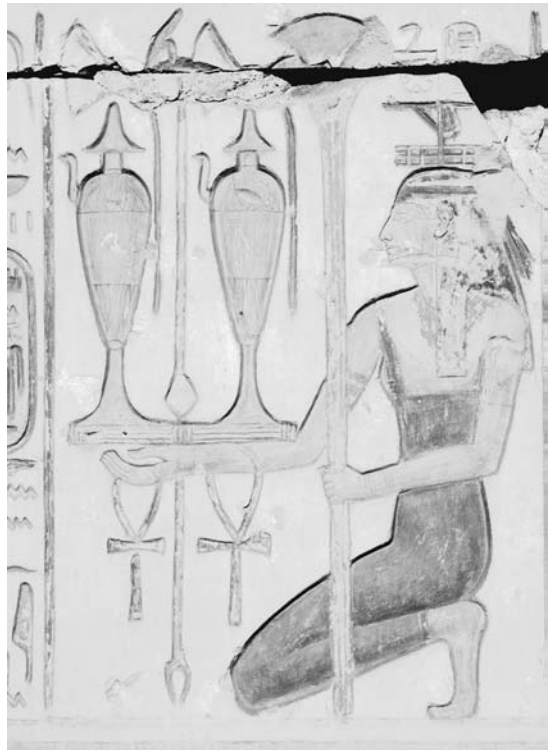
### Early Conceptions of Isis

The name “Isis” is a Grecian version of the Egyptian name “Iset” or “Aset,” meaning “woman of the throne.” It refers to her position as the ancient patron goddess of the Egyptian royal lineage. Depictions of Isis show her wearing a headdress that resembles a throne, and she usually carries the sacred ankh, one of the most ancient Egyptian symbols of life and fortune. The earliest references to Isis have been dated to the predynastic period, before 3100 BCE.

The written record of Egypt begins in the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 BCE), and Isis is mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, from the Saqqara pyramids, written between 2400 and 2300 BCE. Isis is also associated with fertility and the Nile River, and several legends connect her to the birth of the river. By the Third Dynasty (2670–2610 BCE), the city of Heliopolis had become one of the capitals of the Egyptian Empire, and Isis had become part of the Ennead of Heliopolis, also known as the “Great Pesedjet,” a cosmology of the universe based on a group of nine primary deities. Scholars are uncertain how the Ennead of Heliopolis evolved, but the myths of Heliopolis were described by the Roman historian Plutarch in the first century CE.

The Ennead myth begins with the creator god Atum, who gave birth to Shu and Tefnut, who further gave birth to Geb, the god of the earth, and Nut, the goddess of the sky. The children of Geb and Nut were Isis, Osiris, Set (Seth or Typhon), and Nephthys. Though they were brother and sister, Isis and Osiris fell in love while still in the womb and mated. The divine pair of Isis-Osiris became one of the most popular forms of Ennead worship for centuries after the establishment of the Ennead system, and Isis became one of the most popular goddesses in the pantheon.

Most of the Isis myths say that Osiris was killed by his brother Set, and the body of Osiris was carved into multiple pieces and scattered across Egypt. Isis and her sister found most of the pieces, with the exception of Osiris’s penis. Isis then conducted a miraculous reconstitution of Osiris’s body. In some versions of the myth, Isis constructed a new penis from gold or wax and then mated with the



Isis kneeling, relief from the temple of Ramses II at Abydos, Egypt. One of the most ancient goddesses of traditional Egyptian religion, representations of Isis evolved over time from a symbol of the Egyptian empire to the matron of a savior cult. (BasPhoto/Dreamstime.com)



body of her dead husband-brother to give birth to Horus, the falcon god. Horus was one of the earliest gods recorded in the pantheon, but he was reimagined as the son of Isis and Osiris in the Heliopolis cosmology. Horus defeated Set and gained control of the throne, becoming the ancestor of all future Egyptian kings. Thus Isis, the personification of the throne, became the matriarch of the Egyptian pharaonic lineage.

### **Greek, Roman, and Later Conceptions of Isis**

Greek historian Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century BCE, visited Egypt and explored the native religion, concluding that the Greek pantheon had been derived from earlier Egyptian gods. While historians now believe that the Greek pantheon was more inspired by Middle Eastern gods, the imagined link between the Egyptian and Greek pantheons inspired generations of Greek religious theorists. Herodotus suggested that the Egyptian goddess Isis was the inspiration for the Greek goddess Demeter, a fertility goddess and sister of Zeus, king of the gods.

During the Hellenistic period (232–31 BCE), an Isis cult spread throughout Greece and Egypt, partially as a result of early diplomatic ties between the Ptolemaic dynasty, under Ptolemy II, and the Roman Empire. Poems and artistic renderings from this period reveal that Isis was now envisioned as the queen of the gods, a counterpart to the Roman Diana or the Greek Hera. The religion of Egypt was refined under the Ptolemaic dynasty, resulting in a divine trinity of Egyptian worship. This included a father deity, known as Serapis (a combination of Apis and Osiris), who was associated with a variety of Greek gods, including Dionysus, Zeus, Pluto, and Adonis. The queen mother was associated with Athena, Hera, Demeter, Aphrodite, and Isis, envisioned now as the wife of Serapis. From this union came the divine son, Horus the Young, who was known as Apollo or Hermes in Greece.

It is also clear that Isis became a figure of salvation during this period, and was the patron of sailors, saving them from the dangers of their profession. According to the Greek hymns of Isidorus, an Egyptian priest who lived during the second

#### **Isis the Percussionist**

Depictions of Isis often show the goddess holding a sistrum, a metal instrument that consists of a curved iron bar fitted with movable struts that produce a clanging sound when shaken. Isis's sistrum might have symbolized thunder, representing the rains that flooded the Nile, as Isis was a protective goddess who prevented the Nile from flooding its banks.

century CE, Isis was also the giver of laws and the patron goddess of civilization. The *Golden Ass*, a novel published in the second century CE, which is notable as the only Latin novel that survived to the modern era, tells the story of Apuleius, a man who attempts to learn magic and accidentally transforms himself into a golden ass. Apuleius suffers additional torments until he is finally returned to human form by Isis, described as the Queen Mother, who grants him salvation through his becoming a member, and eventually a priest, in the Isis cult.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the Isis cult remained popular until after the Christian domination of the Roman world in the fifth century CE and that the cult spread deep into Europe and the Middle East. Evidence of Isis cult worship has been found even in northern Europe, including England and other parts of the United Kingdom. Scholars have suggested that Isis is also related to the Virgin Mary in Christian mythology and that the myths of Mary may have been derived from earlier stories developed in the Isis cult. Experts in religious iconography have noted similarities between statues of Isis, depicted cradling the newborn baby Horus, with statuettes of the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus. The development of new religions necessarily involves the adoption of some elements of preexisting traditions, most notably in the assimilation of “material culture,” meaning the complex relationships linking art and artifacts to social dynamics. Early Christian artists were likely inspired by the iconography of Greek and Roman depictions of Isis when formulating artistic representations of Mary.

It is most likely that the salvation-oriented Isis cult of Rome was a key ideological development within Roman culture that paved the way for the similar salvation-oriented philosophy of early Christianity. Historians are uncertain whether the originators of Christianity purposefully tried to replace the earlier Egyptian cults with their own mythology as a way to attract converts, but it is a distinct possibility that some early Christian artists and theorists imitated the extant traditions to promote their own philosophy.

In any case, Isis gradually became a figure with a great deal in common with Mary and therefore indicates the degree to which the evolution of Western/Roman philosophy in general had evolved toward the same ideas that led to the birth and eventual dominance of Christianity. Isis, therefore, can be seen a symbol of the complete journey of humanity, originating in Africa, transitioning through the cradle of Western civilization in Greece and Rome, and finally paving a path for the Christian conquest of Europe and birth of the modern age.

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# Loa and Orisha Worship

Vodou (also spelled Voodoo, Vodoun, Voodooon, and Vodun), Santeria, and Candomblé are syncretic African religions that arose from the combination of West African Vodun (practiced by the Yoruba of Togo, Benin, and Nigeria), European Catholicism, and elements taken from other indigenous tribal religions of the New World. The term, “creolization” is sometimes used to refer to the blending of characteristics from cultures emerging in different areas and especially to the blend of European and African cultures that has occurred throughout the world as the result of the African slave trade. Loa and Orisha religions emerged from the creolized cultures of the New World. One of the central facets of these religions is the belief in a complex pantheon of spirits known regionally as Loa (or Lwa) or Orishas. Loa and Orisha worship developed as a result of the African diaspora (or the Atlantic slave trade), which brought native African religions together with European and Amerindian spirituality.

## Origins and Evolution

Historians are uncertain about the origins of the West African Vodun religion, but some have suggested that the core beliefs may have originated as early as 6,000 to 10,000 years ago among the Fon tribe. These beliefs may have been integrated with North African religions from Egypt and Middle Eastern beliefs from Assyria. Little is known about West African Vodou until the establishment of the Dahomey Kingdom in 1600, encompassing parts of what is now Togo and Benin.

The Atlantic slave trade began in the early 16th century CE, with the transport of the first slaves to Spanish and Portuguese territories, and continued through the 19th century, with more than 12 million Africans brought to the New World. The majority of slaves brought to the New World came from West and Central Africa, and with them the traditional religions of the Fon, Ewe, and Yoruba ethnolinguistic groups were transported to colonies in the New World.

Haitian Vodou is the most prominent representative of New World Vodou, though similar religions are found throughout the Caribbean. This version of Vodou was born in 17th-century Haiti, then called “Saint-Domingue,” when the island was the property of the French Empire. The “Code Noir,” established by

King Louis XIV in 1685, is a turning point in the development of New World Vodou because it prohibited the practice of native African faiths and required the forced conversion of slaves to Catholicism. The Code Noir and similar provisions in other slave colonies did not extinguish native faiths, but practicing non-Catholic religion was forbidden, leading to syncretism, a blending of traditions and practices between native African religion and European Catholicism.

In some of the territories colonized by the Spanish, most notably Cuba, Argentina, Venezuela, Columbia, and Mexico, the primary ethnolinguistic group was the Yoruba, derived from southwestern Benin and Nigeria. Yoruba spirituality is related to West African Vodun, but it has slightly different characteristics. Spanish authorities also prohibited native religions and instituted forced conversions, and native Yoruba traditions were therefore syncretized with Catholicism similarly to Vodou in French territories. Scholars are uncertain about the origin of Yoruba spirituality, but some have suggested that it combined animistic traditions of African tribes with elements of Egyptian or Mesopotamian religions. The syncretized version of Yoruba religion became known as Santeria, which is most common in Cuba, though it is also practiced in parts of South America.

A similar scenario occurred in Brazil, where African slaves representing the Yoruba, Fon, and Bantu tribes made up more than 80 percent of the population. Portuguese colonial authorities forbade native religions, leading to suppression and eventually syncretism between the Yoruba religion, West African Vodun, and Catholicism. In Brazil, this blend of religious beliefs came to be known as Candomblé, a term that refers to characteristic type of dancing ritual. Brazilian Candomblé was also influenced by the animist religions of native Brazilian tribes, and a variety of indigenous rituals and deities were incorporated into Candomblé as the religion evolved.

The syncretic Orisha and Loa religions survived the colonial period, and some of them even played a role in developing independence movements. The Haitian Revolution began in 1791 and resulted in the end of French colonial rule in 1804, with Haiti becoming the first independent slave republic in history. Historians agree that the organization of Vodou cults was directly responsible for the success of the revolution. Though Santeria, Candomblé, and Vodou have all survived into the 21st century, only Haitian Vodou attracted enough followers to become an official state religion under the brutal Duvalier regime from 1971 to 1986. Since that time, Vodou has remained one of the most popular religious traditions in Haiti and is practiced by more than half of the population.

## Beliefs and Rituals

Orisha and Loa religions are semi-monotheistic, with a single creator god known as “Bondye,” from the French terms for “good god,” in Haiti, or “Bon Bieux” in

some of the other French/African manifestations of the religion. In West African Vodun, there is a genderless creator god called “Nanan Bouclou” who fills the same role. In Candomblé and Santeria, the creator god is known as “Oludumare.” The creator gods of these various traditions are depicted as unknowable and unreachable and are therefore best classified as impersonal manifestations of god in which god cannot be related to as a person.

The syncretic African faiths are best known for their complex pantheons of spirits, known as “Orishas” in Santeria and Candomblé and “Loa” (or “Lwa”) in Vodou. These spirits live in close contact with humans and interact in the daily lives of their followers. In general, religious scholars have noted that the Orishas are derived primarily from Yoruba spirituality, while the Loa of Vodou include the Yoruba deities but also add other deities derived from the Fon and Ewe religions and other sources, including Catholic saints.

In Vodou, the Loa are divided into several groups. Older deities from Africa are called “Rada,” while the New World Loa are “Petra.” Another group of Loa, representing departed ancestors, are known as the “Ghede.” The various traditions also share a belief that each person has a guardian Loa or Orisha, known as a “met tet” or “master of the head” in Haitian Vodou, who serves as a protector or patron spirit. Through Catholicism, the Loa and Orishas have become associated with Catholic saints, and images of the saints are often used as stand-ins at temples dedicated to the Orishas or Loa. For instance, in Santeria, the Orisha Shango, who symbolizes justice and is associated with fire, is equated with Saint Barbara. The Petra Loa Kalfu in Haitian Vodou is associated with Satan, and the central creator god Bondye or Oludumare is usually associated with the Catholic God.

Another common belief is that the spirits of the Orishas or Loa can possess the bodies of humans, thus speaking through them and providing messages to humanity. Followers of the syncretic faiths have developed complex rituals, which often include dancing and music, to invoke the spirits and ask for their favor. Offerings of food and (sometimes) animal sacrifice are also common as a result of the belief that spirits require sustenance and depend on humanity for food. In return for worship and provisions, the Loa and Orishas grant favor to humans and also guide each person toward his or her destiny. It is believed that following one’s destiny is more important than meeting external notions of good or evil or practicing certain rituals.

Orisha and Loa worship have a characteristically indistinct view of the afterlife. In Vodou, there is a “next world” where spirits travel, but in some versions of the tradition it is believed that spirits remain on earth as part of the environment or eventually return to earth and live another existence. The variety of afterlife beliefs in Orisha and Loa religions are most likely related to the fact that the diasporic traditions have incorporated beliefs from numerous and very different sources.

The fact that this family of syncretic religions arose as a result of forceful enslavement and religious persecution explains why the traditions may seem shocking or extreme to the average person. In reality, the core structure and beliefs of Vodou are not that different from any other faith, incorporating theories about creation, the cycle of life, and the proper way to live on earth.

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## AFRICAN MERMAID MYTHS

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### Evolution of the Water Spirit

The concept of the water spirit or water deity is common in indigenous cultures around the world, especially those with infrastructures built around a body of water. One of the most popular and important of the Orishas is Yemaya—also known by a wide variety of names, including Iemaja, Yemanja, Yemoja, Watramama, Mami Wata, and La Sirene—a sea goddess and patron of the oceans, rivers, and lakes.

In many Orisha traditions Yemaya is depicted as the mother of most of the other Orishas and is therefore a powerful maternal symbol and patron of women. There are groups in Africa and throughout the diasporic territories that have adopted Yemaya as their principle patron goddess. As the ancient pantheon of the Yoruba has been modified and absorbed into Orisha-based spiritual systems around the world, the symbolism used to represent the goddess has embraced influences from European and Indian iconography.

### Origins of Yemaya

Yemaya derives from an ancient family of water deities, which have been common in Africa since the Paleolithic era. Rock paintings in Southern Africa, dated to more than 28,000 years before the present, show half-human–half-fish creatures, known as “therianthropes” that were used to represent the primal bounty and danger of the water. Similar spirit depictions occurred across Africa, including the

Lolo, Imo, and Ihuku river spirits of the Okigwe people and the Tingoi spirits of the Mende people in Sierra Leone.

Anthropologists have suggested that some of the early therianthrope myths may have been inspired by sightings of the West African manatee (*Trichechus senegalensis*), an aquatic herbivore that lives in the waters of Africa and the Caribbean. According to this theory, early sailors may have thought the manatee, especially the nursing mother manatee, resembled humans when viewed in a murky river or through ocean waves, and this may have led to the development of feminine water spirit myths.

Descendants of West African Yoruba-speaking peoples, including the Igbo and Ibibio, were transported across the globe through the Atlantic slave trade and brought many of their central religious traditions with them. A variety of Igbo deities are associated with Yemaya, including Ezebelamiri, known as the “Queen of the Waters,” and Nwaanyi Mara Mma, known as the “More Than Beautiful Woman.”

Modern Yemaya myths reflect the process of creolization and the continuing importance of oceans and rivers in many New World creole societies. By the 13th century, myths about the often malicious water spirits known as mermaids and sirens were popular in sailing cultures across Europe, reflecting elements of ancient Greek and Roman mythology and likely earlier polytheistic associations. The slave trade brought European myths to the African slaves, who likely saw similarities with their own native water goddesses. Over time, new versions of old traditions prevailed, and water deities were depicted and ascribed with blended characteristics from different traditions.

In contemporary Africa and the Caribbean, a religious tradition has emerged around a modified water spirit known as “Mami Wata,” who is generally depicted as a fair-skinned mermaid holding a serpent in her arms. This manifestation of the Yemaya spirit was popularized in the 19th and 20th centuries and became a powerful fertility goddess among many African diasporic traditions. One of the

#### **Dutch American Mermaid**

Winti is a diasporic African religion that emerged in Suriname, a South American country settled by Dutch colonists and African slaves and later populated by a large number of Hindu immigrants. Winti followers worship an oceanic water goddess named Watramamma who possesses a combination of traits from West African, Hindu, and European mythology. Iconography for Watramamma includes images of a statue of a mermaid erected in Amsterdam to commemorate the Hans Christian Andersen story *The Little Mermaid*.



most widely used images of Mami Wata is derived from a chromolithograph of an Indian snake charmer that was circulated in Africa in the 1950s. The association between the water spirits and the snake, itself one of the most ancient and powerful symbols in indigenous African mythology, proved very popular and has become one of the most popular representations of the water goddess in Orisha worship around the world.

### Meaning of the Water Goddess

Myths about water spirits serve a variety of purposes. On one hand, they represent the mysterious facets of the oceans and other waters that remain beyond human comprehension and control. Factors influencing the productivity of a fishing season or the development of dangerous weather patterns were often superstitiously attributed to the blessings or curses of water spirits and gods. By honoring the spirits of the watery world, sailors and fishermen hoped for clement weather and abundant fishing. The spirits also served as scapegoats for a wide variety of oceanic misfortunes and were invoked as the cause of everything from tropical storms to the loss of lives from sailing accidents.

In the Brazilian version of Orisha/Loa worship known as Candomblé, which is a subset of the broader Afro-Brazilian spiritual movement known as Macumba, Yemaya has become one of the most venerable of the ancient pantheon of Orishas and is known as “Yemanja” or “Iemanja.” The Candomblé Yemanja is depicted as the patron goddess of fishermen and sailors as well as the feminine aspect of the origin myths, which is responsible for all creation. In one of the most common of the Yemanja myths, Yemanja was raped by her son and as a result gave birth to the other Orishas.

Yemanja is the subject of a major celebration that takes place on the first of January in parts of Brazil and on the second of February in the southern state of Bahia. During the celebration, women gather, usually dressed in white, silver, and blue (the colors most often associated with Yemanja), and float small boats that contain offerings to Yemanja into the sea. When the boats sink, it is taken as a sign that Yemanja has accepted the offerings. Worshipers participating in the Yemanja ceremonies ask the goddess to protect their husbands, fathers, and brothers who make their living on the sea. They also atone for humans who toss litter into the sea, which is believed to anger Yemanja. In response, Yemanja creates waves that wash the detritus back onto the shore.

Yemaya, whether appearing as Yemanja of Brazil or Mami Wata, is depicted as a beautiful spirit who sometimes uses her beauty to tempt men to their deaths. Thus, accidental deaths at sea could be ascribed to the siren song or simply the alluring beauty of the sea goddess. Yemaya is also associated with wealth and the

bounty of the sea, including items made of rare metals or precious stones. These associations have made her a popular patron for those seeking wealth, and in many communities individuals may make offering to Yemaya in hopes of succeeding in business or reaching a higher monetary status.

## Symbolism

The symbolism associated with Yemaya, in her many variations, is a syncretic blend of aesthetic elements taken from a broad variety of sources. Many of the Orishas are not commonly depicted in art among the Yoruba, and this has led many practitioners of Orisha worship around the world to adopt images or symbols from other cultures as representations of their native gods. This process intensified during the colonial period when Africans were pressured into adopting Christianity. In many cases, Christian and Catholic icons and saints served as stand-ins for the Orishas. Yemanya, for instance, is often associated with Catholic saints related to the Virgin Mary, who is referred to as “Our Lady of Navigators” in some oceanic communities in Brazil.

More generally, European depictions of mermaids in the form of pictures, paintings, and statues have been used to represent Yemaya. Shrines dedicated to the goddess are often decorated with mermaid art or statues as well as items representing elements of her mythos. The colors white, red, blue, and silver are associated with Yemaya, and many worshippers decorate shrines and wear clothing in these colors.

The symbolism associated with Yemaya, like the goddess herself, represents a blend of influences and inspirations that reflect not only the ancient African spiritual roots of Orisha worship but also the process of creolization that continues to shape the evolution of the goddess in the human imagination. Yemaya also represents the phenomenon of the oceanic god and goddess in general, embodying an ancient human understanding of the links between human life and the sea, or other waters, and the very early perception that these bodies of water, while providing life, are also dangerous, unpredictable, and ultimately beyond human control.

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## ANIMAL SACRIFICE

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### Feeding the Spirits

Animal sacrifice is one of the most ancient and universal types of spiritual rituals and has been practiced independently in many cultures and religions, from the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity to Hinduism and Sikhism in the East. Ritual animal sacrifice is no longer common in most of the world's spiritual traditions, partially reflecting the degree to which current traditions have deviated from their ecological roots. While it is no longer as common as it once was, there are still Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian groups that practice sacrifice. In many animist and traditional folk religions, sacrifice remains common and is an important part of regular ceremonies.

Animal sacrifice has been part of many native African traditions since prehistoric times and is still practiced in many extant African tribal groups. These ceremonies became part of African diasporic traditions as African slaves were transported to colonies around the world during the Atlantic slave trade. Animal sacrifice is common in Vodoun, Santeria, Candomblé, and similar traditions that arose from syncretism between Catholicism and native West African spiritual traditions.

### Meaning and Controversy

The purpose of animal sacrifice varies, depending on the history of a particular spiritual tradition. In some cases, it was believed to appease gods or spirits who might otherwise be tempted to take human lives. In other faiths, animal flesh is one of many items offered to gods or spirits in hopes of gaining favor. In Christian and Jewish traditions, animals were slaughtered as a way to atone for sin, as with the traditional rooster sacrificed before the Yom Kippur ceremony.

In many ways, the ritualistic offering of blood, animals, or other types of food or precious items is tied to a time in human history when the loss of a single food animal or a portion of one's harvest was a significant sacrifice for the agricultural families who donated these items to their gods. For an individual subsisting on his own agricultural or pastoral efforts, offering food to the gods or patron deities was similar to the monetary donations common in other religions. In some ways, these offerings can be viewed as a spiritual form of taxation, representing the belief that a certain portion of one's earnings should be dedicated to keeping the spiritual world going.

In the United States, animal sacrifice has become a controversial issue, and animal rights organizations have appealed to state and national authorities to prohibit the practice. Defenders have argued that killing animals for spiritual ceremonies is not significantly different than killing animals for food or recreational

hunting and fishing and therefore argue that, if these more common practices are allowed to continue, there is no justification to prohibit spiritual sacrifice. The prejudice against religious animal sacrifice might be partially related the fact that modern urban and suburban Americans can no longer relate to the cultural traditions tied to sacrificial rituals. With the modernization of American culture, the mainstream now views animal sacrifice as representing primitive rituals that are no longer reasonable in an advanced spiritual tradition.

### Sacrifice in Santeria

Animal sacrifice is central to the practice of Santeria, reflecting this religion's tie to the animist Ifa spirituality of the African Yoruba, who were brought to Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean through the slave trade. Within Santeria, animal sacrifice is not symbolic of an abstract concept, like the sacrifice to absolve sin in Christianity and Judaism. Rather, Santeria believes that the sacrifice is provided to nourish and feed their patron spirits, the Orishas. Santeria followers believe that the Orishas will die if they are not given food, drink, and other material objects, and doing so allows worshippers to build personal relationships with various Orishas. Orishas then provide favor to individuals who have honored them. In addition to animal sacrifice, Santeria practitioners may offer fruits, grains, and vegetables to the Orishas.

Animal sacrifice is not a daily ritual in Santeria and is most often used in connection with important ceremonies, including marriage, childbirth, the initiation of priests, and funerals. In most cases, the animal is killed by slicing the carotid arteries, leading to a rapid death through blood loss. It is generally believed that Orishas only want the animal's blood, so the animal may be cooked and eaten after the ceremony. In cases where the sacrifice is used to ward off illness, the animal is not generally eaten, as it is believed that the illness may transfer to the animal before it is sacrificed. The most common sacrificial animal is the chicken, though goats, pigs, sheep, turtles, and even guinea pigs may also be used.

Because Santeria has a significant presence in some parts of the United States, animal sacrifice has become a controversial issue in animal rights law. In 1987, the City of Hialeah, Florida, passed an injunction that made it illegal to kill an animal for a purpose other than consumption. This occurred after the Church of Oukumi Babalu Aye declared its intention to establish a Santeria church and cultural museum within the city. Prejudice among Hialeah residents against Santeria motivated a legal attempt to prevent the church's "unsavory" activities. In the 1993 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah*, the Court ruled that the freedom to conduct animal sacrifice was protected under First Amendment protections of religious practice.

## Sacrifice in Candomblé

Like Santeria, Candomblé evolved from the Yoruba spiritual beliefs of slaves who were imported to Brazil during the Portuguese colonial period. Animal sacrifice is an important part of Candomblé ceremonies as well, though not quite as prominent as in the related Santeria tradition. Candomblé also differs from Santeria in that its ceremonies were influenced by elements of the native Amerindian culture (rather than by Caribbean natives) and by Portuguese Catholicism, which differs somewhat from the Spanish variety that influenced Santeria.

Drawing from native Amerindian traditions in Brazil, practitioners of Candomblé have developed a unique pantheon of Orishas. Candomblé recognizes all of nature as possessing a soul and believes that many species of native wildlife are sacred and therefore inappropriate for sacrifice. By contrast, most types of domestic animals are believed to make appropriate sacrifices, including chickens, goats, pigs, cows, sheep, and a variety of other species. A 2009 interview in the *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, practitioners of Candomblé revealed 29 species that were used in sacrificial ceremonies. Of these species, most are domestic, though a few varieties of snakes, tortoise, and lizards are also used.

In Candomblé, like Santeria, animals are sacrificed to provide food to the Orishas who exist in a sympathetic, interdependent relationship with humankind. By feeding and favoring the Orishas and honoring them with blood sacrifice, harmony is achieved between these spiritual deities and the material world of the living, constituting an essential transfer of energy between nature, humanity, and the spiritual dimension. Candomblé also uses sacrifices to mark major events and ceremonies, such as weddings, births, and deaths.

Candomblé retains a sense of ecological integration that is absent in most of the major religions and is less pronounced in the other manifestations of diasporic Yoruba traditions like Santeria. It is possible that the influence of South American Amerindians has helped to foster the ecological consciousness of Brazilian Candomblé, tying it to the local environment in ways that are not mirrored in traditions that have emerged away from their point of origin. In any case, Candomblé animal sacrifice is intended to promote the welfare of the people as well as the animals. By keeping the Orishas alive and fed, worshippers promote harmony within their own society and in the larger natural world they inhabit.

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## THE BIZANGO AND ZOMBIFICATION

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### Spiritual Justice and Slavery

The Bizango is a sect within Haitian Vodou that has been linked to the secret “zombification” ceremonies famous in the pop culture view of Vodou culture. Sometimes called the “Cochon Gris” (“Grey Pigs”) or the “Sect Rouge” (“Red Sect”), Bizango is the most influential of the many secret Vodou sects in Haiti. Ethnographic analyses indicate that the society is linked to the slave era, especially to bands of escaped slaves who mounted a resistance against colonial society. The zombification ritual has become one of the most studied aspects of Haitian Vodou and has featured prominently in American and European fiction about Vodou societies.

### History and Function of the Bizango Society

According to historian and author Michele Laguerre, Bizango societies have their roots in Haiti’s colonial past, when groups of escaped slaves invoked a spirit known as “Bizango,” a warrior patron of protection. Gradually, the Bizango society evolved into a social and political arbiter among the peasant populations of Haiti. Laguerre traced the secret societies of Haiti to equatorial West Africa, where similar societies play an important role, often arbitrating disputes regarding land and property and punishing offenders who violate laws. Bizango rituals, though commonly feared and misunderstood among the populace, are intimately tied to a sense of social order and justice.

Researcher Wade Davis, whose explorations of Haitian Vodou have helped to demystify popular beliefs about Vodou culture, examined the Bizango society by becoming initiated into its lowest levels and found that the Bizango functions as an important political agent in Haiti, wielding power commensurate with the Vodou churches and high priests.

The Bizango sect is widespread in Haiti, but membership and group activities are intentionally secretive. By remaining concealed and allowing the public to retain misinformation and the impression of magical control, the Bizango preserve an element of fear that contributes to their effectiveness as an agent of social control.

Initiation into the Bizango involves a ritual of death and rebirth, followed by a secret oath of allegiance. The Bizango are organized similarly to a military organization, and some researchers believe there may be as many as 30 different ranks



Members of the Bizango society dance during the Rara celebration of Easter, Artibonite Valley, Haiti, 1982. Several of the men are dressed as women, a tradition in Rara. (Wade Davis/Getty Images)

in Bizango society, which itself is known as “*La Famille Bizango*” (“the Bizango Family”). The Bizango also have characteristic clothing and colors (red and black) that are often worn to signify membership, especially red shirts or blouses with a black cross on the back.

The lowest rank in the Bizango hierarchy is the *soldat* (soldier), who has no specialized duties within the group. From there, Bizango society progresses through a series of quasi-military ranks that include *secrétaire* (secretary), *major*, *general*, and *prince*. In addition, the Bizango have three special ranks that reflect their role in solidifying law and order within society, including the *sentinelle* (sentinel), who is a guardian and security officer and leads the procession to the Bizango ceremonies; the *chasseur* (hunter), who brings guilty parties before the Bizango council; and the *bourreau* (executioner), who enforces the decisions of the council.

The ruling council of Bizango society is known as the *Groupe d’Etat-Majeur*, which is led by an individual known as the *empereur* (emperor), the highest rank in Bizango society. The second rank belongs to the *présidente* (president), who is also an administrative leader for the group. The third rank in Bizango society belongs to the *première reine* (first queen), the highest-ranking woman in the Bizango hierarchy.

Women play an important role in Bizango society, and in Haitian Vodou in general, and the Bizango reflects this with a variety of special positions reserved for female leaders and priestesses. Below the *premiere reine* are the *deuxieme reine* (second queen), the *troisieme reine* (third queen), and the *reine drapeau* (flag queen). There is also a special rank within the Bizango known as the *reine voltige* (flying queen), sometimes called *loup garou* or “werewolf,” who has the special duty of carrying a sacred coffin during formal Bizango processions.

## Bizango Zombies

The Anglicized word “zombie” is derived from the Haitian Creole word “zombi,” which originally referred to a snake deity derived from the animistic spiritual traditions of the West African tribes. The term has come to have special meaning within Bizango and Haitian Vodou, where it refers to a corpse that has been animated through the influence of mysterious powers. The term was introduced in Europe and the United States in the 1800s and was later popularized through writers of horror fiction. The 1929 novel *The Magic Island* by occultist and journalist William Seabrook is sometimes credited as introducing the idea of zombies and the term “zombie” into general American usage.

By the 1970s, research on Haitian culture had revealed that zombies resulted from a secret drug known as *poudre* (powder), which was administered through a secret Bizango ceremony and transformed people into the “walking dead.” In 1982, scientist Wade Davis traveled to Haiti to study the zombification ritual and attempted to investigate the chemical mechanisms involved in the Haitian *poudre*. Davis was an “ethnobotanist,” a specialist in the study of the cultural usage of plants, and had come to believe that the *poudre* was most likely a plant extract of some type.

Davis’s research in Haiti involved investigating the widely publicized case of Clairvius Narcisse, a man who was reportedly zombified after death and brought back to life. Narcisse apparently died in 1962, after having been subjected to a Bizango ritual as a sanction resulting from his violation of Bizango law. Narcisse’s death was verified by a number of individuals, including two American doctors who testified that the man had died. After having been buried, Narcisse returned from the grave and was sent to work on a plantation along with other captives. After the death of his master, Narcisse wandered away from the plantation and eventually returned to his native village, from where he had been missing for 18 years. Clairvius Narcisse was interviewed in the 1987 issue of *American Scientist*. He claimed that his soul had been taken from him and that he had worked in a mindless state for two years.

Investigations of the Narcisse case and others revealed that the secret Bizango zombification ritual was the most severe sanction placed on an individual by Bizango authorities. Those subjected to the ritual were made to ingest the *poudre*,



which in high enough doses caused immediate death, though on some occasions the individual could be “revived from death” and forced into mandatory labor as further punishment for his or her crimes.

Davis and others developed a working theory that the zombification ritual was the result of both a biological agent within the Haitian *poudre* and the psychological influence of the deep belief among the Haitian people that the Bizango had the power to turn individuals into the living dead. Eventually, Davis obtained eight samples of *poudre* from different regions of Haiti, which were chemically analyzed. Davis was convinced that the primary active ingredient in the substance was tetrodotoxin, taken from the bodies of certain varieties of the poisonous puffer fish. The puffer fish toxin was already known for its ability to cause paralysis and death if ingested in sufficient quantities. In addition, some analyses indicate that tetrodotoxin may be used in conjunction with bufotoxin, which is secreted in the skin of some toad species and is also capable of causing paralysis and death.

Davis and others concluded that there is no single recipe for Haitian *poudre*, and those who create and administer the drug use a process of trial and error, believing themselves to be guided by spiritual forces. Because each dose may have widely divergent chemical properties, the administration of the drug can cause effects ranging from minor illness and discomfort to death.

Rarely, depending on the chemical mixture and the constitution of the individual ingesting the poison, *poudre* can produce a state of paralysis and reduced body function that mimics death so closely that a basic medical analysis may not discover signs of life. In these cases, the individuals are sometimes buried and then hours or sometimes days later unearthed and given additional stimulants and other substances that revive them from the near-death state.

At this point, contends Davis, the revived individuals are fed a drug that contains *Datura stramonium* (generally known as Jimson weed), a plant in the Solanaceae family that contains a potent neurotoxin. This substance causes hallucinations and other physical symptoms, including memory loss and confusion. Because Haitian Vodou adherents are psychologically primed to believe in the mystical power of the Bizango ceremonies, they accept that they have in fact died and been revived. Thereafter, the individuals are continually made to ingest a formula containing *Datura*, thus preventing them from regaining control and keeping them compliant to demands.

While Davis’s neurotoxin explanation has been widely accepted, scientific investigation has not been conclusive on the effects of the *poudre* recovered by Davis, and little evidence has been found suggesting that this combination of drugs would work in the way Davis contends. Some later studies revealed that individuals who claimed to have survived the procedure were suffering from mental illness or brain damage as a result of the ceremonial neurotoxins. It has been suggested that zombification has simply become a popular folk explanation for certain types

of mental illness in Haiti, though the connection with the Bizango rituals has not been fully explained, and further research may be necessary to understand the biological and psychological aspects of the Haitian zombie phenomenon.

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## THE HAITIAN LOA

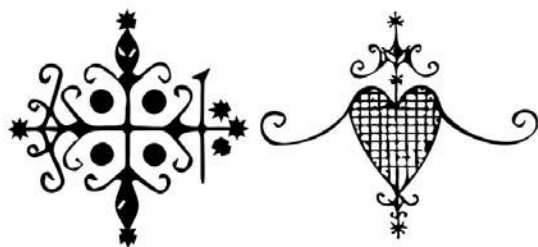
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### God-saints of Vodou

The Loa (sometimes spelled “Lwa”) are a pantheon of spirits worshipped in Haitian Vodou and derived from the gods of the West African Igbo and Fon religions. Even within Haiti, the composition of the Loa and the legends attached to individual Loa differ from village to village, and hundreds of individual Loa exist in Vodou cultures both in Haiti and in places where Haitians have been transplanted.

The pantheon of the Loa mirrors the foundations of Vodou in Haiti, having originated out of a confusing blend of different religious beliefs, languages, and cultural influences. The so-called *Code Noir* (black code) of the French slave empire called for all slaves to be baptized, and African slaves brought to French colonies were indoctrinated with Christian imagery and mythology, even at times violently forced to demonstrate their knowledge of, and allegiance to, the Christian mythos. The diasporic culture that emerged among the former African slaves in French territories also absorbed beliefs and superstitions that were common in French society at the time, including a preoccupation with the occult, witchcraft, and magic.

Some Western writers have characterized the Loa as Catholic or Christian saints reconceived in an Africanized image. This description is not entirely accurate, as the Loa possess more independent divine power than the saints, who are venerated only for their relationship with the Christian God. However, Vodou followers sometimes use images of Catholic saints as stand-ins for Loa, and this results from the fact that the native Fon and Igbo rarely depicted their gods prior to the slave era but learned to adopt the artistic iconography of European cultures. In addition, many followers of Vodou consider themselves Catholics or Christians in addition to followers of Vodou and do not consider this duality to be unusual. Thus, many of the more common or important Loa have become associated with particular Christian saints.



In Haitian Vodou, veve are graphical symbols used to invoke the aid of divine forces. The symbol on the left is used to represent the popular loa Papa Legba, the spirit who mediates between humanity and the divine world. The symbol of the right represents Erzulie, a family of spirits associated with love and beauty.

## Divisions of the Loa

Most followers of Haitian Vodou recognize the existence of a single, all-powerful creator god, known as the Bon Dieu, who is generally uninvolved in the lives of mortals. The supreme god is a figure to be feared and worshipped but not asked for favor or intervention. Vodou adepts and initiates therefore concentrate their rituals and prayers onto the pantheon of the Loa, who take a

direct interest in humanity. Each of the Loa has an area of specialization, and different Loa serve as the patrons of certain professions or types of rituals.

While the Loa are diverse and multifaceted, they fall into two major divisions. The Rada (or Arada) are benevolent gods, many of which are mirrored in the religion of the Dahomey people of Africa. Several of the Rada in Haitian tradition carry names that demonstrate Dahomey origins and are still associated with the symbolism of West African mythology. The Rada, led by Damballah, are good spirits, who are primarily responsible for providing assistance, blessings, and salvation to those who are faithful. These Loa can be contrasted with the Petro, led by Baron Samedi, who are primarily evil, or at least mischievous, and are often believed to have been derived from the pantheon of spirits brought to Haiti through immigrants from the Congo in Africa.

## Damballah (Dambala)

The Loa Damballah, also known by his full title of Damballah Ouedo Freda Tocan Dahomey, is the king of the Rada and a benevolent father figure who has become one of the most popular of the Loa in Haiti. His primary symbol is the serpent, and he is associated with Saint Patrick, though descriptions of him in oral myths do not bear a close resemblance to that saint. While Haitian Vodou practitioners do not worship the snake directly, the snake is revered as a symbol of Damballah, and snakes are believed to be Damballah's servants, carrying out his wishes and communicating with humans on the Loa's behalf.

Damballah is one of the oldest and most powerful of the Loa, but he is never referred to as a "father" or "leader" of the Loa in the way that Zeus was conceived as the father of the Greek pantheon. However, it is believed that the other Loa honor Damballah as a father figure and show him great reverence. Damballah

is believed to be responsible for benevolent blessings of goodwill, health, and prosperity. Worship of Damballah is considered synonymous with the worship of nature, and many of the symbols associated with him depict natural phenomena.

## Baron Samedi

Baron Samedi, which translates to “Lord Saturday,” is one of the most famous figures in the Loa pantheon, bridging the divide between the living and the dead. Samedi is also sometimes known as Baron Cimenterre (Lord of the Cemetery), and this reflects his role, which is often controlling access to the underworld, determining when and how an individual’s life will end, and protecting the underworld from intrusion by the living.

Samedi is generally depicted dressed completely in black, with dark glasses, and is often associated with bones, skulls, and other death-related imagery. Baron Samedi often smokes cigars, and tobacco is used as an offering at shrines dedicated to him. He is also said to sit on a throne decorated with a cross and has therefore become associated with Christian cross symbols. Though the cross imagery may have derived from syncretism with Christianity, the cross itself is an ancient symbol that also appears in native African spiritual symbolism.

Baron Samedi may be petitioned for help with conception, as he represents the confluence of sexuality and death. He is also invoked as the patron of many professionals who come into contact with death, such as gravediggers, funerary officials, and mortuary workers. Because Samedi has absolute authority to decide when and how an individual will die, he is also thought to favor children and to intervene on the behalf of ailing children, ensuring that they live a full life before they arrive in the underworld.

## Papa Legba

Papa Legba is arguably the most famous, popular, and honored Loa in the Haitian pantheon. He is known as the “Old Man” and the “Keeper of the Crossroads,” and

### Symbol of the Skywalker

As Baron Samedi is always depicted as a dark and ominous-looking individual, images of villains from Western pop culture are often used as stand-ins at altars dedicated to Samedi throughout Haiti. One of the most popular villainous icons used for Samedi in parts of Haiti is Darth Vader, the black-clad villain from the *Star Wars* universe.

is seen as the master and origin of life. Legba controls communication among the Loa and between humans and the Loa, and, for this reason, any ceremony honoring the Loa begins with a ceremony to honor Papa Legba. He is conceived as the ultimate messenger between humanity and the gods and the bridge through which humanity can understand the divine nature of the universe.

Papa Legba is depicted as an elderly man carrying a large sack made of woven straw, called a “*sac paille*.” Offerings to Papa Legba include chicken, peanuts, bananas, sweet potatoes, and tobacco, and all of his food must be roasted before it is offered. Legba also accepts a rooster as an offering, but he prefers black and white speckled roosters to other varieties. Offerings to Legba are often gathered into a *sac paille* and tied to the limb of a tree that has been baptized in Legba’s honor.

Images of either John the Baptist or Saint Peter may be used to represent Papa Legba, who is always depicted in a positive light as a friendly and lovable old man. In some traditions, he is depicted as somewhat crooked or disabled, leading to the nickname “Papa Legba of the Broken Foot.” In addition to his most important role as a bridge to the spirit world, Legba is also a guardian spirit who protects houses and temples. Legba is called upon, for instance, to protect a person’s residence while he or she is away. The worship of Papa Legba is common across Haiti, and numerous songs and chants exist asking Legba to “open the gates” and allow humanity to come into contact with the divine.

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V



# INDIGENOUS AMERICAN RELIGIONS

Indigenous American religions are traditions that are native to the indigenous inhabitants of North, Central, and South America and the surrounding islands. This category includes the great Mesoamerican societies, such as the Mayan and Aztec civilizations; the pre-Columbian South American societies, including the Inca Empire; and the spiritual traditions of modern Native Americans and Amerindians of Central and South America. All of the extant indigenous spiritual traditions of the Americas have been influenced by European colonization and the subsequent conversion of indigenous inhabitants to Christianity. This has led to the syncretization of indigenous and European Christian beliefs.



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# Mayan Religion

The Mayan civilization (2,600 BCE to 900 CE) was one of the great Mesoamerican cultures, and it left a lasting influence on the culture of Central America and Mexico. The Mayan religion still exists in a highly altered form, having blended with Catholicism in parts of Mexico and the Americas. The religion of the ancient Mayans has also become famous for its role in Western New Age mythology and the development of cosmological theories based on the complex Mayan systems of calendation and mathematics, which have become popular subjects for doomsday theories and pseudo-spiritual attempts at divination.

## Origins and Evolution

The earliest traces of the Mayan civilization have been found around 2600 BCE, at which time the Mayans were nomadic hunter-gatherers without a defined home territory. The first Mayan agricultural settlements appeared between 1800 and 1600 BCE. The Olmecs, often called the first great society of Mesoamerica (1600–600 BCE), invented many of the religious innovations that were adopted by other Mesoamerican cultures, including the Mayans, Aztecs, and Teotihuacanos. This included the process of creating ritual calendars to organize the spiritual aspects of society and the invention of some of the deities that later appeared throughout Mesoamerica, such as the feathered serpent and the rain god.

Around 600 BCE, the Mayans established a settlement that grew into the city of Mirador, one of the largest city-states in Mesoamerica. By 300 BCE, the city housed over 100,000 residents and featured the stepwise, pyramid-shaped temples that became characteristic of Mayan civilization. Architectural carvings indicate that the Mayans already had a complex pantheon of deities that were worshipped in community temples. For centuries, Mirador was a cultural hub, linking a growing set of Mayan settlements that allowed the Mayans to trade with other Mesoamerican societies such as the Teotihuacanos and Zapotecs.

The Classic Period (300–900 CE) saw the development of a society built on a set of independent city-states, each essentially constituting its own kingdom, led by a ruling family and linked to the other cities through a complex network

### **Geographical Convergence**

The Mayan civilization, which was based on the city-state model, is quite similar to the Greek civilization, which was organized in a similar manner. These similarities likely resulted from similar geography and distribution of resources. In comparison, the Aztec Empire developed along similar lines to the Roman Empire, which had a similar economic and political model and was located in a region with similar geographical features.

of trade, military agreements, and intermarriage between leading clans. The cities had populations of between 5 and 50,000, and some estimates suggest that there may have been as many as 2 million people living in Mayan society as a whole.

Each city maintained its own military, and wars between Mayan cities were frequent. Agriculture was the basis of the economy, and water was derived from a series of cenotes, areas where limestone rock had collapsed or been carved away to provide access to subterranean springs. The cenotes were also spiritual hubs and believed to have divine significance and links to the Mayan gods. A system of trade routes linked Mayan cities to the cenotes and to each other, while additional roads were used to trade with other Mesoamerican cultures. Mayan society was wealthy, and it developed rich artistic and cultural traditions and communities that were integrated with a society-wide religious system that was polytheistic and heavily based on a calendar of ritual observance.

The decline of Mayan civilization around 900 CE is a matter of debate. Some theorize that overpopulation led to a decline in agricultural productivity and resources, and some have speculated that a prolonged drought or other environmental catastrophe may also have occurred, hastening the end of Mayan society. The first contact with Spanish sailors, in the early 16th century, may have introduced smallpox, which further devastated Mayan numbers. Despite this, when the Spanish invaded the Mayan civilization in the 1520s, the Mayans resisted European colonization, using guerilla tactics, for far longer than any of the other Mesoamerican civilizations and the last independent Mayan city was not conquered until the 17th century.

### **Mayan Religious Beliefs**

The Mayans had a complex system of calendars that were used to organize their social, ritual, and spiritual lives. These calendars represented the influence of earlier Mesoamerican civilizations, but the Mayans developed the most complex and influential version of the divine calendar system known in Mesoamerica. Mayan

advancements in mathematics and astronomy were significant, and some scholars believe that Mayan astronomical knowledge rivaled that of many prominent European societies.

The Mayans were polytheistic, believing in multiple gods and other spirits that could influence humanity in myriad ways. Many of the Mayan gods were linked to the natural environment, with animal spirits or gods representing various cosmological bodies, such as the sun and moon. Mayan society was divided into guilds or occupational classes, and each class may have had patron deities that were honored in certain guild-specific rituals. There were gods that mediated hunting as well as gods for fishing, farming, and textile manufacturing.

The Mayans had a cosmological belief in other realms beyond the physical realm that were home to the various gods and spirits. The concept of the afterlife changed throughout the course of Mayan development, but the best-known version divided reality into three realms: the physical world, a realm of paradise, and a realm of punishment. Rather than believing in a single human soul, the Mayans and most other Mesoamerican cultures divided the soul into different aspects, such as blood, breath, and essence.

The Mayans also believed that each human was associated with a divine essence called a “way” (pronounced “why”), often described by scholars as a “co-essence.” An individual’s co-essence was usually seen as an animal (like a jaguar or frog) or as a natural force (like rain or lightning), and this co-essence acted like a guardian spirit, protecting and imbuing the individual with its power or abilities. Many of the Mesoamerican cultures believed that some individuals, often called “nahual,” could become shape-shifters, transforming themselves into their co-essence spirit.

The Mayans appear to have believed that their leaders were divine or semi-divine beings that served as intermediaries between humanity and the gods. In addition, there was a class of priests and priestesses, of many different levels, who occupied a privileged and important role in society. Food offerings and blood sacrifice (giving blood without killing the sacrificial subject) were an important part of Mayan ritual, and the Mayans also likely performed human sacrifice, like many other Mesoamerican societies. Community and village feasts appear to have played a major role in society and often involved singing, dancing, and dramatic performances.

Much of what is known about Mayan culture comes from Spanish colonists, and historians are often uncertain about the accuracy of Spanish perspectives regarding the cultures they conquered. However, some Mayans survived colonization and integrated elements of their culture with that of the Spanish colonists. In some parts of Mesoamerica, Mayan descendants continue to practice rituals that, at least in part, represent their millennia-old cultural heritage.

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## JAGUAR

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### Royal Feline of Mesoamerica

The jaguar has been a powerful emblem and symbol for many cultures in Mesoamerica, from the Olmecs to the later Aztec civilization, the last of the indigenous civilizations to develop before European colonization. Among the Mayans, the jaguar was a symbol of leadership, power, and war, and jaguar artifacts are commonly associated with the Mayan elite. The jaguar remains a common symbol of Mesoamerican heritage and has been adopted by a number of nativist movements in modern North and Central America.

### Ecological Origins of Jaguar Myth

The jaguar (*Panthera onca*) is the largest feline species in the New World, and the third-largest cat species worldwide. Unlike the tiger (*Panthera tigris*, the largest cat) and the African lion (*Panthera leo*, the second-largest cat), the jaguar, which ranges from under 200 to a maximum of 300 pounds, very rarely attacks humans. Despite its comparative docility, it is clear that the inhabitants of Mesoamerica had viewed the jaguar as a potential threat since the prehistoric era.

Jaguars are comfortable in water and are often found around natural springs, rivers, and lakes. They feed on a variety of species, from fish and waterbirds to deer and terrestrial rodents. Jaguars are nocturnal and elusive and considered among the most difficult of the big cats to locate in the wild, largely because their spotted coats enable them to blend in well with the dappled light that penetrates the forests and jungles that the animals inhabit.

Like the lion in Africa, the jaguar became mythologized as a ruler of animals and was admired for its host of impressive abilities. The potentially dangerous aspects of the species created associations between jaguars and warlike behaviors, while its status as a leader among beasts helped to create early associations between jaguars and the dignity of royalty.

## The Olmec Jaguar

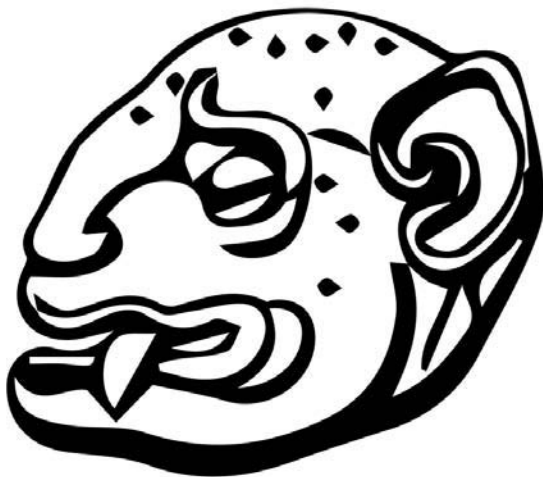
Archaeologists have found carvings and statues at the Olmec archaeological sites of La Venta, Tres Zapotes, and San Lorenzo that depict figures that appear to be half-human and half-jaguar. An ancient Olmec myth says that, in the prehistoric era, a woman mated with a jaguar and became the mother of a race of half-jaguar humanoids with divine powers who were responsible for founding the Olmec civilization. This was also the myth that explained the association between the Olmec lineage of kings and the jaguar symbol found carved on thrones and royal buildings throughout the civilization.

The combination of human and animal is exceedingly common in ancient mythology around the world and represents the desire to mimic the enviable abilities of wild creatures. A human-jaguar hybrid would likely have been seen as possessing the ideal traits of both species, placing the mind, abstract thought, and opposable thumbs of the human within a body that also contained the fierce teeth and claws of the jaguar. Also present in Olmec art are sculptures that appear to show the transformation of shamans or cultural leaders into jaguars, and this too represents the desire to embody the feral power of their animal neighbors.

## Jaguars among the Mayans

The Olmecs were one of the first of the great Mesoamerican cultures, and their mythology and symbolism became part of all the cultures that followed in their wake, including the Toltecs, Aztecs, Teotihuacanos, and the Mayan civilization of southern Mexico and Central America. The Mayans knew the jaguar as “*balam*,” or “*B’ahlam*,” a term that was also used to refer to strength and sometimes valor. The Bonampak murals, a collection of artwork preserved in a Mayan temple in Chiapas, Mexico, contain a variety of jaguar images, many of which are closely associated with depictions of rulers. Often apparent leaders are depicted wearing jaguar skins or with jaguar skins across their thrones.

The Mayans appear to have had several jaguar deities and heroes in their mythological pantheon, many of which were half-human and half-jaguar in the prototypical “were-jaguar” mold seen in Olmec carvings found throughout Mesoamerica. Other deities were envisioned as a blend of a jaguar and another species. For instance, Xbalanque, the “jaguar-deer,” was one of the Hero Twins, the central figures in the oldest Mayan myth that has been preserved in its entirety. In the story, Xbalanque and Hunahpu (the other twin) engage in a mythical struggle against monsters and demonic forces in the Mayan underworld and, after achieving victory, return to earth where they transformed into the sun and the moon, respectively.



As one of the largest predatory animals of Mesoamerica, the jaguar became a symbol of strength and power in Mesoamerican religions. The jaguar was also associated with royalty, mirroring similar symbolic associations involving bears and the African lion utilized in European cultures.

made of a jaguar skin was placed on the seat of power among the ruling council, and the expression “spreading a jaguar skin” came to symbolize the act of preparing for battle. In the Classic Era (300–900 CE), Mayan rulers often took jaguar-inspired ceremonial titles, including King Jaguar Paw, who ruled the kingdom of Tikal, and Serpent-Jaguar, who was one of the rulers of the city-state of Palenque. Jaguar-shaped thrones have been uncovered in Mayan sites at Chichen Itza and Uxmal, and this appears to have been a common custom among Mayan royalty. Excavations have also revealed that the bodies of jaguars were sometimes entombed with dead leaders. The crypt of Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat, who ruled the kingdom of Copan (now Honduras) in the eighth or ninth century, contained 15 jaguars, representing the 15 leaders who preceded Yopaat’s rule.

Throughout Mesoamerica, the jaguar has been adopted as a symbol of leadership, power, fertility, and the abundance of nature. The development of jaguar symbolism, from pre-Olmec to the Mayan and Aztec civilizations, indicates a gradual evolution from a focus on the jaguar as a symbol of ecological power and the danger and allure of nature to a more abstract association between the jaguar and the qualities associated with the ability to lead and rule. In modern Mexico and Central America, the jaguar has remained a powerful symbol of pre-Columbian

The Mayans also believed in “nagual,” a Nahuatl term for an individual with the power to transform into an animal. The ability to transform oneself into a nagual was related to the concept that each individual had an animal co-essence that represents his or her spiritual guardian and underlying primal essence. Nagual who were able to take jaguar form were invariably seen as leaders or powerful icons, and artistic depictions indicate the belief that kings could often become jaguars.

In later Mayan culture, jaguars and jaguar pelts were symbols of war. A rug or mat

heritage as well as one of the most respected and admired totems of the untamed landscape of the New World.

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## THE MAYAN CALENDAR

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### Prophecies of Ancient Cosmology

In 2012, Mayan culture became the subject of a wildly popular doomsday scare that swept through the Western world because of the misconception that the Mayan Long Count Calendar predicted that the end of the world would occur in 2012. Dozens of books, Internet sites, articles, and television programs examined the issue as the apocalyptic date approached, and, as incredulous as it might seem, thousands were legitimately concerned that the prophecy might come true (it did not) and that the world was about to end.

The legitimate study of Mayan culture progressed significantly in the 20th and 21st centuries, largely because of advancements in the study of the ancient Mayan language. By 2010, more than 85 percent of the written records of Mayan society—consisting of more than 5,000 texts inscribed in stone—had been transcribed, and archaeologists were beginning to develop a more realistic depiction of a society that was exceedingly complex in its social, cultural, institutional, artistic, and spiritual development. The 2012 doomsday prediction had little to do with the increasing knowledge of Mayan culture, and more to do with the innate human tendency to attend, emotionally, to the fears and hopes that spring from the perceived mysteries of the unknown.

Despite significant advances in Mayan research in the 20th and 21st centuries, scholars still have a limited understanding of what Mayan civilization was like. The Spanish conquistadors who conquered the Mayan Empire had little regard for native culture and wantonly destroyed thousands of manuscripts, artifacts, and other remnants of their society. To list only one example, records indicate that Mayan libraries contained thousands of books written on either deerskin or bark paper, but only four of these volumes survived the Spanish conquest. One of the most-studied aspects of Mesoamerican culture are the calendars that the Mayans,



Olmecs, Aztecs, and other Mesoamerican societies used to organize their daily and spiritual lives.

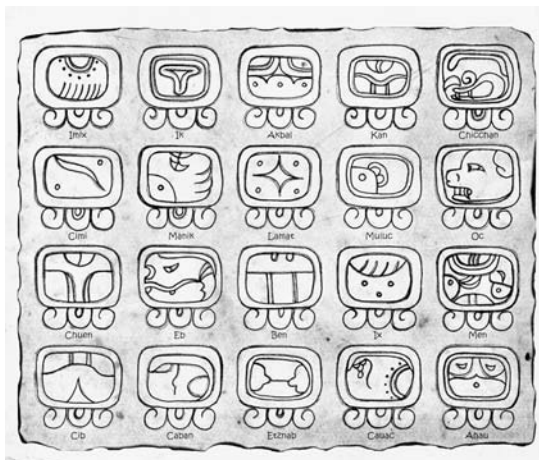
## The Solar Year and the Sacred Year

In the larger Mayan cities, priests were the intellectual elite. They were trained in academies where they learned rituals, astronomy, and mathematics. All of these fields of study were applied to the creation of calendars, which tracked time through the movement of the sun and the moon and then further divided the year into ritual or spiritual periods and finally into a cosmological system that attempted to predict the passage of time into the distant future.

The Mayans used a vigesimal, or “base-20,” system of numbers, which has 20 separate numeral characters instead of the 10 numeral characters in the familiar decimal, or “base-10,” system used in Arabic and Western mathematics. Historians are uncertain how the Mayans arrived at the vigesimal system, but some believe it was based on the 20 fingers and toes of the human body, which suggests a natural system of 20 subdivided into sets of 10 and then 5. The vigesimal system was important to the creation of the calendars, which often marked time in multiples of 20 days.

The solar calendar, known as the Haab or “vague year” calendar, was based on the rotation of the earth around the sun. The Mayans divided the solar year into 18

periods of 20 days, comprising 360 days. However, because the Mayans realized that it actually took 365 days (365.2422 days actually) for the earth to make a complete rotation, they added 5 special days to the end of each year. These extra days were considered a strange time when humanity was close to peril and needed to redouble their spiritual efforts to keep evil at bay and so were one of the busiest periods for community ritual and sacrifice. At the end of the 5 strange days, the New Year began and was commemorated with celebration and feasting at each level of Mayan society.



Maya glyphs depicting the 20-day month. Comparisons of Mesoamerican calendars and the Gregorian calendrical system common in Western culture, shows how combinations of spiritual and environmental cues can be used to create unique concepts of time. (Airi Pung/Dreamstime.com)

The Mayans also created a spiritual calendar, called the “Tzolkin,” which used 13 repetitions of 20-day periods to create a 260-day sacred cycle. Archaeologists are uncertain what inspired the 260-day cycle, but it may be related to the fact that human gestation, from conception to birth, takes an average of 260 days. The Tzolkin and Haab were designed to be used together, creating what is commonly called the “Calendar Round.” Because both calendars had a different number of days, they would rotate with regard to one another such that each spiritual day of the Tzolkin occurred on a different day of the Haab each year. Every 52 years, the Calendar Round reset as the 260-day Tzolkin and 360(+5)-day Haab coincided. This confluence in the calendar made 52 a sacred number, and the Mayans divided the passage of centuries into 52-year periods that were celebrated by a major festival that was often considered the dawn of a new era in Mayan society.

### **The Long Count Calendar and the Mayan Apocalypse**

The Tzolkin and Haab were the most important calendars in Mayan society, but the Mayans also used a variety of other calendars, including an unusual cosmological calendar that is now called the Mesoamerican Long Count Calendar. Unlike the cyclic Tzolkin and Haab, the Long Count calendar appeared to be linear, measuring time in periods of days ranging from 1 day to more than 23 billion days. Like the other Mesoamerican calendars, the Long Count Calendar was based on the vigesimal system and therefore divided time into progressive multiples of a basic 20-day set. Some of the basic divisions of time are as follows:

Winal	20 days
Tun	18 Winals or 360 days
Katun	20 Tuns or 7,200 days
Baktun	20 Katuns or 144,000 days
Piktun	20 Baktuns or 2,880,000 days

The Long Count Calendar was heavily influenced by Mayan cosmology, and archaeologists believe that the Mayans may have used the calendar to estimate the emergence of broad cosmological eras. For instance, several inscriptions mention a period consisting of 13 baktuns (approximately 5,125 years), which some sources describe as a “world age.” Fragmentary records indicated the belief that one of these 13-baktun world cycles began on August 13, 1313–1314 and that this cycle would end on December 21–23 of 2012, marking the beginning of a new cycle of 13-baktuns.

The end of this 13-baktun cycle was the source of the Mayan doomsday prediction of 2012. Poor scholarship led some to speculate that the Mayans had predicted that the end of the world would coincide with the completion of the cycle,

and as the date approached, a media frenzy ensued. News media, Internet sites, articles, books, and television programs covered the subject from every angle, and a variety of other theories were brought in as “evidence,” including the idea of a cosmological confluence (occurring every 26,000 years) that was going to coincide with the end of the Mayan age.

What is interesting about the 2012 Mayan phenomenon is that it was based on almost nothing at all. Repeatedly, experts on the subject reported that there seemed to be no reason to believe that the Mayans thought the world would end in 2012. In fact, numerous Mayan inscriptions mention dates that occur long after 2012, including references to a kingdom that will exist some 4,000 years further into the future. The consensus among experts was that the Mayans would have considered the end of the cycle as yet another major milestone for their culture, probably coinciding with celebrations to mark the beginning of the new age, not unlike the New Year’s celebration of 1999 that marked the beginning of a new century in the Gregorian Calendar.

Millenarism is the belief in a major reformation, destruction, or transformation of society at some future date. This type of belief exists in many cultures, from the Apocalypse of the Abrahamic faiths to the arrival of the Maitreya Buddha in Buddhism. Millenarian theories are nearly *always* popular in the West because Western culture has completely absorbed the idea of a coming apocalypse from underlying Abrahamic indoctrination; therefore, even those who have moved away from the Abrahamic faiths are predisposed to accept the idea of cataclysm or transformative period in the coming future. Books and movies on the subject are perennially popular, and many individuals believe passionately in the reality of a coming new age, regardless of the paucity of substantial evidence to support these theories.

The Mayan calendar craze was merely one in a long list of millenarian fantasies that have captured the popular imagination. The recent Y2K hysteria that preceded the 21st century provides another example, though it was based on pseudo-scientific fanaticism rather than pseudo-mystical theories. The Mayan prediction was also popular because it fed into romantic notions about mysterious esoteric knowledge in ancient societies. This has also been a popular source of fantasy and fiction from the dawn of human culture and may represent the existence of underlying psychological predispositions within the human psyche.

The 2012 event does raise significant questions about 21st-century spiritual commodification, the process by which elements of culture are transformed into marketable products. Given the fact that the Mayan predictions were entirely fabricated brings up the question of whether the many authors who cashed in on the subject knowingly preyed upon public fears for profit or whether they genuinely believed in the rhetoric they promoted. In any case, given the collapse of 2012

theories, these books now primarily serve as a reflection of how irrational the human species can be.

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# Aztec Religion

The Aztec people, originally from northern Mexico, became a dominant society in Mesoamerica during the 15th and early 16th centuries CE, forming a large and prosperous society with a complex religious and social system. The Aztec religion was largely abandoned after the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the 16th century, but elements of Aztec spirituality endured and have become preserved through modern Mexican culture.

## Origins and Evolution

Historians are uncertain about the origins of the Aztec people, but they appear to have begun as a migratory group from northern Mexico that gradually occupied parts of South-Central Mexico in the early 1300s. These early settlers were most likely polytheistic, believing in multiple gods that represented features of the natural environment and animal spirits that reflected the importance of wildlife in their daily lives. The arrival of the Aztecs most likely hastened the end of the previous civilization that ruled the region, the Toltecs, and the Aztecs absorbed many Toltec deities and religious practices into their culture as they conquered the region. The seat of power for this group became the city of Tenochtitlan, located on an island in Lake Texcoco.

The region was occupied by a collection of city-states, each with a separate spiritual and political structure until 1428. At this point, the city-state of Tenochtitlan joined forces with the states of Tlacopan (Tacuba) and Texcoco to conquer the Tepanec civilization, thus uniting the region into a single Aztec Empire under the leadership of Emperor Itzcoatl of Tenochtitlan. Leadership eventually passed to Moteczuma I (one of the most famous Aztec emperors), and by 1440, Monteczuma I had expanded the empire through a series of military campaigns to conquer any of the remaining rival states in the region. At the height of Aztec influence, the empire consisted of hundreds of small city-states, with more than 5 million subjects.

As the Aztec empire grew through the conquest of over 500 smaller territories, they absorbed the religious customs and deities of many other cultures from the

region, forming an amalgamated religious structure based on a complex system of temples and rituals to honor their growing pantheon of gods. Statues, artwork, and architecture from the period indicate that religion was a central facet of daily life and permeated every facet of Aztec existence. The Aztec Empire was conquered by Spanish colonists led by Hernan Cortez in a series of battles between 1519 and 1521. The city of Tenochtitlan was destroyed during the conquest but became the site of Mexico City, which was the center of the Spanish colonial government in Mexico and later became the capital city of the Mexican republic after the country gained its independence from Spain.

### **Beliefs and Rituals**

The Aztecs had a large and varied pantheon of gods representing different facets of life. Gods of animals and plants and gods of agriculture and hunting represented the Aztecs' relationship with their natural surroundings and their subsistence through agricultural production. There were also cultural gods that represented the divine leadership of the empire; aspects of human life, such as sex, fertility, and childrearing; and metaphysical concepts, such as the creation of the universe. Among the most important gods were Huitzilopochtli, the patron of Tenochtitlan and god of war, and the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl, a deity that was adopted from the older Toltec Empire and appears in many forms throughout Mesoamerica. Some scholars believe that the Aztecs believed in a single creator god known as Omoteotl, though experts in Mesoamerican lore do not universally accept this theory.

The Aztec concepts of death and the afterlife were also complex and multi-layered, reflecting the same level of stratification that existed in their pantheon of gods. The Aztecs believed that humans possessed a nonphysical soul made up of several parts or essences and that the combined souls of the dead would travel to another world. The underworld, known as Mictlan (land of the dead), was a realm of nine different regions that needed to be traversed (through a series of tests and obstacles) before the soul could be reborn or reach its final resting place.

#### **Multiple Souls**

Most Mesoamericans believed that humans had multiple souls associated with various body parts and human qualities. One soul was equivalent to the material body, and this soul was seen as being buried or cremated along with the body after a person's death. Another type of soul was associated with a person's name and could be passed on to another person with the same name.

A person's fate after death also depended on the person's occupation or role in society and the way that he or she had died. For instance, soldiers and those who had died by drowning were envisioned as traveling to a celestial realm known as Tlolocan, which was the home of the rain god.

Historians have noted that the Aztecs used a complex system of calendars, including a solar calendar of 365 days, a lunar calendar, and, most importantly, a ritual cycle of 260 days. The ritual cycle thus shifted with regard to the solar cycle each year and provided each day with special spiritual significance. Every 52 years, the sacred and solar calendars would coincide, and this marked the passage of a new era in Aztec culture. The observance of daily, monthly, and annual rituals and spiritual days was the substrate that united all of Aztec society across the various regions. There was a complex network of priests who mediated local and empire-wide rituals and served as an intellectual elite, occupying a prestigious position just below the emperors, who were considered divine or semidivine beings whose leadership had been preordained by the gods.

A central belief in Aztec society was that humans needed to make offerings to appease the gods in the form of food, drink, precious objects, or the sacrifice of both humans and animals. In return for these offerings, the gods were believed to confer favor on humanity and to protect society from agricultural, economic, or military collapse. The Aztec term for the priests, "Tlamacazqui," has been translated as "giver," and this reflects the idea that the distribution of offerings to the gods was among the chief duties of the priest class in Aztec society.

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## HUMAN SACRIFICE

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### The Spiritual Value of Blood

Human sacrifice is an ancient ritual practice that involves the killing of one or more humans for cultural or spiritual purposes. Approximately 5,000 years ago, ritual human sacrifice was regularly practiced in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, often tied to elaborate ceremonial rituals intended to gain favor with



gods or spirits. Following the cultural and spiritual developments characteristic of the Axial Age (traditionally dated 800–200 BCE), human sacrifice became far less common globally, though some cultures continued to condone sacrifice into the modern era.

The Aztec Empire of Mesoamerica has long been linked to the practice of human sacrifice, largely because of the written records of Aztec culture by Spanish colonists who had served under Hernan Cortez during the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the 1500s. Archaeological evidence has since demonstrated that ritual human sacrifice was common within the empire and that the Aztecs may have committed thousands of sacrifices each year. Because the Aztecs were still practicing human sacrifice in the 16th century, Aztec culture has become an important source of information about human sacrifice in general, and many believe that the Aztec approach to sacrifice may have been similar to sacrificial practices used by many cultures in antiquity.

### **Warfare and the Cosmic Debt**

One of the most important functions of sacrifice among the Aztecs was *nextlauhli*, the “repayment of debt” to the gods. The Aztecs believed that their gods had destroyed themselves in the process of creating the earth, so humanity was thus permanently indebted to the gods. Humans attempted to repay this debt by nourishing the gods through gifts. Aztecs offered fruits, maize, and meats to their gods, but the most important gift was blood, which the Aztecs called “*chalchihuatl*,” or “precious water.” The Aztecs gave blood to the gods in several ways: by giving donations of blood from a living body (without the death of the donor), by giving blood from the sacrifice of nonhuman animals, and through human sacrifice, which involved the ritual execution of the sacrificial subject.

Records of Aztec myths indicate that the Aztecs believed in continuity between the spiritual energies of the gods and the spiritual energy that imbued living beings with life. This energy flowed throughout the human body but was concentrated in the head and the heart. The relationship between humanity and the gods was one of reciprocity, with the gods providing energy to humans through food, water, and most importantly sunlight. In turn, humans reciprocated this energy to the gods in the forms of gifts and sacrifice, human or otherwise.

The need to nourish the gods with blood sacrifice also provided partial justification for the Aztec conquest of other societies. Warfare was central to Aztec culture, and it was enshrined in a spiritual and mythological tradition that saw warfare as a divine process that honored the gods. Warfare was called “*teotlalinolli*,” meaning, “divine liquid and burned items.” This reflects the Aztec belief that they were harvesting sacred blood and sacrificially honoring their gods on

the battlefield. Those who died on the battlefield were said to have had a “*xochimiquiztli*,” or “flowery death,” reflecting the idea that dying for one’s state and society was among the highest honors. The Aztecs conferred a rank of mythic heroism to the soldiers who died in battle. Captures slaves and warriors were among the most important sources of sacrificial victims, and records indicate that Aztec warriors endeavored to keep as many captives alive as possible to serve as sacrificial victims to their gods.

Providing blood sacrifice was not simply considered a way to honor the gods or to win favor, though these were important functions of sacrificial ceremonies. It was generally believed that the world would cease to function, that the sun would no longer shine, and the rivers would no longer flow if the gods were not kept nourished with energy reciprocated through humanity. Sacrifice and war were therefore sacred and considered necessary, not only for the good of the Aztecs but to protect the integrity of the world and the entire cosmic reality that surrounded them.

## Ritual and Meaning

Sacrifice took a variety of forms in Aztec culture from common daily, weekly, and monthly sacrifices to important annual rituals coinciding with important periods on the sacred calendar. On any given day, thousands of Aztecs would perform “self-sacrifice” rituals, offering some of their blood, or at times pieces of their bodies to the gods. For more important rituals, individuals might be willing to offer up their own lives, or the lives of their children or family for the occasion. It was believed that these willing sacrificial victims would be allowed to live with the gods in the paradisiacal “houses of the sun,” and this deeply ingrained belief was sufficient to convince many to sacrifice themselves for the good of society.

Sacrificial ceremonies were often preceded by preparatory rituals known as “*nezahualiztli*,” which often involved dancing, singing, and ritual music as well as celebratory feasts and the recitation of incantations and prayers. Priests involved in the sacrificial process occupied an important and celebrated position in Aztec society and held significant power within the empire. One unique tradition was the sacrifice of *ixiptla*, individuals chosen from among the potential pool of victims to be designated as “representatives of the gods.” The chosen *ixiptla* would sometimes prepare for his or her sacrifice for more than a year, during which time they would be treated like royalty, kept in lavish surroundings and fed the finest available foods. Priests and priestesses prayed to the *ixiptla*, and they were considered a form of minor divinity, leading up to their sacrifice, which was a cause of major celebration and public ritual.

Sacrifices were carried out in a number of ways, including decapitation, removal of the limbs, impaling the body with arrows, roasting or burning, and

casting bodies down the long flights of stairs leading to the top of a temple. In one of the most famous sacrificial ceremonies of the Aztecs, the individual was placed on a sacrificial stone, called a “techcatl,” at the top of a temple and then a priest used a ceremonial knife to remove the individual’s heart. In other cases, individuals were sacrificed through ritual combat after being forced to fight to the death in gladiatorial contests. In the most elaborate ceremonies, such as the annual sun ceremonies, priests conducted many different types of sacrifice in the same ceremony, reflecting the central importance of the event in the spiritual year.

Sociologists and anthropologists have speculated that sacrifice may have served social and sociological functions in addition to spiritual functions within Aztec society. One theory holds that sacrifice may have eased population pressures and therefore reduced the potential for food shortages. Others have suggested that sacrifice also served as a threat to potential military rivals as well as serving as a kind of criminological punishment within the empire. Records indicate that people were occasionally sacrificed for violating social or spiritual taboos, and this gives credence to the criminological theories of Aztec sacrifice.

The prevalence of violence in Aztec society has led many to characterize the Aztecs as barbaric or primitive. Modern scholarship reveals, however, that Aztec society was equally caring and loving and revolved around bonds of family and community that kept their society together. There is no single measure of morality that can be applied to all cultures around the world, and nearly every culture commits acts that would be considered immoral or even evil in other cultures. For instance, capital punishment (based both on utilitarian crime prevention and ancient “moral” concepts of revenge) provides one example of modern institutionalized violence that some may consider equally immoral or barbaric as spiritual human sacrifice.

The idea of sacrifice as repayment of a cosmic debt is the factor that links Aztec sacrificial rituals to many other religious traditions around the world. Many religions have embraced the idea that blood and life are gifts of the divine and that this gift requires repayment, either through symbolic or material donations. From this perspective, human sacrifice can be seen as perhaps a more extreme example of traditions around the world that are designed to recognize and repay the debt of life owed to the divine.

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## QUETZALCOATL

### The Feathered Serpent

Quetzalcoatl is a Mesoamerican deity that derived from the Preclassic period (2500–200 BCE) among the Olmecs and Toltecs and was later incorporated into the mythology of the Aztecs and Mayan civilizations in Mexico. Quetzalcoatl is one of the most complex of the Mesoamerican deities, having evolved to fill a number of different roles through various civilizations. Aztec imagery of Quetzalcoatl remains important in Mexico as a symbolic and cultural link to the nation's ancient heritage.

### Birds and Serpents in Mesoamerica

In many indigenous cultures, deities are divine beings representing facets of the natural environment, including the plants and animals that share the landscape with humanity. The bird-serpent god Quetzalcoatl seems to have been partially inspired by the qualities of species living in Mexico and Central America blended with broader spiritual associations with the climatological patterns of the natural environment. While Quetzalcoatl was sometimes depicted as a humanistic figure, the most common depiction of the god in ancient art and architecture is a zoomorphic hybrid of avian and serpentine characteristics. In this version, Quetzalcoatl is usually depicted as having a dragon-like serpentine body, often covered in both scales and feathers, with a pair of feathered wings. The name “Quetzalcoatl” is taken from the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs and translates as “feathered serpent.”

The quetzal (*Pharomachrus euptilotis*) is a species of tropical bird from Mexico and Central America that was long prized by the Aztecs for its brilliant green plumage, especially the elongated tail feathers found on the male of the species. The long green tail feathers were used by the Aztecs to create elaborate ritual headdresses worn by priests and members of the royal families. Green was often considered the color of nature and rain among the Mesoamericans, representing the verdant colors of nature during the wet season. Birds also fly, and this links them with the sky and with the deities of the sky responsible for bringing sun, rain, storms, wind, and all other celestial phenomena. Quetzalcoatl's association with birds makes him a deity of the sky, and his green feathers, like the quetzal's, make him a symbol of the fertile rainy season.

Snake mythology around the world is often complex because snakes are prized for their beauty and other qualities but are also feared, representing one of the ancient hazards of the untamed wild. Because of their size and natural stealth (being able to move without footfalls), snakes are easily able to infiltrate human settlements. In many cases, this is a benefit, as snakes hunt such vermin as mice

and rats that plague human food supplies. However, poisonous snakes also occasionally enter human society, and accidental encounters with venomous species (common in Mesoamerica) can be fatal. Research indicates that humans have an evolved fear response to the shape of the snake's body, an instinctual wariness passed down from Paleolithic ancestors who first discovered the potential hazards of venomous serpents.

Mesoamericans were also fascinated by the snake's ability to shed its skin, which was seen as the power to reverse the aging process, with a young animal emerging from the body of its older self. Sloughing became symbolic of renewal and the patterns of spring, and the snake has become a symbol of seasonal transformation around the world. The sloughing of the serpent along with the fact that many snakes emerge from their lairs to breed during the rainy season, and thus become more evident in the environment, transformed the snake into a symbolic representation of rain, fertility, and thereby agricultural productivity.

### **Pre-Aztec Representations of Quetzalcoatl**

In the Olmec civilization, the feathered serpent was generally depicted as a rattlesnake with feathers or wings and was a minor deity, but it was depicted less than the more common jaguar deities in Olmec art. It was in the pre-Aztec city of Teotihuacan—the largest city-state ever built in Mesoamerica—that the feathered serpent became one of the most prominent deities. This ancient city, which flourished in the second and third centuries CE, seems to have been populated by a blend of people from different ethnic groups, including the Nahua ancestors of the Aztecs.

Within Teotihuacan was the Cuidadela, or “citadel,” the administrative and spiritual center of the city, which also held a market and a parade ground for city-wide celebrations. The focal point of the complex was the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, a pyramid structure decorated with many different carvings of the feathered serpent symbol both on the outer surfaces and within. Archaeologists are still attempting to determine the meaning and significance of the feathered serpent depictions within the temple, which seem to associate the winged serpent deity with a variety of phenomena, including fire, wind, rain, and the ocean. The feathered serpent also seems to be associated with the Olmec rain god, who is believed to be the inspiration for the later Aztec rain god Tlaloc, one of the most important gods in the Aztec pantheon. The association with both rain and fire might indicate that the Olmec feathered serpent was meant to represent the alternation of wet and dry seasons and may have been credited with causing this cyclic climatological pattern.

In the Mayan and Toltec civilizations, it appears that the feathered serpent was associated with nobility and leadership, and this same association seems to

have transferred to the Aztecs following the Aztec conquest of the remnants of the Toltec civilization. Toltec, Mayan, and Aztec rulers were also charged with overseeing the annual rituals that honored the gods responsible for climatological patterns, including the alternation of wet and dry seasons. By associating the kings with the feathered serpent, the Mesoamericans conferred the deity's powers to the king, thus granting the king the ability to help control the shifting of seasons.

## Aztec and Mexican Culture

The modern knowledge of Aztec mythology derives heavily from accounts of the civilization given by Spanish historians and soldiers after the 16th-century conquest of Mesoamerica. It is difficult for historians to determine the accuracy of these depictions, both because the Spanish had difficulty interpreting Aztec society and language and because many of the myths altered within Aztec society as a result of their defeat and colonial imprisonment.

A number of Aztec myths concerned the Toltecs, whom the Aztecs viewed as the architects and mythic heroes of human culture. Aztec society was built on the remains of Toltec culture, and the Aztecs integrated this into their mythology. One myth concerns a mythical Toltec king named Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, who is also associated with the god Quetzalcoatl. Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was banished from the Toltec Empire by Tezcatlipoca, the god of war, sex, and the nocturnal environment, after Quetzalcoatl became drunk on pulque (a mash liquor made of corn) and had sex with Xochiquetzal, the goddess of nature and love. According to one version of the myth, Quetzalcoatl left the city and promised that he would return to reclaim his kingdom. When Hernan Cortez and the Spanish arrived in Aztec territory, some believed that the Spanish were the returning Toltecs who had come to reclaim their kingdom.

While many of the Aztec gods disappeared after the Spanish began forcing the Aztecs to convert to Christianity, Quetzalcoatl was preserved through oral myths and the secretive preservation of native beliefs. The Aztec-Spanish Mexican of subsequent



Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, was a prominent divine spirit in the Aztec religion, but was also represented in many other Mesoamerican cultures, representing the cultural threads and shared ancestry that united cultures throughout the region.

generations often associated Quetzalcoatl with Saint Thomas and developed a syncretic symbolism that blended native Aztec and Christian iconography. Over the centuries, remnants of the Aztec lineage reclaimed Quetzalcoatl as a symbol of pre-Columbian spirituality, and the god has since become an emblem of several nativist or neo-Aztec cultural movements within Mexico largely oriented toward preserving, recovering, and maintaining elements of the history and heritage of the Mexican people.

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## TENOCHTITLAN

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### City of Gods

The city of Tenochtitlan served as the capital of the Aztec Empire from the 1300s until the Spanish conquest of the empire in the 1500s. At the time of the conquest, Tenochtitlan was one of the largest cities in the world, with a population of between 200,000 and 300,000 inhabitants. At the height of the empire, Tenochtitlan was one of many smaller cities and communities under Aztec rule and served as one of the empire's most important commercial, social, and spiritual sites, with a large elaborate public center organized around the Templo Mayor, a massive spiritual complex built to honor two of the most important Aztec gods. The site of Tenochtitlan became part of Mexico City after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire.

### Geography and Architecture

Tenochtitlan was located in the Valley of Mexico, covering three to five miles of territory within Lake Texcoco, and was separated from the mainland by a system of brackish lakes and marshes. The city was connected to the mainland by a series of bridges and causeways that allowed for the passage of thousands of visitors and commercial shipments each day. As the waters of Lake Texcoco are too saline for consumption, freshwater was distributed to the city through a system of aqueducts connected to nearby streams. The city also contained a system of inner-city canals

### **Sinking City**

The Spanish colonists who created Mexico City filled in the canals and small lakes along the marshes of Lake Texcoco to build their city. The city is gradually sinking into the marshes, at a rate of as much as 2 inches per year. Experts believe that the city has receded by as much as 27 feet since 1900.

and rivers that made it possible for residents to travel through the city and to the mainland by boat.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Tenochtitlan was organized into four major zones, each of which was further divided into districts or quarters. Each district had its own market area in addition to residential neighborhoods with houses and local neighborhood marketplaces. There were also small temples located throughout the city, though the center of public and spiritual life was the Sacred Plaza in the center of the city, a walled complex containing temples, schools, and administrative and imperial buildings. The palace of Montezuma was located here, a massive building with space for hundreds of servants and imperial assistants to live alongside the emperor. The massive spiritual complex known as the Templo Mayor and the imperial palace were the tallest buildings in the empire and would have been visible anywhere in the city as well as to residents of nearby cities and towns on the mainland.

### **Foundations of the City**

The people of Tenochtitlan are specifically called the “Mexica,” considered a subset of the Aztec people. The Mexica were a band of hunter-gatherers who originated somewhere in the Valley of Anahuac, the mountainous region surrounding Lake Texcoco. Historians believe that the Mexica left this region in the mid-13th century and migrated toward Lake Texcoco. During their migratory period, the Mexica had a relatively small population and limited military capabilities and were therefore unable to establish a permanent territory and were forced to remain migratory for more than a century, driven away from fertile agricultural territories by more powerful tribes living in those areas. The Mexica were eventually relegated to living among the difficult marshy terrain at the western border of the saline Lake Texcoco, where they established a small village on the largest island around 1325.

When they arrived at the eventual site of Tenochtitlan, the Mexica found that the region had once been the site of a large kingdom, now believed to have been occupied





Illustration of an eagle perched atop a cactus, from Juan de Tovar's 16th-century history of Mexico (facsimile edition). According to legend, Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec war god, told the Aztec people that a divine sign would guide them to their new homeland. After hundreds of years of wandering, the Aztec came into the Valley of Mexico and found the sign—an eagle perched atop a cactus. (Jay I. Kislak Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress)

Tenochtitlan had become the undisputed capital of the empire and had also grown into one of the largest cities known anywhere in the world.

### Mythology of Tenochtitlan

One of the most famous myths of Tenochtitlan concerns the patron god Huitzilopchtli, often called the Aztec god of war, who was also the patron of the Mexica people and the city of Tenochtitlan. The legend says that Huitzilopchtli was born in the legendary city of Aztlan, a quasi-mythical land where individuals lived for hundreds or thousands of years and existed in harmony with their

by a branch of the Toltec or Totonac peoples. The Mexica used the remnants of buildings and roads left behind from this earlier city to plan their own city, and they believed that the presence of these ancient ruins was a sign that they had been guided to a sacred location by divine influence.

Initially, the Mexica were under the dominion of the more powerful Tepanecan tribe, whose capital was located in the city of Azcapotzalco (in what is today the northwest part of Mexico City). Through military conquest and by dominating trade, the Mexica gradually became the leaders of the Aztec Empire, with direct control over most of the other city-states in the region. The wealth and power of the empire continued to grow, partially because of the tributes of goods and labor donated by other cities to the imperial center at Tenochtitlan. At the time of the Spanish conquest of 1521,

environment. Huitzilopchtli had no father, but was instead conceived when his mother found a ball of feathers on the ground and tucked it under her clothing. Huitzilopchtli's divine birth angered his brothers and sisters, who turned against him.

Huitzilopchtli left Aztlan with his followers, known as the "Azteca," and promised to take them to a special location where they would found a great kingdom. Huitzilopchtli and his followers traveled for years searching for this auspicious location, and along the way, Huitzilopchtli was forced to battle with his sister's son, Copil, who had grown into a fearsome warrior. Huitzilopchtli defeated Copil in an epic battle and then cut out Copil's heart and cast it into the distant forest.

After this, Huitzilopchtli left the Azteca people and bade them to continue searching for the location he had prophesized. Along the way, the Azteca tried to settle in various areas, but Huitzilopchtli used magic and trickery to prevent them from settling until they reached the sacred place he had envisioned. After more than 40 years, the Azteca reached the borders of Lake Texcoco. There, they received a vision of Huitzilopchtli and found an eagle with a serpent in its mouth perched atop a prickly pear cactus. The cactus had grown out of the discarded heart of Copil and marked the sacred location where the Azteca founded their new empire. The prickly pear cactus (nochtli) became a sacred symbol of the Mexica, and they named their new city "Tenochtitlan," meaning "among the rocks and prickly pear cactus." Huitzilopchtli became the patron god of the city and was one of two gods honored at the Templo Mayor, the other being Tlaloc, the patron of agriculture.

The myth of the migration from Aztlan to Lake Texcoco is layered over the actual history of the Mexica tribe's migration into the region. For instance, the myth says that Huitzilopchtli prevented the Azteca from settling until they reached Lake Texcoco by using magic, which included inciting other tribes to drive the Azteca nomads away. During the actual migration of the Mexica, the people encountered other tribes that were hostile who prevented them from establishing their own territory, and these historical occurrences were later mythologized and given spiritual significance through the myth of Huitzilopchtli.

Throughout the centuries, Aztec culture and mythology has exerted a strong influence on the culture of Mexico, as it has been combined with Spanish Catholicism and other influences. The image of the sacred eagle perched on the cactus was incorporated into the crest of the Mexican Empire and later into the flag of the United Mexican States. Even the country's name, "Mexico," was chosen to reflect the history of the pioneering Aztec migrants who established

Tenochtitlan. Modern nativist movements have attempted to unearth and study Aztec cultures in more detail in an effort to reveal and protect elements of their cultural heritage.

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# Incan Religion

The Incan civilization was one of the largest and most prosperous cultures of pre-Columbian South America and occupied the western coast of the Peruvian Andes, which had been home to human civilizations for more than 5,000 years. The Incan religion provides an interesting example of imperial-level nature worship, with Incan cults reflecting spiritual associations with the sun, water, animals, and other features of the natural environment.

## Origins and Evolution

Humans occupied the Peruvian coast for thousands of years before the emergence of the Inca civilization, and archaeologists have found evidence of continued agriculture in the region dating to before 3000 BCE. The Chavin culture of the Andes Mountains (1200–400 BCE) constructed one of the earliest-known city-states in the region, while a variety of other societies thrived on the central coast. The immediate precursor to the Incas was the Chimus civilization (1300–1463 CE), with its capital city of Chan-Chan, which developed a complex architectural, artistic, and agricultural society that flourished in the decades preceding the emergence of the Incas.

The Inca Empire began with the foundation of the capital city of Cusco around 1200 CE by Monco Capac, the legendary founder of Incan society. Incas believed that their royal rulers were semidivine beings empowered by spiritual authority to found and later lead their society. One of the myths regarding the foundation of Cusco says that Monco Capac's family emerged from three caves in the Andes bearing a magical golden staff that led them to the divine location of Cusco. These mythic leaders were believed to be manifestations of the mountain and that they turned to stone after their deaths.

Under the leadership of the Sapa Inca dynasty, the kingdom of Cusco expanded through military conquest to control vast portions of the Andes. By 1350, the kingdom had become an empire, with control over dozens of semiautonomous territories. While many of the innovations of their society were adopted from earlier cultures, such as their complex irrigation system, the Incas were artistic and

cultural innovators that created a highly unique model of imperial governance. The Incan state was essentially socialist, with the empire retaining ownership of all food, land, and public works and requiring citizens to dedicate a certain amount of their work (whether crops or labor) to the state, thus constituting a tax-through-work system.

Spanish explorers (led by Francisco Pizarro) reached the Inca Empire around 1526, and they were welcomed by the curious officials of the empire. The Spanish were intrigued by the wealth of the empire and noted that many Incan objects and imperial implements were fashioned from gold and precious stones. Pizarro left and appealed to the monarchy for permission to invade. When the Spanish returned to Cusco in 1532, a combination of disease (brought by the first Spanish visitors), civil war, and the unchecked expansion of the empire had weakened the Incas, and they were unable to consolidate resistance to the Spanish threat. Atahualpa, the last ruler of the Sapa Inca dynasty, was executed in 1533, and by 1572, Spanish forces had conquered the last remaining cities and states of the empire.

## Beliefs and Rituals

Incan religion was polytheistic, with multiple gods representing various cultural, natural, and cosmological ideas about the universe. Incan religion was also a conglomeration of beliefs, some unique to the Incas and some taken from the earlier societies of the Andes that the Incas subsumed in their rise to power. There are a few deities that appear in both Incan spirituality and other Andean cultures, such as the earth mother goddess Pachamama, who was the goddess of fertility and the earth and was accompanied by a pantheon of minor gods and spirits that were the patrons of agriculture, productivity, and other terrestrial features. There was also Viracocha (Kon-Tiki), a creator god responsible for creating the heavens, the earthly realm, humanity, and human civilization.

The Incas believed that the gods and mortals could interbreed, and many Incan leaders claimed to be descendants of the divine spirits. In addition, it was widely believed that humans were the children of the gods. Burial rituals and reverence for the dead was a major facet of Incan spirituality, and this is reflected in the artifacts and artistic remnants of the religion, such as the metal death masks and burial tombs found throughout the Andes. Ancestry was also important because each individual was part of an ayllu, or “clan,” which was a grouping of families working and living together.

The llama (*Lama gama*), a relative of the camel native to South America, was one of the pillars of Incan agriculture, society, and religion. Llama meat was an important part of the Incan diet, and the flesh and wool of the llama was used to make clothing, roofs for houses, and a variety of other objects. Incas often

### Camel Preserves

Travelers in the Andes fueled their journeys by carrying dried, salted llama meat, called “charqui” in the Quechua language of the Incas. The word “charqui” was integrated into Spanish after the European colonization of South America and gave rise to the English term “jerky” for dried, salted meat.

sacrificed animals at sacred rituals, and llamas, because of their exalted position in the economy and social structure of Incan society, were the most important sacrificial animals. Herds of llamas were rarely considered the property of a single individual but most often seen as the property of an entire ayllu.

A series of festivals and celebrations helped to integrate spirituality into the calendar, with at least one festival each month. Monthly festivals were often linked to such agricultural periods as planting and harvesting. During the Festival of the Sun, for instance, Incas celebrated with a three-day fasting ritual, followed by a communal feast. The Incas also sacrificed to the gods in an effort to nourish the gods and thank them for their bounty and spiritual guidance. Religion was integrated into every facet of Incan society, and an individual’s daily activities were considered important representations of faith as well. Thus agriculture, animal husbandry, and architecture were considered divine arts similar to the ceremonies of organized religion.

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## ANDEAN MUMMIFICATION RITUALS

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### Ancestor Worship in South America

The Incas, like many of the other cultures living in the Andes Mountains of South America, believed in an essential connection between the living and the dead. This central tenet of Andean culture gave rise to a whole slew of complex rituals surrounding the preparation and preservation of dead bodies and other funerary practices. It was believed that ancestors continued to watch over the living after death and that their posthumous supervision was essential to society. This belief was likely the root of such rituals as mummification that were designed to preserve the appearance of life in a lifeless corpse.

The Incan concepts of death and the afterlife were complex, partially because the Incan spiritual system was so widely inclusive, having absorbed legends, myths, and deities of other cultures that the Incas had conquered during periods of expansion. Despite its melting pot of beliefs, there were some universal tenets in Incan culture, including a reverence for ancestors and a strong belief in the importance of funerary customs.

### Concept of the Sacred

Incan society was built around a system of sacred locations known as “huaca,” or “wak’a,” a word generally translated as “sacredness” or “holiness.” The huacas were a representation of the belief that an animistic spirit resided in all things,



Mummy discovered at Huaca Pucllana, a pre-Inca site in Lima, Peru, October 20, 2010. Archaeologists unearthed four mummies that could be as old as 1,600 years, at ruins in Peru’s capital that apparently hold a crypt of a prominent person for the ancient Wari people. (Cris Bouroncle/AFP/Getty Images)

from elements of the environment to the bodies of animals and individuals. A huaca might be any object that was considered spiritually significant and was also the name of the spirits that animated these special places and things.

Shrines, temples, and worship sites were known as “huacas,” but the term was equally applied to certain mountains, trees, rivers, waterfalls, and other natural features. The huacas provided Incan culture with a mode of physical orientation, and towns and villages were planned around the location of important huacas. Important cities and towns were also conceived as huacas in their own right, such as the city of Cuzco, which was the capital of Incan civilization. The concept of a huaca also extended to anything unusual in the natural environment. An especially large or strangely colored animal or an

unusual rock or oddly shaped potato might also have been seen as huacas, with their unusual appearances credited to animation by a spirit.

Burial places were also an important type of huaca, so much so that some Spanish colonists believed that the word “huaca” meant “burial site,” though subsequent research has revealed the more current understanding of the term. The bodies of deceased ancestors, called “mallqui,” were also huaca and as such were the objects of worship and spiritual rituals. Communities were arranged around the location of honored mallqui, and the mallqui served an oracular function, with priests visiting the resting place of the mallqui seeking divine portents about the future. Mallqui belonging to honored elders and civic leaders were believed to have important influence over the resources of the village, controlling access to food, clothing, other resources, and, most importantly, freshwater. Deceased ancestors were believed to constitute a bridge between humanity and the divine, as it was believed that the deceased could freely communicate with the spirit world.

## **Mummification Rituals**

The practice of mummification predates Incan civilization and was widely utilized by a number of societies living in the Andes before the arrival of the Spanish. Not every individual was mummified; the process was generally for revered elders or socially important individuals. This included founding members of a family line, governmental leaders, and spiritual leaders. Incan burial customs indicated a belief that the individual continued to live on after death and therefore still needed material possessions. Most individuals (even those who were not mummified) were buried with at least a few important possessions.

Among those who warranted mummification, there was a hierarchy of mummification processes, ranging from a simple technique used for low-ranking elders to a more complex ritual for high-ranking individuals. The meaning of this mummification process was unique in that individuals were not expected to live on in another life but rather to continue taking part in the community, retaining their symbolic position as a leader, adviser, and protector. Most importantly, deceased leaders were believed to act as advocates for the community within the spirit realm, helping to maintain the flow of resources. The drying of the body for mummification was important, as it was believed that dry bodies attracted water and would therefore help to provide water for the community.

Lower-ranking family or community leaders had their bodies dried and then entombed in miniature dwellings called “chullpas,” which had an open entrance that allowed visitors to pay their respects and commune with the deceased. In some cases, a chullpa was built in a small cave or natural recess around which the family might build a partial barrier. Living family members visited their deceased



ancestors regularly and brought gifts of food and clothing to make the deceased's life more pleasant. Visitors then asked the mallqui for advice and guidance regarding any pressing civic or familial issues. The care of the mallqui was important, as it was believed that the ancestors might turn against the community if they were not kept comfortably.

The bodies of emperors and high-ranking individuals were treated to much more elaborate rituals. After mummification, leaders were dressed and placed in the palace or position that the individual had occupied in life. Specially designated priests were assigned to “speak” for the deceased ruler, communicating his wishes to the rest of the population. Deceased leaders were treated as if they were still living and were fed and dined daily to keep them happy. All property owned by deceased individuals remained under their ownership, though guardianship of the property and territory passed to the highest-ranking members of their family.

Some of the mummies discovered in Incan archaeological sites are the victims of a sacrificial ritual called “capacocha,” in which victims were sacrificed to the gods during periods of spiritual significance. Children were often chosen as sacrificial victims because of their perceived purity and value to the gods. Investigations of preserved mummies from the capacocha ceremony indicate that these individuals were sometimes selected more than a year before they were sacrificed and were given a special diet that consisted of such mind-altering substances as coca (the plant used to make the drug cocaine) and alcoholic drinks. Some capacocha victims were violently killed by blows to the head, while others seem to have been poisoned by an overdose of some chemical substance. Capacocha victims constituted a special subset of mummification rituals and were often buried with precious items and food, indicating the high value placed on the sacrifice of these individuals for the good of the community.

### **Social Aspects of Ancestor Mummification**

Rank in Incan society was determined by patrilineal heritage, and all families were part of a clan, called an “ayllu,” that was headed by a chosen individual who served as the clan's spokesperson to the rest of society. The body of an important ancestor was therefore the most prized possession of the ayllu, as it was believed that this individual continued to grant rank, status, and spiritual blessings after death. When battles occurred between clans, ancestor mummies were captured, and, consequently, the conquering clan gained control over the deceased's property and possessions. The loss of an important mallqui in a family's lineage might mean desolation for the family in terms of rank, property, and status.

The fact that deceased individuals did not relinquish ownership of their property meant that property stayed within a family for generations and only passed to

a new family with the complete desolation of the controlling family. As a result, Incan leaders looking to own property were forced to expand farther and farther from the center of society to find areas where the property had not yet been claimed. This ultimately weakened the empire by stretching the civilization over a broad area and may have played a role in the empire's vulnerability when the Spanish arrived to conquer their territory in the 16th century.

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## CHAKANA

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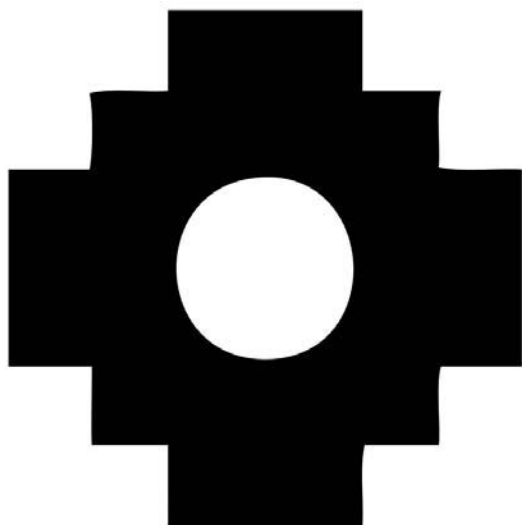
### Symbol of Space and Time

The chakana, also known as the "Andean cross," is a central cultural and spiritual symbol of Peru that represents the ancient Incan civilization and its links to the ancestral capital of the empire, Cuzco, in southeastern Peru.

### Interconnectedness in Space and Time

The term "chakana" is from the Quichua language and translates as "ladder." The symbol is four-sided and each side has three levels, extending in steps from a central hole in the middle of the design. For the people of the Peruvian Andes today, the chakana signifies the interrelatedness that the Incas saw as characteristic of their world. The spiritual significance of the ladder has to do with the concept that the various levels of life, whether biological or spiritual, are connected and that individuals can move between these levels.

The chakana also represents the connections between past, present, and future and reflects the belief that individuals move between these levels of temporal reality as well as between the realms of the universe. The steps, or ladder, of the chakana are also reflected in Incan architecture. Many buildings had steps on the tops of the building that represented the levels of consciousness and existence. The central hole in the chakana represents the role of the spiritual leader in Incan society, who was viewed as having the ability to travel between realms or levels of existence and was therefore a central part of Incan culture.



The chakana symbol visually represents central spatial, temporal, and cosmological facets of Incan religion. The steps on each side of the symbol represent the passage between layers of the metaphysical universe, as well as the relationship between humanity and the divine, and between past, present, and future.

### Three Realms of Existence

The Incas divided existence into three vertical levels, or planes, representing the upper, middle, and lower realms. They also imagined that existence was divided along the horizontal plane by lines connected to the four cardinal directions, thus dividing each of the vertical realms into four quadrants. The capital city Cuzco, which translates loosely as “navel,” was seen as the center of both the vertical and horizontal axes and the point of passage through which spirits could move between the three vertical planes of existence.

The physical world was called “Kay Pacha” and was envisioned as a flat disk between the lower and upper worlds. Kay Pacha was seen as the center of the universe on the neutral plane, and the other realms were known by their relationship to this middle realm. Kay Pacha was symbolically linked to the puma, or mountain lion (*Felis concolor*), a species often chosen to represent humanity and the Inca Empire. Temporally, Kay Pacha represented the present tense and the world as it was experienced in the moment. Lastly, as the representation of the physical world, Kay Pacha represented the physical level of existence, meaning the existence of matter within the natural world.

Below the physical realm was the underworld, “Ucu Pacha,” the home of dead spirits, nighttime, and darkness. Ucu Pacha served as a type of hell; some legends recount individuals being subjected to various types of suffering, such as always being cold or having to eat stones for nourishment. However, Ucu Pacha was not wholly malevolent; benevolent deities and honored ancestors also made their homes in this realm after death.

Ucu Pacha was represented by the snake, a creature that was seen to occupy the liminal world connecting life and death and was also associated with the subterranean environment. Ucu Pacha also represented the past, and this was part of

the realm's link to ancestors and departed relatives. The Incas recognized that life depended on death and that the living world was dependent on the deeds, both good and bad, of their ancestors, so Ucu Pacha was both feared and honored as an essential part of the universe. Ucu Pacha was also associated with the inner dimension of existence, meaning the internal, psychological mind state.

Above the physical world is Hanan Pacha, the home of the gods and all other celestial objects. Like many indigenous cultures, the Incas believed in the spiritual significance of the sun, moon, and stars, and Hanan Pacha was their home. Upon death, some spirits transcended the physical world to become one with Hanan Pacha, where they lived an existence without need or suffering. The symbol of Hanan Pacha was the condor (*Vultur gryphus*), an animal whose magisterial size and ability to fly gave it a physical connection to the heavens. In many indigenous cultures, birds are envisioned as messengers between the cosmic and physical realms, and the condor served this important role in Incan culture. Hanan Pacha also symbolized the future and the spiritual level of existence.

While the Incas used many spiritual symbols and images in their art and architecture, the chakana is unique because it incorporated so many of the central principles of Incan cosmology. While Incan culture dissolved under colonial Christian influence, the chakana remains a common and meaningful symbol in Peru, representing a link to their indigenous culture and the philosophy of interconnectedness in the universe.

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## WATER SPIRITS

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### Water in Incan Spiritual Life

Water was perhaps the most sacred substance in Incan spiritual culture, with a preponderance of cultural and spiritual rituals designed to attract the precious substance to Incan communities and to protect their sources of water. The centrality of water influenced every aspect of Incan life, from their daily eating and drinking routines to their funerary customs and spiritual views of the universe. To obtain and maintain their access to freshwater, the Incas developed a complex system of hydrological engineering modeled after innovations from earlier Andean civilizations.

## Sacred Waters

The centrality of water in Incan life was reflected in the Incan pantheon of deities, many of which had supernatural associations with various aspects of the water cycle. Mam Cocha, the goddess of rain and the sea, was one of the most important deities, especially in seaside fishing communities, and rituals to honor the goddess were believed to keep fishermen safe and to enhance the fruitfulness of fishing expeditions. The mythology of Mama Cocha and other water deities indicates that the Incas understood the basics of the water cycle, in that the water from the sea fueled the rain that fell over the earth.

Water was considered a sacred substance, and it was believed that each river, lake, and other body of water was imbued with a living spirit that gave power to the water. The Inca capital of Cuzco was located between two rivers, the Tullu and Saphi, which joined at the eastern edge of the city, forming the Huatanay River. All three rivers were sacred sites where priests regularly gathered to honor the riparian spirits.

Particularly sacred were areas at the confluence of two rivers or streams, called “tincuy.” These were often the sites chosen for important spiritual ceremonies. The meeting of the Tullu and Saphi rivers, for instance, was the site of the Purapucyo Festival, which involved community feasts and animal sacrifice to the spirits of the river. Sacrifices to the river spirits usually included chicha (an alcoholic drink made from corn), burned food, and the bodies of sacred animals (generally llamas), which were all intended to nourish the river spirits. Individuals also bathed in tincuy, believing that the waters in these locations had unique cleansing powers that could restore vitality and purity.

Lake Titicaca, a large lake with a basin that transverses the borders between Peru and Bolivia, is one of the most important bodies of water in Incan mythology and, in some myths, is described as the origin of their civilization. The name of the Incan creator god Viracocha is derived from the Incan term for the foam that gathers on the surface of turbulent water. In one of the common Viracocha myths, the god emerged from the foam on the surface of Titicaca and then fashioned the first

### Corn Spirits

The alcoholic brew called “chicha” was a ceremonial drink among the Incans and usually made from the fermented flesh of maize. Traditionally, individuals (usually women) softened and ground the maize in their mouths, thus creating the mush of maize and saliva used to make the brew. Though this technique is no longer the norm, women in some rural communities continue to chew maize for the brewing process.

humans from the sediment at the base of the lake before leading them to their new home in Cusco, the capital of the Inca Empire. Viracocha is often depicted as having a beard made of rushing water, thus further linking him with the sacred substance.

## Water in Civil and Social Life

The scarcity of water in the Andes Mountains made it necessary to preserve rain-water and to transport water from springs and areas with high rainfall to areas with low rainfall to irrigate the soil and allow the cultivation of crops and the maintenance of livestock. The Spanish colonists who conquered the Incan civilization noted the presence of complex aqueducts and canals used to transport water from higher elevations to lower-lying agricultural settlements. Archaeological excavations have revealed that pre-Incan civilizations also constructed reservoirs and canals for irrigation.

Within the city of Cusco, water transported from higher in the mountains was sent to a series of fountains located throughout the city where individuals could drink and bathe. Each fountain was also considered sacred and believed to be protected by a specific ancestor spirit. The organization of Cusco indicates that the city was built around the irrigation system, which was likely already present in a limited form from an earlier society and served as the basic model for all later urban planning.

Incan society was divided into clans, called “ayllus,” which were believed to be descended from a single mythic ancestor present at the moment of creation. Each ancestor was given control over a certain portion of land and subsequent water rights. The links between water, spirituality, civic organization, and political power converge in the hierarchy of the ayllu, which received social status through divine inheritance that manifested in the control of water distribution. The access to water controlled by an ayllu thereby guaranteed the clan’s political and social power unless the clan was defeated in military conquest. The need to increase water and land resources for one’s ayllu was thus the primary reason for engaging in military campaigns, and these campaigns were also viewed as a sacred legacy passed down through the ancestor gods.

While the need for water conservation was considered a sacred remnant of the Inca’s divine legacy, it was also a matter of basic resource conservation, given the climate, elevation, and geological nature of the Andes Mountains. The Incan civilization provides an excellent example of an ecological religious system based on a sacred concept of location and environmental integration. Though the Incas expanded through the military conquest of nearby cultures and societies, they remained within the Andes, and this specific landscape was the source of their mythology and spirituality. The sanctity of water among the Incas embodied these ecological connections and reflected a basic knowledge of biology in the universal organic need for

freshwater to sustain life. Incan culture also exemplifies how access to water is a deterministic factor in the development of human culture, and this universal facet of existence has played a major role in the evolution of cultures around the world.

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# Native American Religion

It is difficult to determine how many indigenous inhabitants lived in North America before the arrival of Europeans, but scholars have proposed estimates ranging from 2 million to more than 10 million. While the North American genocide of the colonial period decimated Native American cultures across the continent, many of the spiritual traditions of the Native American tribes have endured and influenced North American cultures in myriad ways.

## Origins and Evolution

The first inhabitants in North America seem to have migrated into the region from Asia during the most recent Ice Age, around 30,000 to 12,000 years ago. Some followed a now-flooded land bridge across the Bering Strait (between Russia and Alaska), and evidence indicates that other migrants may have arrived by boat from as far east as Japan and as far west as Europe.

Little is known about the religion of the earliest inhabitants of North America. Between 4000 and 3000 BCE, hundreds of individual tribal cultures emerged, each with distinct cultural characteristics. While some tribes followed a hunter-gatherer lifestyle as late as the 19th century, other tribes developed complex agricultural societies or semiurban economic and trading systems. A diverse array of religious systems existed at this time, and religious beliefs were sometimes specific to a single tribe or could be shared by tribes within a region.

Before the arrival of Europeans, several prominent large-scale social movements developed in various parts of the continent. In the American Southwest, there was a series of four civilizations that developed complex societies around the cultivation of maize between the 1st century BCE and the 16th century CE. The legacy of these early Southwestern civilizations can still be seen in the culture of the extant indigenous cultures of the region. Another was the vast mound-building Mississippian culture (1000–1500 CE) of the Mississippi basin, an agricultural society with a complex social and spiritual system that involved burial mounds and the development of large trade networks. Some of the cities formed by the Mississippians, such as Cahokia in southern Illinois, were the most populous cities



ever to exist in North America until the 19th Century. In the American Northeast, several prominent tribes organized advanced political and trade networks that involved the standardization of language and other manifestations of cultural confluence between the tribes.

European colonization, beginning at the end of the 15th century, brought waves of disease to North America to which indigenous peoples had no evolved defense. Following the decimation of many tribes through disease, the colonial population began to grow, leading to increased conflict with native populations. What followed was a genocidal extermination of epic proportions as the American colonists gradually conquered each territory in the United States. The population of indigenous inhabitants was reduced from an estimated 500,000–600,000 in 1800 to 200,000–250,000 by the end of the century.

### **Native American Beliefs**

Given the diversity of Native American cultures, there is no single set of beliefs characteristic of Native Americans as a whole. Ethnographers typically divide the region into 10 cultural zones in which the native tribes share certain cultural and religious characteristics. Among the best-known of these cultural groups are the tribes of the Pacific Northwest, who are known for their development of ritual totems and marine-based spiritual concepts; the tribes of the American Southwest, known for religious systems that reflect their focus on agriculture; and the tribes of the Great Plains, who developed a spiritual system deeply rooted in their nomadic hunting lifestyle.

Native American religions ranged from systems that resemble monotheism, with a single creator deity, to polytheistic systems with a range of deities. Many Native American tribes tended toward animism, or the belief that animals, plants, and other features of the natural environment had spiritual significance. Community integration and religion were often blended together, with religious rituals serving to unite the community while paying homage to whatever forces or deities were seen to represent the world beyond the physical. Native American religions were often tied to fables and myths that provided practical education and historical information about the development of society. Few tribes used writing. Most Native American myths and religious beliefs were passed orally through the generations.

The common view in American pop culture is that Native Americans were nature worshippers and ecologically responsible is partially based on historical evidence and partially on an oversimplification developed in the white cultural reimagining of Native America. Compared to European colonists, Native Americans had little in the way of technology and had not domesticated large animals to facilitate agricultural labor. Thus, Native Americans had not exploited their natural

environment in the same fashion that was common in Europe during the same period and had developed cultural customs and religious beliefs that reflected how their cultures were tied to the natural environment by necessity. In addition, Native American spirituality was largely ecological in nature, with the belief that specific features of the environment were sacred. This contrasted from the humanistic spirituality of the European Christians and Catholics who migrated to the country.

As Native American culture was gradually decimated through colonization, Native American tribes began grouping together and blending their cultural and religious ideologies. The result was a group of religions, such as the Ghost Dance religion and the Native American Church, that reflected an attempt to syncretize and thereby preserve elements of their traditional culture. This process is ongoing, and many Native Americans now practice religions that blend various generalized native beliefs or result from a combination of indigenous traditions and Christianity. On a limited scope, some Native Americans have continued to practice more or less traditional forms of spirituality more in keeping with the pre-European religions of their ancestors.

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## COYOTE

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### Trickster of Myth

The coyote is one of the most ubiquitous symbols in Native American mythology, appearing as a central figure in myths from Canada, across the United States, and into Mexico and Central America. Coyote legends and symbolism were especially prevalent among the Native Americans of the Great Plains, who depicted the animal in a variety of ways, from a mischievous trickster to a creator deity.

### Ecology

The coyote (*Canis latrans*) is one of the world's most successful canines in terms of distribution and survival, residing from Alaska to Central America and remaining

common despite widespread attempts to eradicate them as an agricultural pest. The species evolved in the North American environment and thus has been a feature of the landscape since the earliest human migrants arrived in the region. In many regions, coyotes live in burrows, caves, or other natural cavities.

The species is an opportunistic predator, feeding on any prey that it can catch and also scavenging from the kills of larger predators, such as wolves and humans. Coyotes will also eat insects, fruits, berries, and plants. Coyotes are often solitary animals, though they may hunt in mated pairs or with small family groups. In prehistoric times, coyotes may have been primarily active during the day (diurnal) or during the evening and morning hours (crepuscular), though they are now active primarily at night (nocturnal) throughout most of their range. Biologists believe that pressure from human hunters has forced the coyote to adopt a nocturnal lifestyle.

### Mythology of the Coyote

The mythology of animals is often derived directly from observations of animal behavior. Scavenging animals like the coyote, raven, crow, and vulture occupy a special place in human imagination because they feed on the bodies of dead animals, including dead humans. This has created a mythological link between scavengers and the realm of death or the intersection of life and death. The coyote is depicted as both a hero and a villain, possibly reflecting an ancient sense of ambiguity toward a species that is reviled for some behaviors and honored for others.

In the Maidu tribe, the coyote is said to have introduced death to humanity as well as the concepts of suffering and work. Even as the figure was associated with death, many Native American tribes understood that death was a necessary part of the life cycle, and so the coyote's role in facilitating death was also honored as a necessary darkness that allowed societies to continue, freed from the burdens of growth without decline.

While many different species in the Native American environment were endowed with spiritual or mythological associations, the coyote overlaps with humanity in many ways, feeding on the same types of prey and occupying the same environments. This may have led to the proliferation of myths about the coyote playing a role in the origin of humanity, embodying one of the most ancient ancestral spirits that was present at the moment of creation. The Old Man Coyote of the Crow people *was* the creator, while other tribes, such as the Pawnee and Maiute, depicted the coyote as a companion of the creator deity who helped to teach humanity the lessons they needed for survival. In Navajo legend, the coyote was a companion to the first humans and helped them to build their culture.

The depiction of the coyote as a teacher is also common in many Native American myths, and this may ultimately reflect the historical process by which indigenous tribes learned to attend to animal behavior to aid in their survival. Where the coyote flourished, humans also found game, productive plants, and water. The bark and howl of the coyote were often seen as communicative messages passed between the spirits of nature and humanity, representing an instructive link that integrated humans with their environment.

### **The Trickster Archetype**

By far, the most common mythological association with the coyote is its depiction as a trickster who uses intelligence and guile to fool other animals and humans into misfortune. The word “coyote” is taken from a Mexican-Spanish approximation of the Aztec word “coyotl,” which is usually translated as “trickster” or “deceiver.”

The coyote, raven, and crow are three of the most common tricksters in Native American mythology, and this likely reflects commonalities in these species’ behavior and ecology. For one, coyotes and the other tricksters are among the animals most likely to steal from humanity, taking fruits, vegetables, and meat whenever possible. Second, the coyote, raven, and crow are observant, intelligent, and capable of learning to interpret human behavior to the level that they can fool humans into leaving their food unguarded.

In one sense, the trickster archetype represents human competition with animals and mythologizes the ecological knowledge that certain species must not be trusted because they will run off with a portion of your dinner. This basic idea, however, also filters into the idea of the trickster as a teacher because his or her tricks lead to the accumulation of painful lessons that serve to illustrate essential survival skills. In many instances, the coyote’s tricks result in benefits to humanity.

For instance, in a Kalmath story, a coyote cheats in a gambling game with the thunder god, tricking the thunder god into providing him with fire, which the coyote and the other animals then distribute to all humanity. This myth simultaneously records the human understanding of the link between lightning and the discovery of fire and also provides a lesson about the dangers of gambling. The coyote is a hero, bringing fire to humanity, but simultaneously a deceiver, teaching humans a cautionary lesson. This also illustrates the benefits of having a sharp mind.

In other instances, the mythology of the trickster is simply used to illustrate the moral and physical perils of lying and deceit. In many myths, the coyote is depicted as selfish and thoughtless, using tricks to amuse himself at the expense of others. Sometimes the coyote is punished by another deity for his trickery, and in some legends the coyote is banished from the sky realm as punishment for this behavior. There are also a variety of stories in which the coyote is killed by other

### Profligate Puppies

Dogs were domesticated between 18 and 32,000 years ago and have lived in close proximity to humans since that time. Dogs mate unabashedly at any time of day, with little regard for their surroundings, and this has led to the association between dogs and promiscuity. The term “bitch,” for a female dog, became an insult in the English language and was initially used as a slur to refer to a woman who was allegedly promiscuous.

animals after one of his tricks goes awry, transforming his attempt at fun into a deadly situation. The trickster thus has utility in teaching and passing on the values of honesty and fairness.

Animal fables in historical myths and legends often served multiple purposes, providing cautionary lessons, demonstrating virtues, and also communicating ecological knowledge between generations. The animal entities of the Native American world were depicted as teachers, competitors, and companions, literally and symbolically, and the coyote is a perfect example of this mythological trichotomy.

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## THE GHOST DANCE MOVEMENT

### Millenarian Religion in Native America

The Ghost Dance movement was a religious and cultural movement that emerged among the Native American cultures of the Central Plains in the late 19th century and was one of several spiritual and social movements aimed at syncretizing Native American belief systems and creating a unified movement for the preservation of native culture. The Oglala Sioux adoption of the Ghost Dance movement played a role in the conflict that led to the massacre at Wounded Knee in December of 1890. Though the Ghost Dance movement was influential for less than a decade, it was an important precursor of other movements meant to unite Native Americans across tribal lines, and a few Native American communities still practice the Ghost Dance as part of their traditional spiritual ceremonies.

## Origins of the Ghost Dance

By 1888, most of the buffalo that once roamed the North American plains had been slaughtered, and the Native American tribes living in this region had been confined to reservations to make way for the expansion of agricultural and commercial settlements. In response to the devastation of their way of life, the influence of forced Christian conversion, persecution of their native belief systems, and the subjugation of the people through internment and exploitation, several pan-Indian movements arose between the 1870s and the 1890s, preaching a quasi-spiritual-cultural synthesis that promised to preserve their way of life. In some cases, the leaders of these movements preached that if others followed in their example, they would achieve peace with the whites and eventually see the return of their traditional culture.

The Ghost Dance tradition is generally linked to the teachings of a Paiute man named Ta'vibo who taught a philosophy of racial equality, nonviolence, and a prophetic belief that Native Americans would return to their traditional ways of life. Ta'vibo became a popular teacher, and his fame spread to Native Americans in surrounding states. Ta'vibo practiced a generalized version of a circle dance, drawing upon earlier fire dances of his tribe, that became the central ritual of his movement.



An *Arapaho Ghost Dance*, artwork based on a photograph by ethnologist James Mooney, Jr., ca. 1900. The Ghost Dance movement spread westward for decades until the practice was largely abandoned following the South Dakota Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. (National Archives)

Ta'vibo died at a relatively young age, leaving behind a son, Wo'voka, who was then raised in a white family, the Wilsons, for whom he worked as a ranch hand. The Wilsons gave Wo'voka the Christian name Jack Wilson and introduced him to Christianity. Wo'voka married a Paiute woman and stayed integrated into Paiute traditions, and he was well respected by both native and white communities in the region. Wo'voka later blended his father's prophetic beliefs and circle dance ritual with elements of Christian theory and other influences to create a unique quasi-native religious movement.

Wo'voka claimed to have had a personal vision in 1886 that was delivered to him when he was bedridden with an unknown illness. Wo'voka and his later followers believed that he had died and was later returned to life after receiving his vision. Wo'voka described being transported to heaven, where he was surrounded by idyllic flower-covered pastures filled with plentiful wild game to hunt. There, he saw friends and relatives living a peaceful, traditional life. He reported hearing God's words telling him to return to earth and to spread the message that all must live in peace and avoid warfare. God then taught him a special ghost dance (based on his father's circle dance) to spread among the people. A solar eclipse that reportedly occurred during Wo'voka's illness was later described as evidence of this divine experience.

## Spread of the Ghost Dance

Wo'voka's charisma and teaching ability allowed him to convert a large number of Paiute to his new religion within a few years. It was widely rumored that he had magical powers, though some historians believe that Wo'voka used sleight of hand and other tricks to convince followers of his abilities. From the Paiute, the tradition spread to the Shoshone tribe and further into the plains states. The Ghost Dance and the other aspects of Wo'voka's spirituality were sufficiently generalized that many different Native American tribes were able to integrate aspects of the Ghost Dance into their existing spiritual system and customs.

In 1889, Wo'voka "died" again, coinciding with another solar eclipse, though some historians speculate that Wo'voka may have read reports that the eclipse was going to occur and strategically planned another "death" to gain additional support for his movement. Upon his second return, Wo'voka was called a "prophet," and a "messiah," especially in white media coverage of his movement.

The Ghost Dance was one of several spiritual and social movements during this period that shared a common theme: the current world would end, resulting in a return to the traditional way of life. Charismatic "prophets" from the Wa'napum, the Nez Pierce, the Squaxin, and Apache all preached similar prophetic visions. Some of the movements were more militant, envisioning an apocalypse that would

result in the death of the white people or inspire a military uprising among the native people. Wo'voka's prophecies were nonviolent, but he preached that whites who were friends to the native people would be reborn as natives following the approaching transformative period that would return the land to the native tribes.

## The Ghost Dance War

The success of the Ghost Dance movement rested in the generality and universality of the Ghost Dance teachings. These same qualities meant that each version of the religion differed from those that came before it. The Ghost Dance movement reached the Lakota Sioux through Kicking Bear, a low-ranking chief and mystic who heard about the movement from an uncle who had married into the Arapaho tribe. The Sioux sent representatives to meet with Wo'voka, and these individuals later carried elements of the Ghost Dance to the Sioux.

In the late 1880s, the relationship between the Sioux and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the government organization responsible for managing the native population, had been strained by occasional conflicts and a recent reduction in government food provisions. The Sioux developed a more militant version of the Ghost Dance ceremony imbued with messages about empowering the Sioux warriors to resist oppression. In 1890, the government broke a treaty with the Sioux by dividing the Great Sioux Reservation in South Dakota into five smaller territories in an effort to provide additional land for settlers. Many of the Sioux began practicing the Ghost Dance rituals more frequently, and the demonstration frightened BIA officials stationed around the reservation who believed that the new movement might be a prelude to armed resistance.

In response to their fears, the BIA dispatched additional soldiers and placed their guards on high alert. On December 15, 1890, a firefight erupted between several Sioux and U.S. Army agents while the army was in the process of attempting to arrest Sioux Chief Sitting Bull, a former member of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and an important spiritual leader to many Sioux. The BIA believed that Sitting Bull was attempting to organize a Sioux militia, based on unsubstantiated rumors. During the short conflict, seven Sioux were killed, including Sitting Bull, who was reportedly unarmed at the time of the conflict.

On December 28, members of the U.S. Cavalry intercepted a group of Sioux men and women ranging outside of their reservation boundaries. The Sioux were escorted to the edge of Wounded Knee Creek and told to set up camp for the night. The following morning, cavalry officers attempted to remove any weapons held by the Sioux, but they encountered resistance from an elderly deaf man who did not understand their orders and objected to their taking his rifle on the basis that he rightfully owned the weapon. In the resulting confusion, a shot was fired, and the



cavalry opened fire from all sides, resulting in the death of between 150 and 200 Sioux and around 25 soldiers.

The Wounded Knee Massacre, as the events of December 28, 1890, came to be known among the Sioux, was the end of Sioux resistance against the U.S. government and the effective end of the Ghost Dance movement. It was widely believed that the Sioux massacre was partially the result of the Lakota Sioux's adoption of the Ghost Dance religion, and many practitioners thereafter abandoned the religion out of fear of government reprisal or the misconception that they were taking part in an armed rebellion. The millenarian movements of the late 1890s eventually fell out of favor, partially because their apocalyptic predictions failed to become reality. However, the integration and syncretism of tribal beliefs remained an important aspect of Native American religion, and several pan-tribal religious movements have continued into the 21st century.

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## GREAT SPIRIT SYMBOLISM

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### The God Concept in America

The Great Spirit is a concept that developed independently among many Native American tribes. It reflects the concept of a divine creator deity usually thought of as a central figure in the spiritual pantheon. The concept of the Great Spirit draws upon many ancient Native American beliefs, but it is also the result of syncretism as Native Americans and European ethnographers attempted to explain Native American spirituality in terms that fit with common Western European concepts of God.

### Origins and Syncretism

French Jesuits visiting with the Huron people in the early 1600s were the first to record the term "Great Spirit" in reference to Native American religion. Jesuit missionary Samuel de Champlain used this term to refer to a Huron deity known

as “Oqui” and perceived by de Champlain to be the Huron version of a supreme God or deity. The Jesuits of the 17th century, who had been indoctrinated with the Abrahamic worldview, had a difficult time understanding the religion of those with animistic or polytheistic beliefs. Though the concept of the Great Spirit has been recorded in the spiritual views of a large number of tribes, in many cases this idea resulted from the attempt to conceptualize Native American spirituality in the Euro-Christian model.

Historians have also speculated that, through decades of enslavement, the Native Americans began to alter their own spirituality to model the religion of their Christian captors. Many Native Americans adopted Christianity, and many that attempted to maintain ancestral belief systems altered their beliefs considerably, consciously and unconsciously absorbing Euro-Christian concepts. In addition, the Native American unity movements of the 1800s resulted in the blending of spirituality and rituals between tribes that had previously been more unique in character. The Great Spirit concept may also have been propagated between tribes during this period, with various tribes adjusting their pantheons to reflect the belief in the single creator or dominant deity from among the many separate spirits in their pantheon.

## Concepts of the Great Spirit

In many tribal traditions, the Great Spirit concept was adopted from deities envisioned as spiritual ancestors. Often these tribes referred to their Great Spirit as a “Father” or “Grandfather.” The Crow, for instance, had a deity they referred to as the “Old Man,” who was responsible for creating the landscape familiar to humans with the help of two ducks who fetched the mud and plants of the terrestrial environment from the bottom of the water. The Arapaho envisioned a Great Spirit figure who lived in the sky realm and dictated to the world below through a pantheon of subservient deities. The Arapaho Great Spirit, often called the “Man-Above,” was also seen as responsible for having created the earth from mud and plants taken from the aquatic realm. Among the Blackfeet, the Great Spirit concept came to embody their native deity known as the “Old Man,” who was a complex figure responsible for helping humans to develop their culture, but who also tormented humanity through tricks and magic.

One of the best-known versions of the Great Spirit belief is found among the Oglala Sioux of the Great Plains, who believed in Wakan Tanka, a nebulous spiritual entity that exists everywhere simultaneously and is more akin to a generative living force than an anthropomorphized god. The Sioux term “Wakan” was also used to refer to spiritual power and could be applied to objects, natural features of the environment, and other sacred concepts. Many Sioux ceremonies, including

tobacco ceremonies, dances, and lodge ceremonies, were ultimately directed toward Wakan Tanka. Some Native American revisionists have suggested that the Sioux concept of Wakan Tanka is better understood as a Great Mystery because it does not refer to a deity in the Western sense, but rather to a divine spark or sacred essence present in the universe that allowed creation to occur.

## Sacred Places

In a general sense, Native American spirituality tends to embrace the belief in sacred geography, an idea common to many indigenous cultures, which involves the belief that the ecological features of the environment are imbued with spiritual significance. In many Native American religions, spirits of the sky were dubbed “Great Spirits” and linked with celestial objects, weather patterns, and calendrical cycles. The Ute tribe, for instance, had a deity named “Pokoe” or “Old Man” who was said to have created the sun and the moon. The Zuni of the Southwest believed in Awonawilona, conceived as a father deity who became the sun, giving light to the world. Awonawilona’s rays of energy interacted with primordial waters to produce deities of the earth and sky who were then responsible for producing all life.

To the Seminole and Choctaw tribes, among many others, humanity emerged from caves, perhaps reflecting an ancient reality of human existence before the advent of constructed homes. To these tribes, caves remain sacred locations and are sometimes conceived of as homes for the Great Spirit or other spirits involved in teaching humanity how to live among the land. In this approach, the spirit and the land are seen as one in the same, and this reflects an ancient ecological understanding of the links between humanity and the environment and the fact that humans are essentially animals that owe their existence to the patterns of the earth.

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## KOKOPELLI

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### Ancient Symbol of Fertility

Kokopelli is one of the most common Native American images in Southwestern iconography. It depicts a hunch-backed individual with flowing hair playing

a flute. Archaeologists have found hundreds of related Kokopelli and Kokopelli-like images in petroglyphs and ancient ceramic art from the Four Corners region, which includes portions of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah.

### **Kokopelli Origins**

Archaeologists believe that the deity or deities that gave rise to Kokopelli were common among the premodern Puebloan people, a group of civilizations that existed in the Four Corners region for thousands of years and are sometimes divided into several cultural and artistic groups known as the “Hohokam,” “Anasazi,” and “Mogollon.” Archaeologists have created these convenient groups among the ancient civilizations of the region to reflect shared artistic and cultural elements, but archaeologists are uncertain how these ancient cultures were organized. What is known is that Puebloan tribes of the Four Corners region derived cultural, artistic, and religious concepts from these earlier ancestor cultures.

Images of a hunched flute player have been found in petroglyphs on rock walls in the Chacoan Valley, an ancient trade route, that were carved between 800 and 1600 CE. The popularized image of Kokopelli is taken from versions of the character found in Hohokam pottery around 1000 CE. The presence of Kokopelli imagery among the Hohokam, Anasazi, Mogollon, and many modern Puebloan cultures indicates the presence of an ancestral deity or deities who inspired similar myths in all of the later Puebloan cultures. The etymology of the name “Kokopelli” is uncertain, and a variety of theories have been developed to explain the origin of the term. Some writers have suggested that Kokopelli may have been derived from the Aztec civilization, especially from the deity Xochipilli, who was a patron god of art and artists. The connection between Kokopelli and Aztec mythology is tenuous and not based on sufficient scholarship. Other ethnographers have suggested that the name derived from Zuni or Hopi words for “god” or “masked dancer.” One of the most widely accepted theories is that the name was derived from the name of a Hopi Kachina called “Kookopolo” who is often depicted with similar characteristics.

### **Kokopelli Symbolism**

A variety of theories have been proposed regarding the symbolism and meaning of the Kokopelli figure. Most early examples of Kokopelli show the figure with a pronounced protrusion that looks like a large phallus, and this suggests that the figure may have originally been a fertility deity. Male fertility symbols often have erect phalli; while female fertility symbols are commonly show pregnant with exposed milk-filled breasts.



The Kokopelli symbol has been widely used in white American culture as a representation of ancient tribal cultures of the American southwest. Despite the symbol's popularity, historians and anthropologists are still uncertain about the origin and meaning of the symbol.

back. Ethnographer Ekkehart Molotki believes that Kokopelli is not a human figure but derived from anthropomorphized images of the robber fly (family Asilidae), an insect species that has a rounded, hunched back, bristles along its head and back, and an extended proboscis through which it sucks fluids from the bodies of its prey. According to this interpretation, Kokopelli's "flute" may have been a misinterpretation of ancient attempts to depict the proboscis of an insect. Not only was this biting fly well-known in the region, but flies and cicadas were also associated with fertility as the annual appearance of the species coincided with annual cycles of mating and plant growth.

Some writers and historians have suggested that the character's hunched back is significant, perhaps representing ancient migrants who carried "backpacks" full of their belongings. Others have suggested that the arched back is suggestive of dancing, which, when combined with the flute carried by the figure, suggests the symbolism of ritual dancing or celebration. The presence of the flute has also been the subject of speculation, with some anthropologists suggesting that the character's flute is a representation of his role in musical rituals. Popular accounts sometimes link Kokopelli with the Greek god Pan, who was associated with both music and fertility, suggesting that Kokopelli is a Native American representation of this spiritual archetype.

Kokopelli is also usually depicted with protrusions along the head, often described as "dreadlocks" or "waving hair," and some versions of the figure have protrusions along the

## Popularization of the Symbol

The New Age movement and similar alternative spiritual trends of the 1960s and 1970s popularized Kokopelli, the “dream catcher” and the “medicine wheel,” as part of a growing interest in indigenous spirituality and culture. These movements were motivated by legitimate interest in native culture, but they produced a highly superficial view of Native Americans as nature-loving mystics who existed in a harmonious balance with the earth.

Ironically, the earnest desire to make contact with ancient wisdom through the symbols of indigenous cultures is part of the broader process of recontextualization, in which indigenous culture is transformed into commodities for capitalist consumption. The image of Kokopelli is now a brand logo featured on tourist merchandise, coffee houses, and restaurants across the Southwest. While this process is not always malicious, the co-optation of indigenous art diminishes the history of white destruction of indigenous cultures through colonization by providing an illusory sense that the dominant culture has embraced the roots of indigenous traditions rather than erasing them.

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## MEDICINE WHEEL

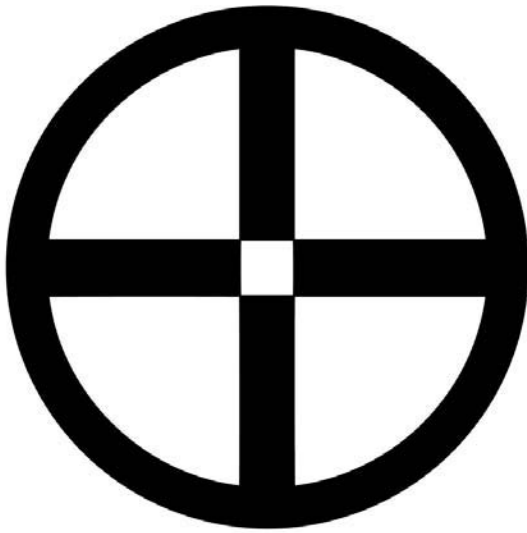
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### The Sacred Circle

The medicine wheel, also called the “sacred circle,” is a pseudo-spiritual concept created from an ancient Native American family of symbols regarding the spiritual significance of the circle and ideas of sacred geography. The term also refers to a group of stone monuments created by Native Americans in the Great Plains states. The concepts of the medicine wheel and sacred circle have been adopted by white pseudo-spiritual followers in North America and Europe as part of an ongoing attempt to utilize the ancient wisdom of Native Americans as a form of self-help or a syncretic modern spiritual practice.

### The Spiritual Circle

There are some concepts so basic to human observation that they emerge again and again in cultures around the world. Basic mathematical concepts, such as grouping



The medicine wheel symbol is commonly used to represent the fundamental directions of the physical world, but can also be used to represent cosmological features of the universe or a variety of other spiritual concepts.

thus framing our basic visual experience through this primordial shape. Native Americans, like ancient Europeans, once viewed the world as a disk-shaped plane, and this is one of the origins of the sacred circle concept in Native American tradition. The world was thus a circle filled with life, and this became the circle of life by extension. The circle is an unbroken form that contains that which is within, thus constituting the inner realm of the circle as distinct from the outside. This concept is also important, as the circle then becomes a tool for dividing phenomena into two planes of existence, such as inside and outside, living and dead, or physical and spiritual.

The circle can be further divided, giving rise to more complex divisions. For instance, Native Americans recognized that there were four cardinal directions on the horizontal plane—north, south, east, and west—bisected by the vertical axis leading to the sky in one direction and to the earth in the other. Thus the wheel can be divided into a system of four, bisected twice by lines representing the cardinal directions. This four-section circle has become a popular symbol in many Native American traditions.

At some point in the 1800s, some Native Americans, attempting to adjust to the English language, began using the term “medicine” to refer to various types of healing, whether physical or spiritual. Gradually, through American writing about Native Americans, the idea circulated that Native Americans used “medicine” to

things into ones, twos, threes, and so on, and the basic shapes, such as the circle, square, and triangle, belong to this category. They have been derived from prehistoric observations of nature and imbued with a variety of symbolic associations throughout the millennia. The circle is a naturally occurring geometric shape that is mirrored in the form of the full moon and sun, a wide variety of plant and animal structures, and on the human body, most notably in the shape of the iris and pupil.

The relationship between the eye and the circle is significant because it creates the illusion of a circular field of view,

refer to spiritual or mystical power. White writers later coined the term “medicine man” to refer to the shamanic traditions of Native Americans. In the 20th century, the term “medicine wheel” began being used by white writers to refer to the class of circular and four-section circle symbols used in some Native American cultures.

### **The Stone Circle**

Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming is the most famous of more than 70 circular stone monuments constructed by Native Americans in North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and in Alberta and Saskatchewan in Canada. The wheels consist of individual rocks organized in a circle around a central pile of rocks, called a “cairn.” In most of these medicine wheel monuments, there are also lines of rocks forming spokes that connect the outer circle to the central cairn. The number of spokes varies, and they are not always placed equidistant from one another.

Bighorn Medicine Wheel is located near Medicine Mountain, one of the tallest peaks of the Bighorn Mountain range with an elevation of 3,036 meters (9,962 feet). Archaeologists estimate that the structure is between 200 and 400 years old, making it young by comparison to other medicine wheel monuments; some are estimated to be as old as 4,000 years. The Bighorn Medicine Wheel bears close resemblance to a building called a “medicine lodge” that was used by the Cheyenne for a sun dance ceremony. The Cheyenne medicine lodge is a temporary structure consisting of a circle of 28 poles organized around a central tree. Similarly, the Bighorn Medicine Wheel has 28 rock spokes radiating from the central cairn.

Archaeologists are uncertain about the use and purpose of the stone medicine wheels, but many feel that they were likely used for rituals and gatherings similar to the medicine lodges used by some tribes. Astronomer John A. Eddy examined the Bighorn Medicine Wheel and developed the hypothesis that elements of the wheel aligned with important astronomical phenomena, including the rising of the sun during the summer solstice. Eddy therefore concluded that the wheels were ancient calendars, similar to theories (now largely disproven) regarding Stonehenge in England. Subsequent research has led archaeologists to doubt Eddy’s conclusions, and researchers have been unable to verify many of the astronomical alignments that Eddy identified in his research.

### **The Wheel Symbol and the Modern View**

Plains Indians such as the Sioux and Cheyenne used the four-segment wheel as a symbol for the universe and the fundamental divisions of nature and culture. Among the Sioux, each quadrant was associated with a different color, symbolizing certain cultural and spiritual characteristics of the universe. Black was the



color of the west, which was home to the deities of thunder, lightning, and rain. The north was associated with white and the entities and spirits of winter. The east was symbolized by the color red and associated with the sun and the origin of light. Finally, the south, which was usually green, symbolized rebirth, death, and the regenerative cycle of existence. The Sioux further divided the wheel into two roads or paths. The red road, from south to north, was a path guided by living a life of balance regarding the primary virtues, while the black road, from east to west, was the path of the selfish and self-absorbed. All of these virtues, paths, and realms of existence were seen as part of an overarching earth spirit or philosophical concept from which all life emerged and ultimately must return.

In the 21st century, hundreds of books and Web sites representing the self-help and alternative spirituality industry purport to teach important psychological, spiritual, medical, or ecological lessons derived from Native American wisdom. The medicine wheel has been invoked as a tool for dream interpretation and as a philosophy for self-improvement and achieving ecological balance. While often partially based on history and actual native beliefs, such as the sacred circle of the Sioux mentioned above, the generalized medicine wheel concept has become part of an ongoing process of commodification through which Native American culture has become an intellectual product marketed to those with an interest in ancient knowledge. The medicine wheel has thus become one of many stereotypes ascribed to the imagined Native American culture invented and preserved in Euro-American mythology.

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## PEYOTE RITUALS

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### Sacred Plant of the American Desert

“Peyote” is the common name used for two species of psychoactive cacti, *Lophophora williamsi* and *Lophophora diffusa*, which are an important component in certain spiritual rituals practiced by the indigenous peoples of Mexico and North America. The Spanish name “peyote” is taken from the Nahuatl term “peyotl,” which is used among the indigenous tribes of Mexico. Peyote is

a low-growing, flowering cactus that is originally native to the Mexican deserts, though the plant has since been cultivated throughout most of the United States. In addition to its use in spiritual rituals, peyote has long been used as a medicinal plant, functioning as both a pain reliever and antibacterial agent.

## History of Peyote Use

Peyote is classified as an “entheogen,” a term coined by ethnobotanists in the 1970s for substances that are used in a spiritual or religious context. Ethnobotanists estimate that indigenous Mexicans and Native Americans have used peyote for more than 5,500 years, and archeologists have uncovered samples of preserved peyote that were harvested and prepared around 3500–3700 BCE. Evidence suggests that the people of the Toltec and later Aztec cultures may also have used peyote.

The Tarahumara and Huichol peoples of Mexico are two of the indigenous groups that continue to use peyote in rituals. The peyote rituals practiced by the Huichol are believed to be the closest extant representation of peyote rituals in the pre-Columbian era. The Comanche people, originally ranging from Texas to Kansas, are another tribe that integrated peyote rituals and helped to spread the practice among the Plains tribes of the United States in the mid-15th century.

During the colonial era, one of the ways Native Americans responded to colonial persecution and displacement was by creating syncretized movements to preserve elements of their native religion and culture. One of these movements resulted in the Native American Church, founded in 1918 in Oklahoma by Quanah Parker, a Comanche leader who taught followers that peyote had been provided by the creator for the use of all people. Parker learned about peyote rituals in Mexico from the Huichol people and thereafter demonstrated Mexican peyote rituals to members of the Plains tribes. Some sects of the church have adopted Christianity or Christian elements, while others attempt to remain focused on traditional belief systems.

The Native American Church practices the Peyote religion, which involves the ceremonial consumption of peyote in a communal setting guided by shamans who help practitioners to find spiritual guidance from the experience. The peyote rituals of the church have been controversial, and for decades the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) opposed the use of peyote on the grounds that it was detrimental to health and well-being. The legality of the peyote remains controversial, though legislation from the 1970s to 1990s resulted in the protection of peyote usage under provisions guaranteeing the freedom of religion. A 1996 amendment to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act prohibits states from enacting laws that make it illegal for Native Americans to possess, transport, or use peyote in the context of rituals.

## Botanical and Spiritual Properties

The primary active ingredient in peyote is mescaline, or “trimethoxyphenylethylamine,” a psychoactive alkaloid that has the potential to induce altered mental and physical processes. Peyote also contains 30 different types of additional alkaloids, including phenylethylamines and isoquinolines, all of which may additionally alter an individual’s mental state. Mescaline is nonvolatile and can be preserved or at times enhanced by drying harvested parts of the plant for later ingestion. Peyote typically contains between 3 to 6 percent mescaline. The plant’s mescaline is contained within the body of the cactus, called “buttons” for their short, rounded shape.

Auditory and visual hallucinations are the most commonly reported effects of mescaline ingestion, including enhanced experience of colors and patterns and the perception of imagery within the environment. Participants report feelings of contentment and well-being and an increased sensitivity in all sensory modes. This is followed by the onset of a feeling of calm accompanied by muscular relaxation. The effects of peyote last between 10 and 15 hours, and there are few aftereffects outside of general fatigue. Studies of long-term usage have revealed no significant detriments to mental or physical function, and the substance has no known physically addictive properties.

Though rituals differ between cultures, the spiritual use of peyote generally focuses on the potential for enhanced meditative capability and trance induction. Ritual users generally believe that peyote allows an individual to commune with spirits or to communicate directly with the spiritual plane of existence. Among the Huichol, peyote is the primary spiritual sacrament of their religion and is believed to be the only method available to experience the spiritual realm.

## Tradition and Ritual

In the Native American Church, peyote rituals typically begin on Saturday evening and extend through the night, ending with a communal breakfast on Sunday. The experience is accompanied by prayer, the recitation of chants and songs, and guided meditations. In most chapters of the church, there is a belief that peyote allows users

### Elucidating Hallucination

One of the most common theories about the visual affects of psychedelic chemicals is that the chemicals cause clusters of neurons to fire unexpectedly from a “bleeding” of neuronal stimuli. As the brain attempts to make sense of this unexpected information, patterns appear to the user that represent the patterns of neuronal firing within the brain’s structural layers.



Navajo Indians conduct a peyote ceremony in Hogan, Arizona, near Pinyon, singing during an all-night ritual on December 1, 1954. (Carl Iwasaki/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

to communicate with the creator god or with ancestor spirits living in nonphysical realms. Among Native American Church members who have adopted Christian beliefs, peyote may be seen as allowing one to communicate with the Christian god.

Among all Native American and Native Mexican peoples that use peyote, dancing and singing are a central part of the peyote ceremony, and everyone in attendance participates in ingesting peyote to create a unified communal experience. Among the Tarahumara of Mexico, the name for the traditional peyote dance translates as “moving around the fire,” and circular dances surrounding a central fire are found in many cultures that utilize peyote in rituals. Many of the songs and dances performed at peyote ceremonies have changed little in thousands of years and often involve rituals aimed at inviting the spirits of ancestors and supernatural beings to visit the ceremonies and provide attendees with divine insight or visions. The songs sung differ between cultures, but the theme of thanking the spirits or God for the blessing of peyote and thanking the peyote for allowing them to commune with the spirits are central to the repertoire across cultural lines.

While there are a number of psychoactive substances used as entheogens by various indigenous cultures, peyote is among the most widespread and is

considered by many practitioners to be the most effective. For thousands of years, the indigenous people of Mexico and the United States have used peyote as a way to bridge the gap between the material and the spiritual worlds, and the tradition continues to have a powerful allure for those who seek spiritual guidance. Over the centuries, peyote has also become a popular recreational drug, and there are many who use peyote without participating in traditional Native American rituals. Nonspiritual users of peyote often report that the substance enhances meditative capabilities and causes an altered state of consciousness that can enhance contemplative insight. Other users simply find the altered state enjoyable without reference to more substantial transformative properties.

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## RAIN DANCE

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### Rituals of Agricultural Life

The rain dance is a type of ritual found primarily among the agricultural Native American tribes of the Southwestern United States and parts of Mexico. Though the precise details of the cultural and spiritual significance of the rain dance differs between tribes, rain dance rituals are sufficiently similar between many tribes to constitute a distinct category of ritual. Similar rain-based rituals also occur among the indigenous people of South America and parts of Africa, reflecting the universality of rain ritual across cultures.

Through the development of the mythology and fiction of Western frontier society, the rain dance became a common theme in pop-culture depictions of Native American rituals. Many of these fictional portrayals blend aesthetic and cultural characteristics of rain dance ceremonies from the Hopi, Apache, Pueblo, Navajo, and Zuni, which were among the tribes that often practiced rain dance rituals.

### The Zuni Rain Dance

The Zuni people are one of several tribes constituting the Puebloan people of the Southwestern United States, which is a group united by certain shared cultural and

spiritual characteristics resulting from common ancestry and similar environmental lifestyles. The Zuni are one of the tribes commonly associated with rain dance ceremonies, which are held during August, when rainfall reaches its lowest levels and the danger of drought becomes pronounced. The Zuni rain dance is likely one of the inspirations for the generalized rain dance that appears in Western movies featuring fictionalized Native American dances and rituals.

Zuni men and women prepare for the rain dance by constructing elaborate rain dance costumes that differ according to gender and status. Men wear turquoise-colored masks that stretch across the face, with horsehair fringe that dangles below the mask and covers the throat. The women wear a similar mask, though white instead of turquoise. Both types of masks are decorated on the top with feathers and also incorporate patches of colored stone or painted material. Men typically cover only their loins with cloth, leaving the legs and the upper body bare, while women wear a unique full-body covering that leaves only the feet exposed.

The Zuni rain dance follows a unique pattern of zig-zag steps meant to symbolize the movement of the wind. Male and female dancers begin by standing opposite each other in rows, with about four feet between them. As the ceremony begins, the men and women each sing parts of a ceremonial song, which is also a prayer that pays homage to their culture, ancestors, and protective spirits. The men and women then dance toward one another, like converging wind currents, as they sing rhythmically. There are no drums or other instruments used to accompany the song; the rhythmic repetition of verses establishes the rhythm of the dance.

## The Hopi Rain Dance

The Hopi people, primarily from the region that is now Arizona, practice a number of rain dance rituals during the summer season, petitioning their guardian spirits for the needed rain that feeds their crops and honoring the bonds of kinship and community among the tribe. Every two years, the Hopi hold a major ceremony known as the “Snake Dance,” which is the finale of a 16-day ritual period celebrating the coming rain and signifying their devotion to their environment.

Preparations for the Snake Dance begin on the 11th day of the festival period, as members of a Hopi group known as the “Snake Fraternity” capture snakes that are then kept in earthen containers until the ceremony. The snakes, which the men of the Snake Fraternity consider to be brothers, are gently cared for and washed before the ceremony. On the 15th day of the festival, a footrace is held symbolizing the water coming to the village, and members of the Antelope Fraternity cooperate to build a kisi, which is a shallow pit covered with wooden planks that represents the passage from life to death.

At sunset on the 15th day, members of the Antelope Fraternity perform a ceremonial dance around the kisi, stomping on the wooden planks and on the earth, which symbolizes the thunder that will signal the beginning of the rains. The following day, the members of the Snake Fraternity deposit the snakes they had captured into the kisi and dance around the pit while holding snakes in their hands and then in their mouths. A priest then grabs snakes from the pit and sets some of them loose in the desert.

The symbolic association between snakes and water has its roots in ecology, as snakes in arid environments gravitate toward natural and manmade water sources and thus are often found in these areas. In Hopi legend, snakes, who are the brothers of humanity, act as guardians of the sacred springs and are also credited with the ability to speak to the gods. When the Hopi deposit the snakes in the kisi, it symbolizes the snakes traveling into the underworld where they can inform the gods of the tribe's need for water. In the Hopi version of the rain dance motif, we see a reflection of traditional beliefs bound to and developed from the recognition of environmental phenomena. The Snake Dance is far more than a prayer ceremony begging the gods for rain. It expressed the Hopi connection to all life in their environment and reflected in their spiritual, "familial" relationship with the snakes who, like humans, require the oncoming rainy season to sustain them.

### **Purpose of Rain Dance Rituals**

In Western literature and fiction, the rain dance ceremonies of the Southwest are depicted as primitive shamanic rituals in which the dancers believed that they could control the weather, bringing rain to end a drought and to nourish their plants during the dry season. The belief that ceremony and ritual had the power to alter the physical and natural environment was a legitimate part of Native American culture; however, it is not accurate to depict the rain dance or similar rituals as simple incantations meant to influence the weather. Rituals like the rain dance served many purposes, including community integration, recognition of the social and temporal changes that affected their society, and honoring their ties to the forces and features of the natural environment.

Native American ceremonies and rituals cannot be understood without examining the specific environment that each tribe inhabited, as many rituals were tied to the environment in intricate ways. Tribes that primarily subsisted by hunting wild game developed rituals tied to hunting practices and to the animals that shared their environment and became their food. Similarly, those that practiced subsistence agriculture often developed rituals that reflected the ties between the tribe and the cyclic patterns of the climate that affect agricultural productivity. In some cases, rituals invoked the powers of spirits, ancestors, and gods, whose

influence was seen as an important determinant of environmental patterns. However, ceremonies also helped to reaffirm a tribe's ties to their environment, thus deepening their attendance to the patterns of nature and transmitting important ecological knowledge.

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## SYMBOLS OF THE SUN

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### Solar Circles of the Ancient World

Spiritual sun symbolism is common in many indigenous cultures around the world, sometimes reflecting belief in a solar deity or reflecting the recognition of the sun's spiritual power over life on earth. Surveys of Native American art and spirituality have revealed the presence of solar symbols and spiritual concepts among many different tribes. Solar symbolism is especially prominent among the tribes of the American Southwest, commonly called the Puebloan people, and reflects this culture's ancient agricultural heritage.

### The Puebloan People

Anthropologists and ethnographers use the term "Puebloan" to refer to a group of tribes living in the Southwestern United States, primarily in New Mexico and Arizona, that have come to overlap in key aspects of their culture and spirituality. Anthropologists believe that the Puebloan tribes likely descended from a group of common ancestors that entered the region from Mexico and Central America. Individual tribes included within this group include the Navajo, Zuni, Hopi, Zia, Cochiti, Acoma, Laguna, Taos, and Tewa. Together there are some 21 distinct groups recognized among the Puebloan people. They are grouped together because of common architectural, agricultural, artistic, and cultural similarities.

The term "pueblo" is taken for the Castilian Spanish word for "village" or "town," and this name refers to the architectural style developed by tribes in this

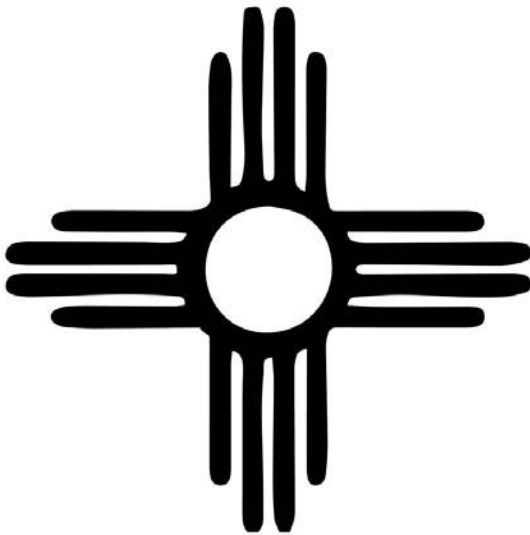


group who largely constructed their homes out of mud and earth, giving them a characteristic appearance and color. Many of the tribes in this region have been agricultural for millennia, growing maize, beans, squash, and a variety of other crops, and several of the tribes developed complex irrigation systems to nourish their croplands and prevent drought. Because of their focus on agriculture and the arid environment, Puebloan tribes have developed a variety of customs and spiritual rituals around the appearance and absence of rain and sunlight, two of the most important aspects of the farming lifestyle.

### The Zia Sun Symbol

The world's most familiar and widely known sun symbol might be the sun sign of the Zia, which consists of a circle with four sets of lines radiating from the circle in the four cardinal directions. The Zia sun symbol has controversially become part of the state flag and state crest of New Mexico and is now found on many thousands of official state merchandise, including New Mexico license plates and a variety of other tourist-oriented goods.

The design of the New Mexico flag came from a contest held by the state in 1925, in which the state asked independent artists to submit potential designs for the new flag. Physician and amateur archaeologist Harry Mera won the contest



by submitting a design developed from a version of a sun symbol Mera had noticed on a 19th-century ceramic pot found in a Zia pueblo. For years the state used the symbol without acknowledging the Zia ancestry of the symbol. After some public criticism over this issue, the state adopted a new official flag salute in 1963 that specifically acknowledged the Zia ancestry of the symbol and called it a “symbol of friendship between cultures.”

In 1994, the administration of the Zia tribe sued the state of New Mexico regarding the use of their sun symbol and demanded reparations for

the state of New Mexico regarding the use of their sun symbol and demanded reparations for

each year the symbol had been used without permission since 1925. The media levied a variety of accusations against the Zia, including accusing the tribe of extortion, being unpatriotic, or simply overly litigious. Spokespeople for the tribe argued that the sun symbol was one of their most ancient and important spiritual symbols and objected to its use as a superficial emblem or motif for state merchandise. The state refused to pay reparations, but it issued a formal apology and legally established the symbol as the intellectual property of the Zia. Those wishing to use the symbol since that time have been required to seek the permission of the Zia administration before they can legally use the emblem.

### **Meaning of the Sun Symbol**

Archaeologists and historians believe that many indigenous cultures once viewed the sun as a deity of one form or another, often seen as a male creator deity or force. These beliefs reflect an understanding of the sun's generative role over life in general. In 1972, archaeologists for the National Park Service found ancient pictographs of a sun symbol in the Chaco Canyon, one of the trade routes for the ancient societies believed to be the ancestors of the modern Puebloan tribes. The symbol consists of three concentric circles surrounding a central solid dot. Archaeologists believe that the circles represent the rays of the sun, and the dot in the center may have represented the umbilical connection between the sun and its creation.

Researchers have also found collections of sun symbols combined with other symbols, indicating that the ancient Puebloans developed complex solar calendars, an innovation necessary and central to agricultural development. The Zuni, Hopi, and many other Puebloan tribes participated in ceremonies to celebrate the movement of the sun at various important junctions, such as the summer and winter solstices. Spiritual conceptions of the sun were not unique to the Southwest and tend to appear around the world, developing in conjunction with agricultural social systems. The Mississippian culture of Missouri and Illinois, for instance, also conceived of the sun as a creator deity and believed that the leaders of their society were brothers of the sun. Sun deities are also known to have emerged independently in Africa, Asia, and ancient Europe.

Without the sun, life could not exist, and this fact was instinctually understood in ancient societies long before science, physics, or the advent of agriculture. The Puebloan sun symbols represent one link to this ancient facet of human experience and can also be viewed as an example of the many symbolic and spiritual concepts that reflect the shared cultural history of mankind.

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## TOTEM POLE

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### Uniting Culture and Spirituality in Sculpture

Totem poles are carved and painted logs constructed by the Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest region that play an important role in community organization and spiritual representations. Similar types of sculptures are produced by indigenous peoples in Africa, Polynesia, and Asia. The process of carving wooden poles evolved from stone sculptures created by indigenous cultures in these same regions.

### The Northwest Coast

The Pacific Northwest Coast encompasses some 1,300 miles (2,000 kilometers) of coastline, with hundreds of scattered islands and inlets, stretching from Alaska, across the coast of Canada, and into the United States to the Oregon-California border. The indigenous population of this region consists of dozens of tribes that have been grouped into seven language families—Haida, Tsimshian, Wakashan, Chimakuan, Salishan, Nadene, and Penutian—and at least 40 different dialects. The tribes recognized in the 21st century are a relatively small abstraction of the diversity that once existed in the region. For instance, the Tlingit people were once divided into at least 14 separate tribes, though they are now usually considered a single group.

Tribes in the region share cultural characteristics partially derived from similarities in their environment and lifestyles and partially from a shared ancestry through migratory groups that first settled the region. By the time Europeans arrived in North America, the Northwestern tribes were also linked by a long tradition of trade that helped to spread cultural characteristics, such as the tradition of carving totem poles, along the Northwestern coast.

The western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*), an indigenous conifer tree that can grow to more than 200 feet, is one of the most important resources of the region and became the backbone of coastal indigenous society. Cedar is used to carve

canoes, which are the primary mode of transportation for many Pacific Northwest tribes and allows for the fishing that forms the background of subsistence and trade in the region. Cedar is also used for the construction of buildings, furniture, and native art and cultural objects such as totem poles, which are usually carved from the trunk of a single red cedar. The harvest of trees is endowed with ritual and spiritual significance that often involves prayers to honor the spirits of both the tree and the forest. Pacific Northwest tribes have developed a complex spiritual aspect to their logging culture, many of which involve the spiritual and cultural significance of cedar and other native tree species.

### Meaning and Identity

Totem poles are carved among the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands; the Tlingit of Alaska; the Tsimshian, Heiltsuk, Nuxalk, Kwakwaka'wakw, and Nuu-Chah-Nulth of Canada; and the Salish, Makah, and Quinalt of the United States. Anthropologists are uncertain where the process originated, but some speculate that the Haida were the first tribe to carve totem poles and spread the process throughout the region. The rituals and traditions of totem pole carving were altered by the arrival of Europeans, which led to the dissolution of traditional tribal boundaries and a blending of cultural identity (and artistic customs) throughout the region.

In general, the totem pole serves as a crest that represents a family, clan, community, or an important individual. Iconographic images are carved into the pole that represent aspects of the family or clan, including representative animal spirits, protective deities, and even human figures representing clan ancestors. The exact combination of images and colors and the overall design, shape, and size of the pole differ according to the purpose of the carving. There are smaller indoor poles that represent a single family, and larger poles that may be used to commemorate an entire community or tribe.

#### SHAME POLE

While most totem poles were seen as positive symbols of status and societal representations, some Native American tribes also erected shame poles to commemorate negative events in their societies. Shame poles were intended as public notices, letting the community know about the bad deeds of some family or tribe, for instance, an unpaid debt or some other slant to the family's honor.



Totem poles carved by the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest often feature images of animals important to local culture and religion. Fish, including migratory salmon, are an important source of food and commerce for many tribes and feature prominently in many totem pole designs.

Poles are 3–10 feet in height, but poles representing an entire community can be taller. Poles as tall as 100 feet have occasionally been constructed. After the carving, the pole is painted with dyes made from botanical extracts, animal blood and pigments, and minerals mixed with water.

The Pacific Northwest tribes have a complex tradition of animal symbolism based on the idea that animals are the spiritual ancestors and teachers of humanity. This is common in indigenous mythology, reflecting how native cultures learn to attend to the behavior of animals in their environment for survival. Species that have important economic or practical value and predators that are the competitors of human hunters are often imbued with mythological significance. The bear, eagle, salmon, and raven are among the most sacred species in the Pacific Northwest, and these species are commonly found on totem poles.

Totem poles often tell a story (a legend, myth, or family history), beginning with the symbol at the top and progressing to the bottom of the pole. Mythological poles often contain animals and deity figures, and family poles often contain images of ancestors and animal spirits linked to the family. Totem poles are not worshipped, though Christian missionaries believed that they were and so objected to their display as a form of idolatry. Totem poles serve a commemorative rather than sacramental purpose and are revered for their symbolism rather than perceived spiritual power.

Because they are made of wood, totem poles erode and disintegrate, and many of the indigenous peoples consider this to be an important part of the tradition, with the various levels of disintegration providing information about the age and history of the family or clan that erected it. However, the impermanence of the poles also means that there are few examples of totem poles carved before 1800, and this has complicated attempts by researchers to investigate the history and evolution of totem pole carving.

As the pole represents both the community as a whole as well as an individual family or kin group, tribal elders must give their permission before an individual or group can commission a family or town pole. With permission granted, a chosen artisan harvests a tree and begins carving, usually working from the bottom to the top and using a collection of stone or metal adzes, axes, and chisels to carve intricate designs. Most family

## The Potlatch Ceremony

Following the construction of a pole, the family or group responsible will usually throw a potlatch ceremony. The potlatch is a celebratory feast commemorating such significant events as births, marriages, clan alliances, and the erection of a new totem pole. The term “potlatch,” which gave rise to the American term “potluck,” was derived from the Nuu-Chah-Nulth term “pa-chitle,” meaning, “giving” or “to give,” referring to the expectation that individuals invited to the potlatch ceremony bring gifts or food.

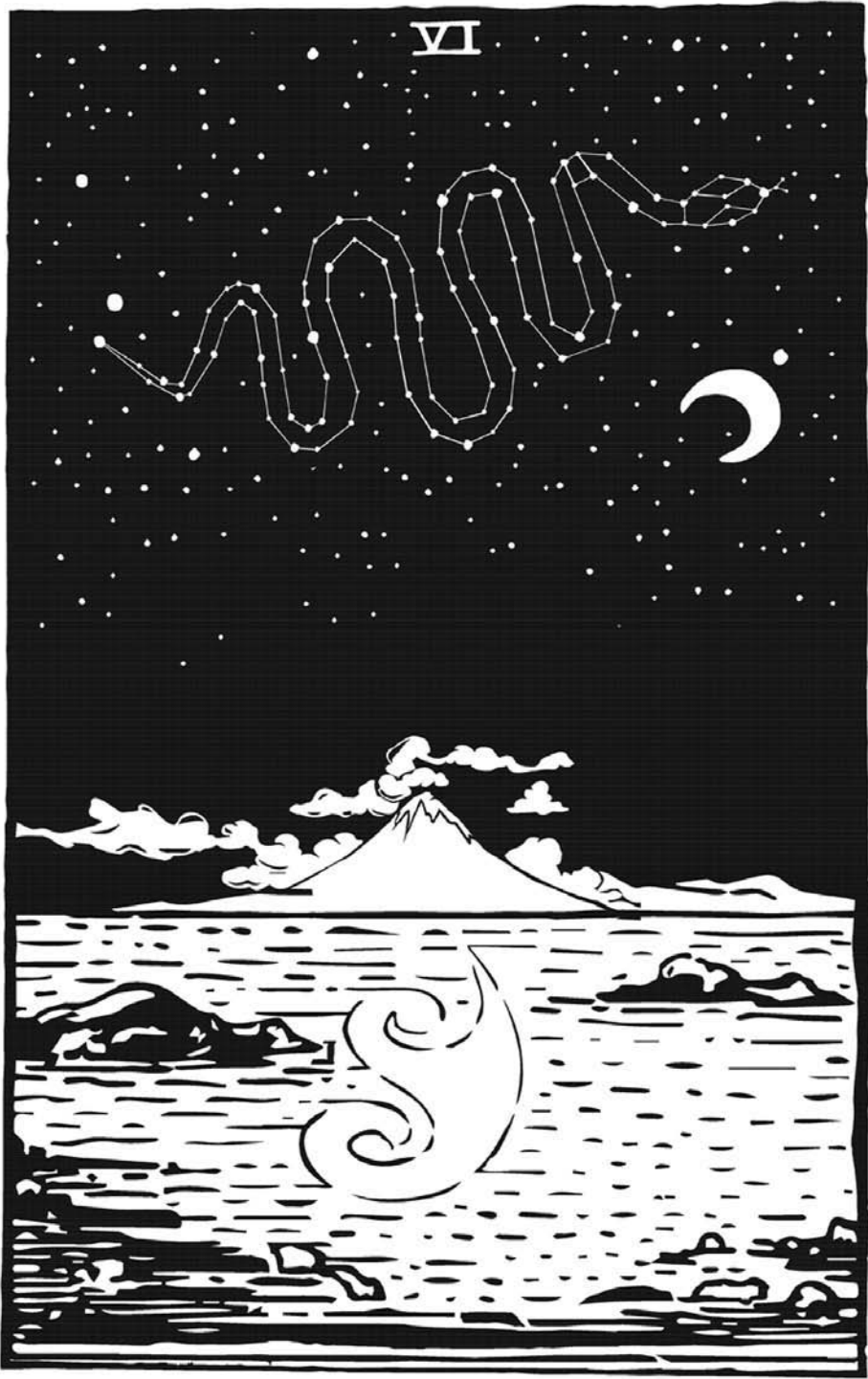
The potlatch is central to tribal culture and community integration, providing a focal time for families, friends, and members of a tribe or community who rarely see one another to come together to share food and reaffirm their bonds. The potlatch was considered the time to repay debts owed from the previous year (or more) and the ideal time to form relationships that might lead to marriages, thus creating additional bonds between families and communities. Often those throwing a potlatch housed and fed guests for days, creating a significant outlay of resources; individuals sometimes spent more than a year preparing to host a potlatch ceremony. Because they were expensive and demanding, the potlatch became a symbol of status and wealth, and families competed to outdo each other by throwing the most lavish potlatch of the year.

In the 1880s, colonial authorities throughout the Pacific Northwest forbade the potlatch ceremony through a series of laws aimed at restricting native gatherings. These policies had a variety of motivations, including the desire to reduce the potential for uprisings within “dangerous tribal groups” and a desire on the part of Christians to eliminate what they saw as “heathen” religious rituals. The potlatch was forbidden until the 1950s in some areas, and totem pole carving fell into sharp decline as a result. When the potlatch policies were lifted, many artisans returned to the totem pole tradition; however, the long period of prohibition diminished the tradition, as the master artisans of the late 19th century were often unable to pass on their techniques and rituals to the next generation. Despite this loss of knowledge, a new generation of artisans has championed the tradition in the modern era, producing contemporary poles that preserve tribal history while simultaneously evolving the tradition in new and surprising ways.

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VI



# OCEANIC RELIGIONS

The Oceanic (also spelled Oceanian) religions are the non-Christian traditions practiced in Oceania, a region, that includes Australia, New Zealand, and the island countries of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. Two primary branches of Oceanic religion are discussed here: Australian Aboriginal religions and the spiritual traditions of Polynesia. The colonization of Australia, and much later the rest of Oceania, occurred by way of a multigenerational migration from Asia, especially through the region that is now Taiwan, Indonesia, and East Timor. Cross-colonization and trade has led to certain religious similarities between the religious traditions of the Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian islands, while Australian spiritual traditions are unique and seem largely unrelated to the traditions elsewhere in Oceania.



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# Australian Aboriginal Religion

The tribes of the Australian Aborigines constitute one of the oldest continuous civilizations in the world. In the 21st century, there are more than 670,000 Aborigines living in Australia, and the indigenous culture of Australia continues to exert a major influence over Australian society. Aboriginal religion is closely linked to the natural landscape of the nation, with a variety of deities and myths reflecting and helping to explain the formation of Australia and its environment.

## Origins and Evolution

It is believed that the human species (*Homo sapiens*) evolved in East Africa, splitting from the nearest ancestral hominid between 400,000 and 200,000 years before the present. Around 120,000 years ago, humans migrated into the Middle East and then to Asia. From there, humans migrated across land bridges and shallow seas to colonize the Americas, while a separate branch sailed across the ocean to the islands of Oceania. Recent genetic evidence suggests that the first colonists arrived in Australia around 70,000 years before the present. Unlike many other cultures, the Australian Aborigines evolved in relative isolation for millennia, and the culture of the Aborigines today still reflects their ancient roots. To provide one example of cultural stability among the Aborigines, in the mid-20th century, some Aborigines still used tool-making methods that are thought to have been developed more than 2 million years ago among the prehuman hominids that preceded the emergence of *Homo sapiens*.

Australia lacks large animals that can be domesticated for riding or labor, and much of the country is not suitable for farming. These factors contributed to the fact that the Aborigines remained hunter-gatherers for thousands of years, living primarily in nomadic groups and developing a culture that was closely linked to seasonal hunting and animal migration. The first indications of Aboriginal religion can be found in rock sculptures that are more than 7,000 years old and contain deities and myths still present in Aboriginal culture, potentially making the Aboriginal religion the oldest continuous religious tradition in the world.

By the time the first Europeans arrived in Australia, there were more than 500 different Aboriginal groups, many of which were sufficiently removed from one another to have developed their own unique languages. Religious practices differed between tribes and often reflected regional environmental variations. The tribes of the deep arid regions, for instance, had different religious rituals from the tribes of the rainforest regions. European colonization began in 1788 but remained located in southeastern Australia until the mid-19th century. Some Aboriginal tribes had little contact with Europeans until the mid-20th century and continue to live a relatively traditional way of life in the 21st century.

The European invasion of Australia allowed the introduction of such diseases as influenza and smallpox, to which the natives had no resistance, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Aborigines. Violent conflicts resulted in further devastation to Aboriginal society over the next two centuries. While the initial colonial government was hostile toward Aborigines, adopting racist policies regarding land ownership and access to political rights, the situation gradually shifted over the centuries. In the 21st century, the Australian government places ownership and administration of many of the nation's famous landmarks in the hands of the Aboriginal inhabitants, reflecting their ancient links to these features of the landscape.

## **Beliefs and Myths**

While differing from region to region, most Aboriginal religions share a common focus on the ancestry of the Aboriginal people and their mytho-historic links to the natural environment. Aboriginal religion is polytheistic, involving the belief in multiple semidivine beings, which can be further divided into several general classes of deities, including creation deities, ancestral deities, and totemic deities.

Creation deities are those involved in the creation of the landscape or certain features of the landscape. For instance, the shape of certain riverbeds has been attributed to the movements of a mythic serpent deity and reflect the shape of the serpent's winding body, while the shape of mountains has been attributed to the contours of a deity's body lying across the earth. Ancestral deities are seen as the ancestors of the Aboriginal people and the other animals that share their environment. Many of these figures belong to the subset of Australian mythology known as the Dreaming or Dreamtime, which is a creative mythical period involved in the creation of reality. Totemic deities are associated with individuals and kin groups and can be thought of as a type of patron deity or spirit associated with various human qualities and characteristics.

Most Aboriginal groups are organized into a system of kinship units that reflect an individual's ancestry and the relationships between clans within a shared region. Individuals born within a kin group are associated with a certain totemic

deity, based on their ancestry and gender, and an individual's kin group is often used to arrange marriages between clans. For example, among the Lardil of northern Australia, there are eight kin groups, each associated with a different set of totemic animals or deities. An individual's kin group is determined by a formula that takes into account the kin group of the father and mother. A male in the Buryani group is only allowed to marry a female of the Kangal group, and their child will automatically be a member of the Balyrriny group. If the child of this union is male, he will marry a Kamarrangi female, and their children will be Buryani. The totems associated with each individual are determined by a more complex system that alternates totemic characteristics between generations.

Ritual is central to Aboriginal culture. Each tribe has an artistic, dramatic, and musical tradition that reflects both their spiritual beliefs and their cultural unity. Rituals that ask deities to provide abundance in the form of available food or water are common in many regions. Another important facet of community rituals are the initiation ceremonies that mark the transition to adulthood for men and women. A related set of rituals accompany marriages, which are important for the unity of society as a whole as they help to bring kinship groups and clans together. Reincarnation plays a role in Australian spirituality, including the concept that individuals can be reincarnated in other forms, such as animals or plants. This feeds into the idea that the animals and plants are also kin to the Aboriginal people, perhaps even representing the reincarnated forms of ancestors. This belief is part of the reason that animal and plant "brothers" or "heroes" are sometimes considered the ancestors of humans.

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## DREAMTIME

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### Sacred Time of Creation

The Dreamtime or Dreaming is one of the core concepts of Aboriginal spirituality, reflecting mythological concepts concerning the origin of humans, animals, and the natural environment and a unique concept of cosmology that defies definition by the Western linear conception of time and space.

## Dreamtime Origins

Australian Aboriginal culture actually consists of dozens of distinct groups, each with unique and distinct cultural, social, and spiritual characteristics. There are more than 30 languages spoken among Aborigines, most of which have their own linguistic roots rather than being dialects or derivatives of a similar root language. Despite these differences, the concept of the Dreamtime is shared across the continent and may therefore represent one of the earliest concepts developed by the original colonists in Australia. The Dreamtime is known by a variety of different terms, including “Altjiringa” to the Arunta of Central Australia and “Marajal” among the Wiradjeri of the southeastern territories, among many others.

One of the functions of the Dreamtime in Aboriginal culture is to provide a framework to understand how humans, animals, and features of the natural environment came into being. Many Dreamtime myths depict the Dreamtime as a historical period, though this definition is only partially apt. However, some myths say that there was a period before the Dreaming, a primordial era in which there was no earth and the universe was just empty space. A spiritual force, sometimes called the “Divine Oneness,” then populated the cosmos with flat, round disks, of which the earth was one.

The Divine Oneness is also responsible for bestowing consciousness (often called “the knowing”) throughout the cosmic void. The spirit ancestors of the Aborigines came to the surface of the earth from a cosmic realm and traveled the surface of the world, creating life and the features of the environment in their wake. In creating physical reality from the formless substance that floated in the void, the spirit ancestors also formed the Dreamtime, a realm maintained through ritual and tradition that connects the ancestral, modern, and future worlds and constitutes the true nature of reality.

The beings of the Dreamtime are often known as the “Dreamtime heroes,” and the deeds of these mythic ancestors are maintained through songs, oral histories, and fables that preserve the cultural legacy of the Aborigines and also reflect historical details of the development of Aboriginal culture among the early migrants to Australia. The Dreamtime heroes fought epic battles and engaged in heroic journeys; the retelling of these stories preserves ancestral knowledge and transmits important moral and ethical lessons within Aboriginal society. In the Dreamtime mythology, it is often believed that feminine spirits were responsible for the origins of laws and rituals, while male spirits were responsible for the formation of the environment and the origin of hunting.

Many of the Dreamtime heroes are animals, and the stories about them reflect observations of animal behavior as interpreted through myth and associated with “related” characteristics of human society. Many of the Dreamtime stories record

### **Sleeping Life**

While the Dreamtime of the Aborigines is not equivalent to nocturnal dreaming, the Aborigines tend to believe that sleeping dreams are another aspect of reality and that some portion of their spirit departs the material world during these nocturnal excursions, visiting other realms, time periods, and realms of existence and engaging in fantastic (and often metaphoric) adventures.

extended journeys across Australia. This feature of Aboriginal mythology may reflect the reality faced by many Aborigines in the need to migrate annually to obtain sufficient food and water. Within some Aboriginal groups, there is a tradition for young men to engage in a walkabout, which is an extended period of travel seen as a representation of the individual's transition to adulthood. Migration and travel are sacred facets of Aboriginal life, reflecting the historical patterns and mythology that have contributed to modern Aboriginal culture.

### **Time in the Dreamtime**

Some of the early archeological investigations of Aboriginal culture mistakenly believed that the Dreamtime was an Aboriginal concept of ancient or mythological time. This misconception resulted from the Western Christian worldview, in which time is seen as a linear progression, stretching from an imagined point of origin to the current moment in time and then into the future. There is also a cyclic concept of time, characteristic of Asian, Indian, and Mesoamerican cultures, where the passage of time progresses through cycles, eventually returning to a point that is both (and neither) the beginning and end, before beginning a new cycle. The cyclic view of time has been a difficult concept for Western thinkers who tend to conceive of cyclic systems as essentially linear systems in which the beginning and end have been joined.

The Aboriginal concept of time expressed in the Dreamtime is neither linear nor cyclic, but constitutes a unique and original temporal concept that has been described as “atemporal,” meaning “outside or separate” from time. In the Dreamtime, the past, present, and future all occur simultaneously, being both separate and essentially inseparable. Pioneering Australian anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner, who is responsible for some of the earliest legitimate studies of Aboriginal culture and religion, coined the term “everywhen” to describe the Aboriginal view that the past and present exist simultaneously in the present, which is eternal and ongoing.

The eternal presentness of Australian spirituality is seen as the result of a collective creative consciousness shared by both human and nonhuman beings

who collectively maintain reality and the Dreamtime through their creative dreaming of the past, future, and present simultaneously. The rituals, sacred songs, and ceremonies honoring the spirits and totems of the universe maintain this reality by reaffirming and reestablishing the connection between human culture and the spiritual ancestors who produced the world and govern the natural environment.

The Dreamtime mythology feeds into the broader concept within Aboriginal societies that the purpose of humanity is to maintain the world as it currently is, rather than facilitating change or development within the world. This unique facet of Aboriginal spirituality may have contributed to the fact that Aboriginal culture has remained remarkably similar to earlier manifestations of their culture and may also contribute to the fact that Aborigines in the 21st century still occasionally live according to customs and traditions that have remained relatively constant for millennia. The Dreamtime mythology is also ecological, reflecting the belief that humans and the other animals of the earth are essentially the same type of beings, united by shared ancestry, and all cooperating to ensure the continuation of their world.

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## KANGAROO

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### Symbol of the Outback

Kangaroos are one of the most distinctive and emblematic groups of animal species in Australia and have become important both to the native Aboriginal cultures and the postcolonial concepts of Australian national identity. To the Aborigines, the kangaroo has been an important source of food since the Pleistocene and has also become a significant symbol in Aboriginal spirituality. Legends and myths about kangaroos and their smaller relatives, the wallabies, are numerous and kangaroo-esque figures are prominent among the Aboriginal Dreamtime heroes.

### Kangaroos and Their Relatives

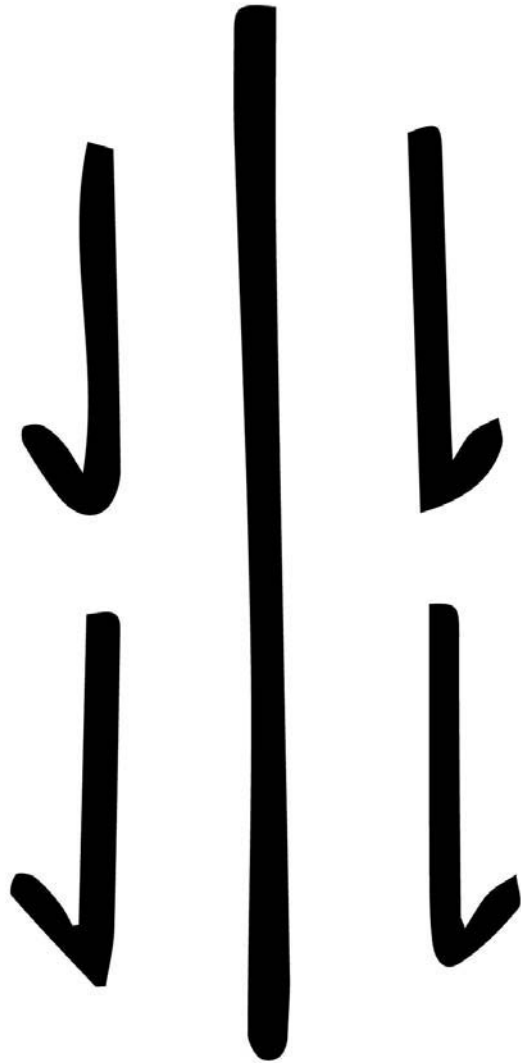
When people outside of Australia think of the kangaroo, they generally picture one of two species, the red kangaroo (*Macropus rufus*), Australia’s largest living

kangaroo species, or the eastern/western grey kangaroo (*Macropus giganteus/fuliginosus*), the most common and widespread of the larger kangaroos in Australia. There are actually 53 related species in the kangaroo group. The family Macropodidae is named for their large feet (“macro” means “large,” and “pod” means “foot”), a characteristic of the family. In addition to the kangaroos proper, the family includes a variety of smaller species, called wallabies, that differ not only in size but in skeletal features, representing a distinct evolutionary lineage of the group.

Macropods are marsupials, a type of mammal distinguished by a unique form of reproduction in which the young develop partially outside the mother’s body, usually in an external “pouch” or fold of skin. All living species of macropod are herbivorous, though paleontological evidence indicates that there was once a carnivorous kangaroo species in Australia as well. The larger kangaroo species, including the red kangaroo and the eastern and western greys, fill a similar ecological niche in Australia as the deer in North America or antelopes in Africa.

### **Kangaroos in Aboriginal Culture and Art**

Australian Aborigines have hunted and eaten both kangaroos and wallabies for tens of thousands of years, so knowledge of kangaroo behavior is an essential facet of Aboriginal cultural education. In many parts of the country, the ability



The Australian Aboriginal peoples live in close concert with the other species in their environment. The tracks of culturally-important animals, like the kangaroo and the emu, are often incorporated into Aboriginal art and spiritual symbolism.



to locate and hunt kangaroo species is essential to survival, and, as a consequence, Aborigines have learned to identify and interpret kangaroo tracks and other remnants of kangaroo behavior, such as the presence of chewed branches, disturbed vegetation, and feces. Kangaroo tracks are distinctive because of the characteristic macropod foot shape and their unusual mode of rapid locomotion, the famous bipedal hopping characteristic of the family. Less familiar to nonnatives is the slower, quadrupedal movement that macropods also use, when not attempting to move quickly, by balancing on their thick, muscular tails. Both types of locomotion result in characteristic track formations and have become common motifs in Aboriginal art and symbolism.

Rock carvings of kangaroo tracks have been discovered in a variety of ancient archaeological sites, including Karolita in southern Australia, where the rock carvings are estimated to be at least 30,000 years old. At another important site known as Sturt's Meadows, in New South Wales, kangaroo tracks feature prominently among the collection of more than 20,000 carved designs that stretching over two kilometers of ancient mudstone. Quantitative analysis of the kangaroo-track etchings at Sturt's Meadows indicate that the Aborigines who produced the carvings used slightly different designs to represent different macropod species, and archaeologists have been able to determine designs that seem to correspond with the grey kangaroo and various species of wallaby.

### **Kangaroo Mythology and Symbolism**

One of the most common myths involving the kangaroo is the story of how the first kangaroos came to Australia. The primordial kangaroos were carried by the wind from somewhere across the ocean, but they were unable to reach the ground because of the powerful storm. As they stretched while trying to reach the ground, their feet grew longer, thus accounting for the elongated feet of the family. At this same time, a group of Aborigines was wandering across Australia, searching for a place to establish a home territory. The Aborigines then saw one of the windblown kangaroos hit a tree, fall to the ground, and hop away into the distance. Seeing the kangaroo for the first time, the Aborigines realized that such a large animal could provide abundant food for their families and that the area where the kangaroo landed also had abundant plants and water. Thus the Aborigines decided that the arrival of the kangaroo was a divine omen that signified the location of their new home.

Kangaroo myths reveal how the Aborigines have mythologized elements of their ecological knowledge and observations of animal behavior. The concept of animals as teachers is present in many Aboriginal legends and myths and is a common theme in the mythology of indigenous cultures that are intimately tied to their environments. Animal-teacher myths reflect how ancient humans learned about

their environments by attending to the behaviors of their nonhuman neighbors. In the first kangaroo myth, the Aborigines associated the appearance of the kangaroo with an ideal ecological environment, and this is significant, reflecting the fact that Aborigines, like many indigenous people, used animals as indicators of environmental quality, sometimes following birds and mammals to sources of water and other environmental resources.

Similarly, the Aborigines used mythology to record details of animal form and function—such as the explanation of the kangaroo’s enlarged feet—and this provides a teaching tool for passing on ecological information to new generations. In addition, the part of the myth holding that the kangaroos arrived in Australia from somewhere over the sea might also be significant, perhaps reflecting the ancient understanding that the Aborigines themselves arrived in Australia from elsewhere, seemingly blown across the sea by powerful winds. It is possible, then, that the Aborigines imagined that a similar pattern may have occurred at other points in the past, populating the island continent with creatures that traveled along the winds and currents to reach Australia in a similar way to the earliest migrants to the nation.

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## THE RAINBOW SERPENT

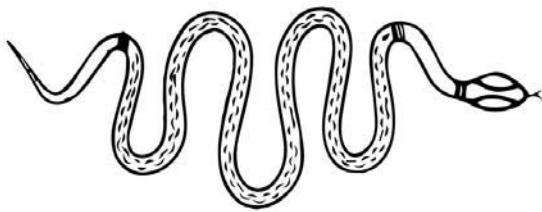
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### Worldwide Serpent Myths

The rainbow serpent is a common motif found in Aboriginal mythology and art. It represents a creative deity, or set of deity-like spirits, that is responsible for shaping the landscape of the earth. The rainbow serpent is one of the Dreamtime heroes of Aboriginal mythology, beings whose ancient wars and deeds are manifested in natural features of the landscape and the patterns of nature. More generally, rainbow serpent mythology can be seen as a representation of a common mythological archetype that associates serpents with water, rainbows, cyclic patterns, and creation, and they are found in many cultures around the world, from Africa to prehistoric Europe.

### The Rainbow Serpent around the World

Folklorists have noted that serpent mythology is a common archetype among indigenous cultures and tends to appear in similar forms, even in cultures separated by



The rainbow serpent is a creative deity that has become one of the most common spirits in the Aboriginal pantheon. Aboriginal groups across Australia have incorporated versions of the primordial serpent into their cosmological visions of the universe.

found in Australia, dating to as early as 4000 BCE. This may make the rainbow serpent one of the oldest deities in the Aboriginal pantheon. The rainbow serpent figure has been given a host of different names among the Aborigines, including “Andrenjinyi” among the Pennefather River Australians and “Kurreah” among the Aborigines in New South Wales.

Rainbow serpent myths also appear in the South Pacific islands, including the creator-deity “Magalim” of Papua New Guinea. In the Baltic nation of Estonia, a giant ox-headed rainbow serpent is said to be responsible for seasonal variations in rainfall, while the Toba tribe of Argentina has a malevolent serpent named “Woso’k” that is responsible for causing droughts when angered. The Igbo people of Africa have a serpent deity called “Egururgru,” a two-headed python-like creature that harkens death among the tribe, while the Dahomey of Benin have a rainbow serpent named “Dan Ayido Hwedo” whose body circles the globe, with the massive head of the serpent biting onto its own tail to form a circle. This “snake eating its own tail” motif is also found in Egypt and Europe, including the Ouroboros symbol of Gnosticism.

### Archetypes of the Rainbow Serpent

Serpents, both real and mythical, are commonly associated with lakes, rivers, streams, and rainfall. This is partially likely because snake activity coincides with seasonal variations in rainfall. In many countries, snakes migrate or breed after rainstorms and have evolved to time their reproductive cycles to seasonal increases in moisture. The connection between the serpent and the rainbow may have a variety of motivations. First, the multicolored rainbow appears in a long arc, a shape that resembles the body of a snake. Second, serpent scales have an iridescent quality that makes them reflect a spectrum of color when exposed to the sun and viewed from certain angles. This biomechanical feature of snake morphology also likely contributed to links between snakes and rainbows.

thousands of years of evolution. The rainbow serpent motif—a subset of serpent mythology that associates the qualities of the serpent with the mythology of the rainbow—also appears in cultures around the world, reflecting ancient associations between serpents and rain. Petroglyphs (rock art) depicting the rainbow serpent have been

Rainbows are also associated with rain and water, as they most often appear in the wake of a rainstorm, and this creates a potential source of interrelatedness between the rainbow serpent and the power to create or stop the rain. In cultures linked to arid environments, beneficial serpent deities may bring the rains that facilitate agricultural production, while evil serpents may be depicted as causing droughts that wither crops and decimate populations. In cultures living in temperate or rainy environments, benevolent serpents may stop the rains to prevent deluge and flooding, while malevolent serpents may punish humanity by bringing potentially hazardous rainstorms.

Indigenous cultures living near waterfalls often believe that the rainbow serpent lives within the waterfall, and this may reflect a phenomena that occurs when the mist of the waterfall interacts with the sun to create rainbows that seem to emerge from the spray. In Australia, it is often said that the rainbow serpent can live within any iridescent object, from pearl shells to prismatic quartz. Iridescence is a striking visual phenomenon, associated with both the sun and the rain, and it is perhaps not surprising that iridescent objects and phenomena have been afforded mythological powers in so many cultures.

In Australia, it is often held that the snakes formed the riverbeds, and this may derive from the visual association between the shape of the snake's body and the shape of rivers and streams. In Western society, though it is commonly accepted that rivers form through a combination of gravity, pressure, and variations in the substrate, rivers and streams are often colloquially described as "snaking" through the landscape. In Australia, curving pathways along mountains and holes in stone are also associated with the rainbow serpent, reflecting both the knowledge that snakes live in these environments and the mythology that the movement of the serpent created the curves and shapes observed in nature. In some traditions, the river itself is seen as a snake whose behavior causes variations in water level. When a river dries, it is said that the snake has swallowed the water, and the snake may later regurgitate this water to form the rain and restore the river.

## **Creation and Destruction**

Myths that associate the snake with creation may be a further reflection of the relationship between snakes and water. Prehistoric humans often developed mythology that associated water with life, reflecting the understanding that humans, and all other creatures, require water for survival. Associations between snakes and creation also stem from the observation of snakes sloughing their skin. When a snake sheds the outer layer of its dermis, the newly formed scales are bright and smooth and this seemed to many human observers to indicate that the snake

### Tops in Toxicity

The inland taipan (*Oxyuranus microlepidotus*) is a venomous serpent native to the arid, central regions of Australia. Studies indicate that the inland taipan has the world's most toxic venom, capable of killing a human in less than 30 minutes. Thankfully, the species is shy and elusive and rarely causes fatal bites.

was reverting in age or being reborn each time it shed its skin. This phenomenon inspired myths in many cultures about the snake having power over the creation of new life. In Australia and elsewhere, the rainbow serpent is often depicted as ambiguous in gender, or as a combination of male and female qualities. This may reflect the fact that snake genitals are hidden internally, thus making the animal appear to have no genitals or gender.

The rainbow serpent is often depicted as both creative and destructive, reflecting the complex way that many indigenous cultures view serpents in general. Australia has more than 140 species of terrestrial serpents and 32 known species of sea snake. Of these, 100 species are venomous, and 12 species are capable of delivering bites that can kill humans. For those living and working in fields and forests, snakes may constitute a daily risk, hiding among reeds and tangled crops and occasionally delivering deadly bites. Snakes, therefore, are feared as well as admired, and this mix of emotions is also present in representations of the rainbow serpent in mythology.

The rainbow serpent provides an excellent example of convergence in mythology and the degree to which spiritual systems reflect ecological knowledge in similar ways across cultural lines. Though the serpent differs in character and prominence in different cultures, the commonality of the archetype can be seen as signifying the unity of human nature and evolution, which often asserts itself in similar ways despite the gulfs created through national and cultural development.

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## ULURU AND KATA TJUTA

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### The Red Center of Australia

Uluru and Kata Tjuta (formerly Ayers Rock and the Olga Mountains, respectively) are rock formations in Australia's Northern Territory that have become two of the most famous national monuments in Australia. Both sites are considered sacred locations to the local Anangu Aborigines of the region and are also among the nation's most prized natural features. They have become emblematic of the untamed, arid portion of Australia colloquially known as the Australian outback.

### Uluru

Uluru is a large sandstone rock formation that was discovered by white Australian culture in 1872 but revered by Aboriginal inhabitants for thousands of years. Pioneering explorer William C. Gosse called the formation "Ayers Rock," after former prime minister Sir Henry Ayers. The Australian government now calls the formation "Uluru" in recognition of the traditional name of the formation in the language of the Anangu Aborigines. Uluru reaches approximately 348 meters



Uluru, or Ayers Rock, a sacred site for the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Uluru is a prime example of the ways in which indigenous cultures develop spiritual concepts about prominent features of the natural environment. (Siu Man Lui/Dreamstime.com)

(1,142 feet) high and is around 9.4 kilometers (5.8 miles) in circumference. The portion of Uluru that rises above the sand is constructed of continuous rock, leading to the belief, held for decades, that Uluru was the largest single rock in the world. Geologists have since discovered that the visible section of Uluru is only a small portion of a much larger rock formation that consists of many different pieces that reach more than 16,000 feet below the surface of the desert.

Uluru plays an important role in Aboriginal mythology and specifically in the myths of the Dreamtime heroes. An important part of Dreamtime tradition is to tell stories and sing songs about how the features of the environment came to have their present forms. Myths about the formation of Uluru focus on a pantheon of ancient animallike heroes who are considered to be the ancestors of the Anangu people. The heroic battles and deeds of these beings brought Uluru into being and gave it its present form. These formation myths not only describe important environmental features but also pass on lessons of animal behavior recorded in stories of the animalistic Dreamtime figures.

One Anangu myth about the formation of Uluru, concerns two groups of Dreamtime heroes who came from the Sky Realm, known as the Kunia, or carpet-snake people, and the Mala, or hare-wallaby people. The Mulga, or seed people, invited both the Kunia and Mulga to attend an important spiritual ceremony. While traveling to this ceremony, the Kunia happened upon a watering hole (now part of a basin at the base of Uluru), where they met the Sleepy Lizard Women, and decided to settle down, taking the Sleepy Lizard Women as their wives. The Mala, for different reasons, also failed to attend the ritual given by the Mulga people. Angered by this, the Mulga used their powers to punish the Kunia and the Mala.

To defeat the Mala, the Mulga sent the Devil Dog, now known as the “dingo,” Australia’s feral dog species. The Devil Dogs hunted and killed the Mala in the area around Uluru. To defeat the Kunia, the Mulga sent the Liru, or poisonous snake people, which resulted in a fierce battle that ranged across the area now containing Uluru. The mythical leaders of both the Kunia and the Liru were killed in the battle, which the Kunia ultimately lost, and the Liru set fire to the Sleepy Lizard Women, killing them. In their sadness, the remaining Kunia committed suicide by singing until they expired. The collective disruption from the battle and the emotional magnitude of these events disrupted the earth such that Uluru rose from the sand.

The specific shapes of Uluru and several notable geological features are associated directly with the myth of the battle between the Kunia and the Liru. For instance, an area near the top of the rock where three holes are visible is believed to be the site where the leader of the Kunia was stabbed to death. During the rainy season, when water fills these holes and then spills onto the rock face, it is symbolic of the blood flowing from his wounds. In addition, this story commemorates

the appearance of the dingo, one of the most feared and revered creatures in the Australian bestiary. The dingo was a relatively late arrival to Australia, though scientists are uncertain of the animal's origins. It appears that dingoes are descended from a hybrid of domestic and wild canines, and they most likely arrived in Australia more than 2,000 years ago. The Aboriginal Australians had already occupied the outback for tens of thousands of years, but they gradually integrated the dingo into their mythology because of its ecological importance.

## Kata Tjuta

Kata Tjuta, which means “many heads” in the local Aboriginal dialect, consists of 36 sandstone and granite mountains located in a vast desert plain in Australia's Northern Territory. The site was explored by British explorers Ernest Giles in 1872, who named the formation the Olga Mountains in honor of Queen Olga of the former Kingdom of Wurttemberg (now part of Germany). The highest peak, Mount Olga, rises 546 meters above the plain, and the entire range covers more than 28 square kilometers (11 square miles).

The Dreamtime stories associated with Kata Tjuta are similar to those associated with Uluru and concern many of the same Dreamtime heroes. Kata Tjuta is believed to have been the home of the Liru before they left the site to attack the Kunia living in the area that is now Uluru. Pointed rock formations in the eastern part of Kata Tjuta represent Malu, one of the kangaroo people, who was attacked and killed by the Devil Dogs. As he died, his friend Mulumara, the lizard woman, cradled him in her arms, and these shapes are preserved in two formations found in this area. In another part of Kata Tjuta, several prominent domed rocks are mythologized to represent another group of Dreamtime heroes known as the mice women.

The entire formation, and especially the tallest peak, are thought to represent Wanambi (also Wanampi), the Anangu version of the rainbow serpent, a giant snake deity who makes his home within the peak of Mount Olga. Wanambi is believed to stay within the mountain during the rainy season, but he moves to the gorge below during the dry season. He also sleeps within many of the other caves found throughout the formation, and these are important spiritual sites for the Anangu as well. A set of black lines found along the face of the mountain (caused by mineral deposits) are described as the hairs of Wanambi's beard, and his snakelike form is seen as the source of many of the shapes characteristic of the formation.

The arid region of the Northern Territories containing Uluru and Kata Tjuta is among the most inhospitable parts of Australia, but it is also considered one of the most beautiful. Many myths, songs, and poems have attempted to capture the unique feral appeal of Australia's deserts. Uluru and Kata Tjuta were under



government administration until 1985, when an innovative legislative movement returned control of these sites to the native Aborigines of the region. Today, the Aborigines control tourism and visitation to both sites in furtherance of protecting their cultural and mythological heritage.

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# Polynesian Religion

Polynesia is a geographical region that consists of a chain of more than 1,000 islands in the South and Central Pacific Ocean. Polynesia is part of the larger region known as Oceania, which includes Australia, New Zealand, Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia. While none of the Polynesian cultures have become global powers, Polynesian spiritual and cultural concepts have influenced the Western world since the European discovery of the Polynesian islands in the 18th century. Hawaii, a U.S. territory since 1959, is part of the Polynesian cultural sphere and has introduced elements of Polynesian culture to the North American landscape.

## Settlement and Diversification

There are several competing theories about the settlement of the Polynesian islands. Genetic and linguistic evidence suggest that the Polynesian people can ultimately be traced to an ethnic group from Mainland China, who gradually settled what is now Southeast Asia and the Malay Archipelago. Around 1400 BCE, these tribes began traveling east to colonize the Oceanic islands.

Gradually, these travelers developed a culture built around seafaring and constructed boats capable of making longer journeys. The settlers also developed a system of transferrable agriculture, enabling them to carry seeds and plants on their journeys that could be deposited on each new island. As the distances between islands grew, more time was needed before successful settlement, but the journey ultimately continued for more than 2000 years, with the final regions of the Polynesian Triangle being settled around 1000 CE.

While each Polynesian society is unique, there are certain characteristics and customs that can be found, in altered forms, throughout the entire region. The islands of Polynesia range from extremely small volcanic islands like Tuvalu, which is a scant 26 square kilometers, to larger islands like New Zealand, which measures some 268,000 square kilometers. The islands also differ in climate, geology, and their flora and fauna. The differences between Polynesian cultures can be partially understood as a process by which a similar cultural model (brought by migrants to each island) has adapted over centuries or millennia to specific environments.

The ocean and oceanic species are central to Polynesian life and play an important role in native mythology and spirituality. Ancient Polynesian mariners used the stars, moon, and sun to navigate as well as the movements of birds, fish, and marine mammals, and it is likely that colonists brought myths about these sacred (and useful) entities with them when they first settled Polynesia. The canoe and fishing have remained important elements of Polynesian culture and also allowed for trade and cultural interchange between the islands as the Polynesian societies developed. Organized agriculture has also been a constant in Polynesia, reflecting the tendency in ancient times for travelers to bring crops with them on their journeys. While tropical products, such as coconuts, are native to parts of Polynesia, other products, such as taro, bananas, yams and sugar cane, were likely imported from Southeast Asia.

In general, Polynesian society is organized into clans and extended kin groups that form the basic structure of society on many of the islands. Ancestry has become blended with mythology, with many clans tracing their lineage to mythological heroes or semidivine beings in the distant past. Interclan warfare has played an important role in Polynesian history, leading to the establishment of warlord kingdoms on many islands, including Hawaii, Tahiti, and New Zealand. From the influence of warfare, the Polynesians developed a “warrior male” concept that still plays a role in many island cultures.

## **Beliefs and Mythology**

Despite many cultural differences, there are strong religious similarities across Polynesia. In general, the Polynesians are polytheistic, believing in multiple deities that represent different facets of culture and environment. Polynesian religion is also often described as animist, ascribing spiritual qualities to nonhuman and (often) such nonliving objects as rocks and water. Most Polynesian cultures share a similar creation myth that involves a union between the sky and the earth, which are typically depicted as dual creation gods of the ancient universe.

The Polynesian pantheon also includes deities that reflect animals, including whales, turtles, and fish, such environmental phenomena as rain, wind, and the sun, and such broad geographic features as mountains, forests, and the ocean. Other deities reflect cultural or physical functions, and so there are deities associated with barter and trade, sexuality, and menstruation. Polynesian art, including prominent stone and wooden carvings, such as the tiki of Hawaii and Tahiti and the moai of Rapa Nui, depict both ancestors and deities, including fertility gods, oceanic gods, and the gods of society.

One of the primary concerns in Polynesian religion is to mediate between the world of the living and the spiritual realm. Various types of rituals and divination

### Aquatic Evil

Among the Solomon Islands, the natives believe that the spirits of evil people merge with the ocean after death, giving rise to a species of malevolent half-fish–half-man creatures called “Adaros” that can terrorize the living. Adaros travel in turbulent waters, especially within a special type of tornado, called a “waterspout,” that sucks water from the ocean into the sky.

are used to protect the living from spiritual forces that may harm or disrupt their lives or to praise and venerate the deities to ask for their protection. These rituals include the designation of spiritual and sacred spaces that are important in the organization of society and help to avoid angering spirits by violating spiritual customs.

Following death, Polynesians believe that a person’s spirit continues to exist in one of two spiritual realms, a subterranean underworld or a divine celestial realm, depending on that person’s nature and behavior. The spirits of the dead may also continue to exist on earth, and these spirits are generally considered to be benevolent “ancestor” spirits that sometimes protect the living. In some cases, however, earthly spirits can be harmful, either possessing individuals or inducing “spiritual sickness.”

Family, ancestry, and heredity are spiritual concepts in Polynesian culture, reflecting the deep integration of spiritual beliefs into the fabric of Polynesian society. A person’s social standing and status is often related to his or her ancestry, which applies both to individuals and ancestral kin groups. Many of the religious rituals found in Polynesia reflect life stages, such as rites of passage that symbolize reaching adulthood, and marriages, which create links between clans and other heredity groups. Ethics and morals are based on adherence to one’s role within a kin group and the larger community, which are further linked to the behaviors of the mythical ancestors and heroes. Thus, Polynesian myth provides a spiritual basis both for ethics and for the complex stratification of society.

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## THE MOAI

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### Heads of the Gods

The moai of Rapa Nui (formerly Easter Island) are among the most famous archaeological monuments in the world and the most widely known monument representing the Polynesian island cultures. A source of conflicting theories since their discovery (by white Europeans) in the 1700s, the moai most likely represent symbolic deification of important ancestral figures in early Rapa Nui history. A number of more fanciful theories have also been proposed to explain the moai, including the idea that they were left on earth or carved to resemble extraterrestrial visitors that visited earth in the distant past.

### Archaeology and Cultural Significance

There are 887 moai in Rapa Nui. Most are located near volcanic quarries where ancient artisans harvested the raw materials used to construct the statues. They are all vaguely human in appearance, with large heads and prominent features. Like the tiki statues of the Marquesans and New Zealand, the moai display several elements that have become common in Polynesian sculpture in general, including enlarged heads, simplified folded legs, and arms stretching to the sides or resting on the stomach.

Archaeologist Jo Anne Van Tilburg has conducted detailed work on the moai of Rapa Nui for more than 15 years and has produced some of the best information regarding the history and scope of moai construction. According to Van Tilburg's survey, the moai average around 13 to 14 feet in height, though the smallest recorded measures only 1.1 meters (3.76 feet). The moai known as "Paro" is thought to be the largest (though it is no longer erect), measuring 9.8 meters (33.1 feet) and weighing over 82 tons. Archaeologists have found the remains of another moai (nicknamed "El Gigante") that was never completed but would have been the largest, measuring 21.6 meters (71.9 feet) and weighing between 145 and 165 tons.

The moai are constructed from a volcanic ash known as "tuff," a compact form of volcanic stone that can be found in the areas surrounding Rapa Nui's three extinct volcanoes. Archaeological examinations of Rapa Nui indicate that the artisans who constructed the moai used axes and chisels made from basalt, another sedimentary rock, which is denser than the tuff and therefore can be used to chip away at large tuff fragments. All the known moai today have empty eye sockets, but archaeologists believe that the builders initially fit eyes made of coral and a soft stone called "scoria" into the heads of the moai. Remnants of these eyes have been found in many locations.

Researchers believe that the moai occupied a mixed sacred and secular place in Rapa Nui society and represent both powerful leaders and a conduit for connecting humanity to the realm of the sky gods. Archaeologists do not believe that the moai were meant to represent specific human chiefs but more likely represent a chief archetype, symbolizing the shared characteristics of the powerful and renowned leaders of Rapa Nui society. Archaeologists have also pointed out that the height of the moai may have been important, perhaps representing an ancient desire to reach into the skies, where gods were believed to reside. Some archaeologists have speculated that the moai signified the desire to join with the gods or to join with their realm of existence.

According to another theory, the positioning of the moai between the earth and sky is significant, placing them both in the secular world and the spiritual realm, and Van Tilburg suggests that the moai may therefore have been important mixed ceremonial sites, used for rituals dedicated to both human leaders *and* the gods. Many of the moai are also positioned along the coastal edges of the island, as if looking out to sea, and this also may have been significant to their spiritual or cultural meaning, perhaps representing the ancient links between the Polynesian people and the sea or serving as guardians of the island and its communities.



Moai at Ranu Raraku, Easter Island. While the exact meaning of the Moai remains uncertain, anthropologists believe that Moai are related to the tiki sculptures created in other polynesian cultures. (Andrzej Gibasiewicz/Shutterstock)

## Theories of Construction

Swiss author Erich von Daniken is one of the people most responsible for advancing the idea of ancient alien contact with early human cultures and theorized at one time that the moai of Rapa Nui are one of several pieces of evidence that suggest

extraterrestrial visits to the ancient earth. Since the 1960s, historians and archaeologists have debunked Daniken's theories and shown that Daniken took creative liberties in his writing, purposefully fabricating much of his "evidence," presumably to enhance book sales.

Despite the steady advance of archaeological research, the theory of ancient extraterrestrial influence still holds a significant appeal for alternative history buffs. For instance, in 2010, the History Channel began airing a series titled *Ancient Aliens* that presents and purportedly investigates theories regarding ancient alien contact. Series presenter and conspiracy theorist Giorgio Tsoukalos has also identified the moai as an important piece of evidence supporting ancient alien activity. Despite public support for the idea, there is no scientific or archaeological evidence to support claims of this nature.

Part of the mystery around the moai stems from the fact that the moai are large, heavy structures; many of the early Rapa Nui archaeologists could not conceive of how the ancient Rapa Nui could have carried out the construction and transport of the statues. In 1958, Norwegian ethnographer Thor Heyerdahl conducted an experiment to estimate whether native Rapa Nui artisans could have constructed and transported an average-sized moai across the island. In Heyerdahl's experiments, six workers were able to construct an average moai in less than a week, while a larger group of workers transported the statue across one of the ancient roadways on the island over the course of several weeks.

Similarly, archaeologists have used artifacts, measurements, and computer-aided modeling techniques to indicate that the builders of the moai most likely used wooden "sleds" to transport the statues from the quarries to their eventual locations across the island. In both cases, serious investigations have shown that, while an impressive feat of ingenuity and effort, the construction and transport of the moai is within the realm of human endeavors without the need to leap to extraterrestrial or divine influence. If anything, the moai represent how the collective efforts of individuals can transcend individual capabilities, allowing a society to build monuments that are so impressive people may believe they are not of this earth.

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## RITUAL TATTOOING

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### Sanctifying the Body

Tattooing is a form of body modification that involves inserting dyes into the dermis of the skin to create permanent, visible designs on the outer surface of the body. Historians are uncertain whether the earliest tattoos were created for spiritual or religious purposes or whether they were simply meant to serve as aesthetic decorations. Tattooing seems to have emerged independently in many different cultures, from ancient Asia and Africa to the tribes of Europe, such as the Bretons who once occupied France.

Tattooing and ritual body modification developed into an advanced art form among the indigenous cultures of Polynesia, including the Maori, Samoans, Tongans, Marquesans, and Tahitians. When Captain James Cook led the crew of the HMS *Endeavor* to explore the South Pacific in the mid- to late-1700s, records of these body-modification practices were transmitted to Europe along with detailed drawings and descriptions of the ceremonies surrounding the tradition. The word “tattoo” is taken from the records of naturalist Joseph A. Banks (part of Cook’s crew), who used a modified form of the Samoan word “tatau.” While tattooing was known in Europe before Cook’s voyage, it was usually called “scarring” or “painting.” The Samoan term later became generalized to refer to any type of body adornment that involves indelibly marking the skin with ink.

While tattooing occurs in many Polynesian cultures, the tattooing customs of the Maori of New Zealand, generally called “moko” or “ta moko,” provide an example of one of the most highly developed tattooing traditions in the world. Maori tattooing also has deep connections to Maori religion and societal and cultural identity.

### Cultural Significance of Ta Moko

In the 21st century, tattoos appeal to individuals for a variety of reasons, from aesthetic attraction to an expression of group and personal identity. Among the Maori, decorative tattoos are referred to as “kirituhi,” which means “body art.” The ritual application of designs to the body is referred to as “moko” and is seen as fundamentally different from artistic and decorative tattooing. Moko expresses civil, societal, and spiritual values through graphic design and ceremonial application. Individuals of Maori descent may express this heritage by receiving tattoos based on traditional designs, but unless these markings are applied in a traditional manner, they may not be considered “true” moko.





Common symbols used in Maori ritual tattooing. From left to right, the symbols are “te mangopare,” which means “hammerhead shark” and symbolizes strength, the “hei matau” or “fish hook,” a symbol of abundance, and the “koru,” representing the spiral growth of ferns and symbolizing eternity.

An individual’s moko serves as a representation of that individual, and famous Maori might be known as much by their moko as by their faces or names. The importance of moko within Maori culture is reflected in the fact that, after Maori began using written documents—a practice introduced by European colonists—individuals would often sign a document by drawing a visual representation of their moko. Traditionally, only high-ranking individuals were adorned with a moko, though the practice has since become more generalized. Having a moko is still a signifier of position and rank, and individuals may be judged to be suitable for certain occupations or social positions by examining their moko. Moko designs have evolved to reflect an individual’s genealogy, or “whakapapa,” which is more than simply a reflection of one’s ancestors; it also reflects an individual’s connection to the heroes of Maori mythology. The moko therefore indicate an individual’s status through his or her associations with immediate, ancient, and even mythological predecessors.

Males typically begin receiving moko around puberty, while women receive moko just prior to marriage. In traditional Maori custom, males and females with moko enjoyed specific privileges within society. For instance, men without moko

### Getting a Head

Following a battle, Polynesian warriors in many tribes kept the heads of individuals who had moko but discarded heads without moko. The preserved skin and moko of a powerful individual were sometimes kept as prized trophies of battle and conquest.

could not build weapons and other types of ritual structures, while women without moko would not have been allowed to participate in raising yams, the most important traditional crop among the Maori. Receiving moko was therefore an important rite of passage that signified the transition to adulthood and higher social strata.

### **Application of Moko**

Traditionally, women received moko only on their lips, foreheads, and other areas around the face. In males, moko is typically applied to the face and lower body, notably the buttocks and thighs. The ceremony of applying moko to a woman's body may last from one to several hours and is generally completed in a single sitting, while males may repeatedly add to their moko over a period of several years. The application of moko is one of the most important ceremonies in Maori culture, and individuals need the permission of elders and their clan leader to undergo the process and must first demonstrate their knowledge of Maori traditions and mythology. The artisans who apply moko are also considered sacred, holding an important place in society.

The design and application of moko overlaps with Maori woodcarving and utilizes similar designs and tools. Rather than using needles to inject ink, moko artisans split the skin with stone or bone chisels called "uhi" and apply pigment to the wound. First, punctures are made in the skin with a small sharp implement and then a serrated uhi is used to loosen the skin and connect the punctures. A flat-edged uhi is then used to split the skin along the drawn line, and, finally, another serrated uhi is used to apply the pigment.

Pigments may be derived from a variety of sources, including native species of insects, the kauri gum plant, and animal feces. Traditionally, no anesthetic is used, as the process is considered a test of an individual's strength and endurance. Individuals are often told to avoid sexual activity and the consumption of solid food during this time, and they take nourishment only in the form of liquids delivered through a wooden funnel. These ceremonial customs helped to reduce the chances of infection before modern antibiotics as the process causes significant swelling, especially when applied to the face. Once healed, the moko leave ridges in the skin, unlike tattoos, thus resulting in a three-dimensional design.

### **Spiritual and Mythological Significance**

The origins of the moko are explained through the myth of Mataora and his wife, Niwareka. Niwareka left Mataora for mistreating her and fled to live with her father's clan in an underworld called "Rarohenga." Mataora traveled to Rarohenga to convince his wife to return with him, and the painted designs on his face smeared in the water. When he reached Rarohenga, the people laughed at him because they carved designs into their skin, rather than painting them. Mataora

remained in Rarohenga where he learned the art of carving moko before returning to his people. In other versions of the story, Mataora asked Niwareka's father, who was a woodcarver, to carve his body with designs similar to those found on the father's house. When Niwareka saw the beautiful designs on her husband's body, she forgave Mataora and returned with him.

The mythology of the moko reflects the general belief that the process was passed to Maori society through the ancient, mystical ancestors of their culture. Thus, the moko also represent the Maori concept of the divine, linking human life to the activities of divine ancestors and the gods themselves. The moko are also seen as an expression of an individual's "mana" or "spiritual essence," which is thought to be distinct from the body, though interrelated. Though the concept of mana is unique, the idea of moko representing an individual's mana might be similar to an individual decorating his or her body with an artistic representation of his or her "soul."

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## TAPU AND MANA

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### Power and Prohibition in Polynesia

Tapu and mana are two of the most important concepts in Polynesian religion and are shared—with various cultural and regional differences—among the Maori, Samoans, Tahitians, Rapanui, Tongan, and Hawaiian indigenous cultures. Mana reflects a shared belief in the divine, spiritual nature of authority and its associations with ancestry and heritage, while tapu refers to sacred objects, persons, or rituals associated with cultural and spiritual restrictions and rules of conduct.

### Mana

Mana is power, and among Polynesian cultures, the term is used to refer to different types of power derived from different sources. Mana can be understood as "spiritual power" or "divine authority," but the usage of the term is often more nuanced. In the West, the concept of mana was co-opted in science fiction and fantasy to refer to an individual's spiritual potency or potential to call upon magical abilities. This usage of the term has become common in video games where a character has "mana points" to represent the character's ability to utilize certain powers.

In Polynesian philosophy, objects and beings have mana by virtue of their heritage, genealogy, and connection to spiritual forces. A powerful clan or family, for instance, is seen as having powerful mana, while clans of lower status are said to have weak mana. The mana possessed by a chief may be seen as the result of the gods' having bestowed mana on the chief's ancestral lineage. The term "mana whenua" is used by the Maori specifically to refer to an individual's spiritually ordained authority to administrate an ancestral territory, which is seen as being "owned" by the tribe collectively.

Mana simultaneously reflects spiritual authority, ancestral stature, *and* an individual's unique character and behavior. An individual may "earn" mana through his or her actions, such as by demonstrating skill in hunting or battle or performing acts of kindness and generosity within the community. This aspect of mana overlaps with the concepts of "social esteem" or "respect." It is also possible to diminish a person's mana by demonstrating superiority over the person in battle or other contests. A chief who fails to win a battle or is seen as failing his family or clan in some other way can be described as having "lost" mana in the eyes of the clan.

Objects can have mana either by association directly with deities or by association with the mana of an individual. A sword owned by a famed chief or ancestor may therefore be seen as carrying special mana from its previous owner. Homes and dwellings may also possess mana by virtue of the owner or resident of the building. Sacred objects, such as statues and sculptures of deities, possess mana because the object is associated with a deity and therefore receives mana directly from the spiritual realm.

Mana is also a communal concept, with each family and clan sharing a collective pool of mana. The actions of each individual may strengthen or weaken the clan's mana, so all members are responsible for protecting the mana and status of the group. Gaining and losing mana is part of the Maori tradition of "utu," which can be defined as "repayment" of either good or evil. In cases where an individual or group was harmed or slighted, utu may escalate to violence, sometimes leading to protracted multigenerational blood feuds between families or clans. Similarly, the entire family is responsible for repaying acts of kindness and generosity bestowed by members of other groups. Because of the Maori focus on genealogical cosmology, utu also applies to the repayment of debts and vendettas from one's ancestors. All individuals in a group—past, present, and future—were therefore linked by the maintenance of the group's mana and social status and could be cursed to suffer the fate wrought by distant ancestors unless they worked together to increase their mana and status in society.

## Tapu

The Polynesian word "tapu" is the basis of the English term "taboo," meaning a prohibition based on spiritual or moral authority. In Polynesia, tapu can be used in a similar

way to refer to cultural prohibitions, but it is more accurately defined as an emblem, ritual, or behavior used to protect individuals from being harmed by the powerful mana of an individual or object. The Polynesians believe that “raw” or “wild” mana is dangerous, physically and spiritually, and it is only through the tapu that the mana can be controlled. A variety of different objects or rituals may be seen as tapu in different ways, but, in general, tapu expresses the process of setting a person, object, or location aside to serve as a sacred space that is prohibited for common or profane use.

Objects or individuals that are tapu can be contrasted with things and individuals that are “noa,” meaning ordinary or without spiritual significance. For instance, a ritual building among the tribe is considered tapu, while a normal house or an area for cooking or other regular activities is considered noa. Meanwhile, the entire village may be seen as tapu, while the houses or areas within the village are considered noa. Ethnographers have defined the relationship between tapu and noa as the differentiation of the sacred from the secular. Tapu is also not always permanent, and things or individuals may be considered tapu by virtue of having mana for some temporary reason and may therefore return to being noa after this condition has passed.

The distinction of an individual or thing as tapu also has a social function, protecting important objects and individuals. For instance, the individual in the village who performs ritual tattooing or a village chief might be tapu, so individuals are therefore forced to observe certain rules about interacting with these individuals. Similar rules apply to ancestral properties or gravesites, sacred objects, and areas set aside for worship and ritual. Tapu thereby expresses the presence and power of mana and also protects this mana through cultural restrictions. The combination of tapu and mana represents a deep cultural resonance in Polynesian culture, providing a set of behaviors and rituals that reflect the intersection of society and spirituality.

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## TIKI

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### Gods and Rum

Tiki are carved statues, often humanlike in appearance, that are common in many Polynesian cultures and have become emblematic of Polynesia in the United States because of the “tiki bar” craze that raged from the 1930s to the 1950s. Tiki carvings occupy a unique place in Polynesian society at the juncture of art and

spirituality, incorporating ancient ideas about prehuman deities and representations of humans in various states of being.

### Tiki in Mythology

The standard Polynesian creation myth says that the world was created by a union between the deity of the sky (often called “Rangi” or “Atea”) and the deity of the earth (usually known as “Papa”). The union of the earth and sky resulted in all of creation, including the pantheon of primordial deities that gave rise to the plants and animals. In Maori mythology, the creation of humanity was then conducted through a descendant of the sky and earth named “Tane,” who impregnated the first woman, who had been formed from the raw material of the earth. The Maori use the term “tiki” to refer to the generative power of Tane or to refer directly to Tane’s penis. Similar creation myths occur throughout Polynesia, including in the Marquesas, Hawaii, Fiji, Samoa, and Tahiti. The name for tiki among the Hawaiians is “ki’i,” while the Tahitians use the term “tii.” Linguists believe that these similar terms reflect the shared linguistic roots of the early colonists to arrive in Polynesia.

### Tiki Carvings

A tiki is also a family of carvings, generally depicting human or humanlike figures, found in many of the island cultures of the South Pacific. The wooden carvings of the Marquesas provide one of the best examples of this tradition. Marquesan tikis



The heitiki is an ornamental amulet derived from Polynesian tiki sculptures. Vaguely human in appearance, the heitiki is a symbol of ancestry, fertility, and childbirth.

are carved from both wood and stone and are recognized by a characteristic shape. The legs of the tiki are usually bowed, with arms extending to the sides and hands resting on their stomachs. The heads are enlarged, sometimes constituting one-third to one-half of the total length of the carving, and the eyes and mouth are prominent and often inhuman in character.

The basic Marquesan tiki design is similar to carvings made in Tahiti and Rapa Nui. In all of these cultures, the tiki is displayed at burial sites and may be seen as representing patron deities or ancestors of the deceased. In other cases, the tiki represent supernatural beings, such as demonic monsters or the spirits of the deceased who remain among the living as ghosts. Some tiki were used to represent certain iconic humans, including historic warriors, kings, or important social or community leaders. Primarily, however, tiki statues were associated with fertility rituals and rites and were often used at weddings and to symbolize the union between clans. While there are many kinds of tiki, the wooden tiki of Hawaii and Tahiti and the related sculptures known as moai from Rapa Nui are the most familiar around the world.

The Maori carve and wear pendants known as “heitiki,” that resemble a twisted human shape with a prominent face. The carvings are generally made from whalebone or a green stone known as “paunamu.” Historically, the gift of a heitiki pendant was associated with fertility rituals and marriage, drawing from the Maori use of the word “tiki” to refer to Tane’s phallus or proliferative energy. Heitiki are also sometimes given to symbolize a connection between two clans, in which case the gift may be considered temporary, with the recipient expected to eventually return the heitiki to the gifting clan.

Explorers who first conducted artistic and archaeological examinations of heitiki artifacts from New Zealand believed that the carvings were meant to resemble a human fetus, and a number of anthropologists have supported this hypothesis, as it seems to be a logical extension of the use of the heitiki as a fertility charm. In modern New Zealand, only women wear the heitiki; however, records from Captain James Cook’s voyages to New Zealand in 1773 and 1777 indicate that men and women were equally likely to wear heitiki at that time, and this suggests that the symbolic meaning of the pendant or its role in Maori society have changed since the 18th century.

## The Tiki Craze

The tiki bar phenomenon can be traced back to the entrepreneurial efforts of Ernest Beaumont Gantt, a former New Orleans resident who was rumored to have worked as a bootlegger during Prohibition. Gantt established a small bar, called Don the Beachcomber, in Hollywood, in 1933, and decorated it with Polynesian-inspired furniture, plants, and other décor (especially bamboo). It served a wide variety of fruit juice–infused cocktails, generally including rum. Gantt, who later changed his name to Don Beach, is credited with inventing the popular cocktail

### Rum Time

Rum is a liquor made from sugar cane that became essential to the economies of the Caribbean and Polynesian islands in the 1700s. The origin of the term “rum” is currently unknown, but it may be related to a Romani gypsy term “rome,” meaning “fine or valuable,” and later adopted into English to mean “good” or “fun.”

known as the “zombie,” for its effects on the behavior of imbibers. Then came Victor J. Bergeron’s bar, Hinky Dinks, in Oakland, California, which was largely modeled after Gantt’s Hollywood bar. Bergeron, who had a wooden leg thanks to a childhood bout of tuberculosis, renamed himself “Trader Vic,” and his bar became one of California’s most famous watering holes.

Don the Beachcomber and Hinky Dinks gained popularity from a minor Hawaiian craze that erupted following the success of Bing Crosby’s 1937 film *Waikiki Wedding*. By the mid-1940s, the South Pacific was in vogue, furthered in no small part by the experiences of World War II veterans who had visited the islands and James Michener’s 1947 collection of Pacific War Stories, *Tales of the South Pacific*, which was adapted into the enormously popular musical *South Pacific* and the 1958 film version. The tiki bar craze lasted into the 1970s, by which time it had become a cultural cliché and no longer held the exotic appeal that it had from the 1930s to 1950s. Many of the Polynesian elements, including the ubiquitous tiki cocktails and “Hawaiian breakfast,” with ham and pineapple, were not authentic to the islands, but had been invented by the businessmen who first started the craze in the 1930s. Both Hinky Dinks and Don the Beachcomber became chain restaurants, with branches expanding around the country.

Throughout the tiki bar era, images and reproductions of Polynesian tiki entered the American popular consciousness, not as symbols of fertility or clan ancestry, but as the ceramic mugs used to serve cocktails and the decorations associated with the rum-fueled bar scene of the era. Though tiki bars are no longer a thriving fad, tiki images and statues have remained a popular form of kitsch in North America and provide one of the most common sources for Western familiarity with Polynesian art and aesthetics.

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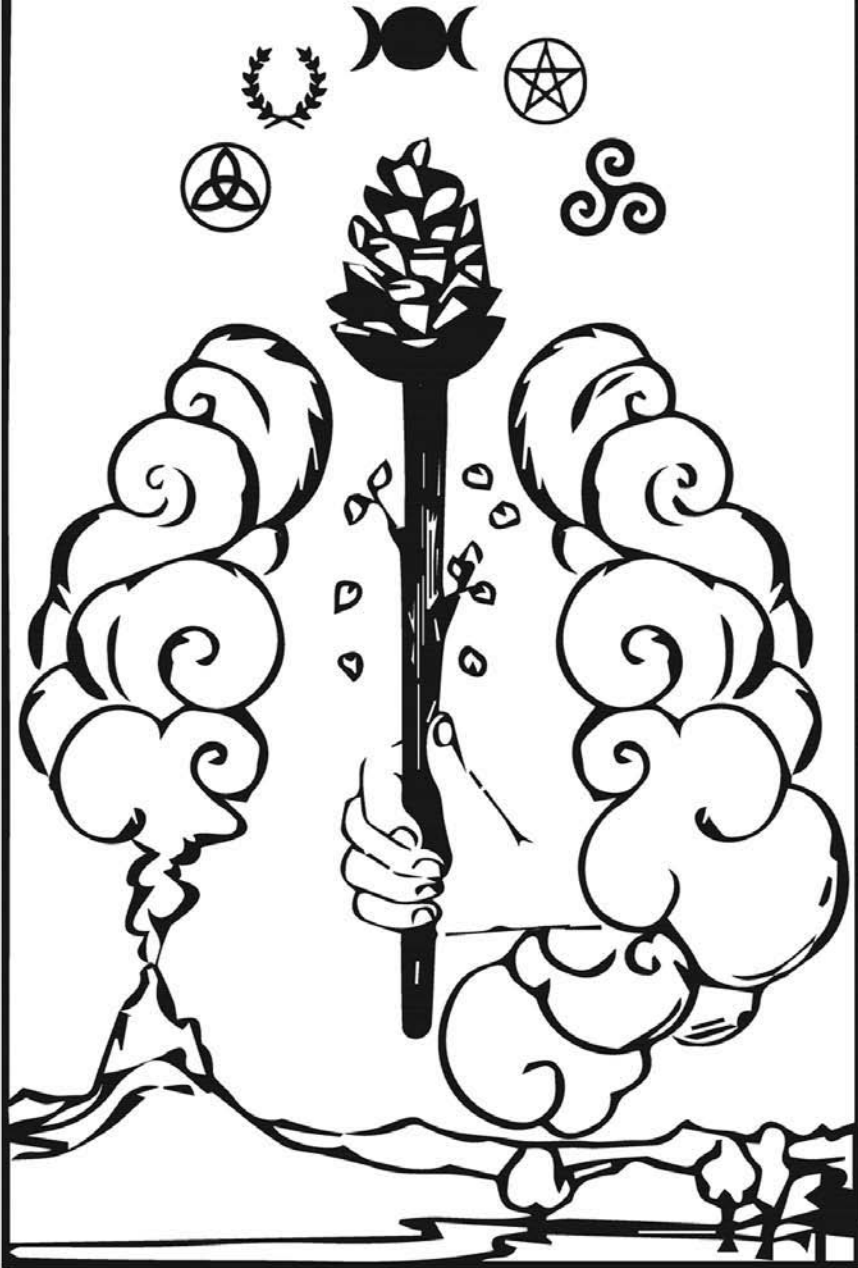
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VII



# WESTERN PAGANISM

The term “paganism” is specifically used to refer to the polytheistic traditions of the classical world, most notably the ancient Greek and Roman religions. These religions, while no longer extant, are foundational to Western society and have had a dominant influence on Western culture, art, literature, spirituality, and philosophy. The neo-pagan and New Age spiritual traditions are a collection of modern (since the 19th century) religious movements that are usually based on the desire to recreate or reinvent elements of older polytheistic or animist traditions. Neo-paganism and New Ageism are generally revivalist in their approaches, but they also involve the fusion of spiritual concepts from different sources to create contemporary, syncretic systems of faith.

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# Ancient Greek and Roman Religion

The philosophical, artistic, and political innovations of ancient Greece and Rome established a framework that is foundational to the entirety of Western culture. Modern art and literature continues to draw inspiration from Greco-Roman myth and religion, while modern academia continues to seek guidance from the scholars and philosophers of this ancient European world. The religions of Greece and Rome evolved over millennia, transforming what began as cultic, pastoral folk religions into unique forms of state-sponsored ritual worship that constituted one of the most powerful and influential polytheistic traditions in history.

## Origins and Historical Background

The Greek mainland was first colonized during the Bronze Age (1400–1200 BCE). Scholars know little about Greek religion at this time, but it is believed the early Greek colonists were polytheists (believing in multiple gods) and animists (believing in the sanctity or spiritual power of nonhuman features of the environment). During the Archaic period (800–480 BCE), Greek culture and their religion of this period were heavily influenced by the polytheistic traditions of the Middle East and Egypt, and many later Greek philosophers believed that their religion was an adaptation of Egyptian polytheism.

Greek farming villages eventually organized into city-states called “poleis,” each with its own government and economy. The mountainous terrain of Greece made trade difficult and effectively isolated the poleis, leading to the development of independent, heterogeneous cultures, though all shared a common language and religion. Each polis had one or more patron gods or goddesses, and the names of the various city-states were often chosen to represent the patron deity of the region; for instance, Athens was named for the patron goddess Athena.

Overpopulation and the rise of an oppressive aristocracy convinced many Greeks to leave the larger states to colonize farther territories, including portions

of the Mediterranean. By 600 BCE, there were more than 1,500 independent poleis, and military strife was common between the city-states. Trade and consolidation led to the emergence of several dominant poleis, including the now famous cultures of Athens and Sparta. Between 498 and 479 BCE, Sparta and Athens fought in a series of devastating wars against the Persian Empire.

In the wake of this conflict, Athens became the cultural capital of Greece and developed an innovative style of popular government, “*demokratia*,” which is considered one of the foundations of the modern democratic system. The Athenian Classical period (fifth and fourth centuries BCE) saw a flowering of literature, philosophy, art, and religion that was unparalleled in the Western world, but the growth of Athens ended in a war with Sparta (Peloponnesian Wars, 431–404 BCE) that ushered in a new age in Greek culture.

In 323 BCE, Alexander the Great of Macedonia (then a Greek territory) conquered Greece and began a military campaign that resulted in the conquest of Egypt and most of Persia. This was the beginning of the Hellenistic period (from the term “*Hellazein*,” which means “speaking Greek”), which involved a blending of religion, art, literature, and other cultural elements between Greece, Egypt, and Persia. As the religions of the three regions blended, there was a tendency to associate Greek gods with Persian and Egyptian deities. The Egyptian goddess Isis, for instance, was associated with the Greek goddess Hera. Alexander the Great’s rule ended after 13 years, and the Hellenistic world divided into three powerful states: the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt, the Seleucid dynasty of Persia, and the Antigonid dynasty of Greece.

During this same period, Rome had transitioned from a collection of agricultural communities into a republic system with a collection of city-states under a central authority. Unlike Greece, the Roman landscape was open, and this allowed for the development of a trade economy and centralized authority. Much of Roman culture was influenced by Hellenistic Greek philosophy, literature, and religion, and the Romans distilled and modified this cultural substrate to create unique Roman religious traditions modeled on Greek myth and ritual.

Rome grew through military conquest, conquering Macedonia and Greece in the second century BCE and then gradually moving through the Hellenistic world in a series of military invasions. In the first century BCE, Rome became an empire under the leadership of Emperor Caesar Octavian (a descendant of Julius Caesar) and accelerated its military conquest of the former Hellenistic empires. The Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt, the last of the Hellenistic kingdoms, was finally captured in 31 BCE. Roman paganism, which was a synthesis and modification of the earlier Greek system, became the state cult of the Roman Empire from its foundations until the end of the fourth century CE, which saw the adoption of Christianity in the Roman Empire and the decline of Roman paganism.

## Beliefs and Rituals

Greek and Roman religions are described as “pagan,” which is a general term for the polytheistic traditions of the Greco-Roman, or “Classical,” Era. Like most polytheistic religions, the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons were created to represent elements of natural philosophy, metaphysics, and cultural development. Natural gods were associated with such phenomena as the changing of seasons, weather patterns, the growth of plants, and the movement of the celestial bodies. Cultural gods were associated with such emotions as love and greed and such human activities as farming, childrearing, or war. The pagan system also involved the adoption of patron deities for various facets of society. One representation of this patron deity concept can be found in Greece, where each occupational guild (fishermen, architects, philosophers) had patron deities associated with their vocation and underlying base of knowledge.

Like many other polytheistic systems, the Greeks and Romans also believed in the existence of a small number of primordial entities responsible for creating the material world out of nothingness. These beings were known as Gaia (earth), Uranus (sky), and Chaos to the Greeks, and they symbolized the combination of the prototypic primordial elements of reality. From this union came a pantheon of gods organized into a family and often seen as having humanistic qualities. The gods and goddesses of the pantheon were not all powerful, though they possessed impressive supernatural abilities and were even able to mate with humans, resulting in demigods or semidivine heroes featured in many myths. The head of the pantheon was seen as a king, called “Zeus” by the Greeks and “Jupiter” by the Romans, and each king also had a queen (Hera in Greece and Diana in Rome). The quasi-governmental structure of the pagan pantheons reflected the political organization of Greek and Roman society, and myths about the pantheon changed to reflect similar changes in the political systems of Greece and Rome.

Greek mythology held that humans were possessed of a spiritual core that would live on in the underworld of Hades after death. However, for a dead person to reach the underworld, certain rituals had to be performed without which the

### Chaotic Spirituality

Many religions include the idea of a primordial state that existed before the formation of the material world. The Greeks called this primordial state “khaos,” which also referred to a chasm or void, while the ancient Chinese developed a concept known as “huntun,” referring to a similar primal brew that existed before the formation of the universe.

spirit might continue to haunt the world of the living. The Greek underworld was divided into various realms where spirits would reside depending on their behavior in life. These realms ranged from a paradise of delight (Elysium) to a realm of torture and suffering (Tartarus). Romans simplified this system, believing in a ritual of cremation at death that allowed the spirit to pass into a more generalized afterlife.

Classical paganism was institutionalized at the state level through a system of rituals, ceremonies, and observances that became part of daily life. The daily practice of religion was in many ways more important than belief or faith, which differentiates classical paganism from the belief-centered Abrahamic faiths. Religion existed at many levels simultaneously, and while some believed in the literal existence of the gods, others viewed the gods in a more metaphoric or symbolic manner and used prayer to these gods as a way of acknowledging aspects of life or reality that were mysterious and largely beyond human control. The most important aspect of classical paganism was observance because the rituals and ceremonies were the structure that integrated society and reinforced the bonds among communities and between the citizens and their leaders.

Altars and temples to the various gods were usually erected in areas associated with each deity. Temples to pastoral deities were therefore erected in the countryside, while the major gods were honored with temples in the cities. In Rome, religion became more centered on the cities and the city temples, where both family and community-wide rituals were performed. In both Greece and Rome, individuals often erected altars in their homes that could be used to pay homage to the family's patron deities, and there were also neighborhood altars where passing citizens could leave a donation or stop to pray to their protective gods. Offering food, wine, and sacrificed animals to the gods was common and seen as a way to gain favor from the various deities or to prevent disaster and misfortune.

In addition to the primary state cults of Greece and Rome, both societies had a large number of alternative religions that were often practiced within secret or exclusive cults that promoted esoteric beliefs, rituals, or mysticism. The Mystery Cults of the Hellenistic period are the most famous of these alternative religions, often involving syncretic blends of Greek, Persian, and Egyptian occultism. Some scholars believe that the mystery cults of the Classical Era inspired or established an ideological foundation for the emergence of Christianity from Judaism.

The Roman pantheon of gods was smaller and less complicated than the Greek pantheon from which it had derived, reflecting the different goals and foci of Roman versus Greek society. Rome was a centralized authority, and its religion, though still polytheistic, became more streamlined and focused. By contrast, the Greek pantheon was mutable and ever changing, reflecting the wide variety of unique cultures that developed within the various poleis of Greek society. One

way of reflecting these differences might be to describe Greek religion as a religion based on myth and ritual while Roman religion was based on a combination of ritual and society.

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## DIONYSUS

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### Symbol of Wine and Fertility

Dionysus was the Greek god of wine, winemaking, festivals, ecstasy, and celebration. The Dionysus cults played an important role in the Greek and Roman cultures, manifesting both as a hidden mystical cult and through a mainstream family of spiritual festivals. The Dionysus cult lasted until the end of the Roman Empire and spread through Persia and Egypt during the Hellenistic period, influencing many other Western religions of the era.

### Origins and Myth

Grape cultivation began in Europe around the Chalcolithic or Copper Age (ca. 5000–6000 BCE), and evidence of winemaking has been found along the Dniester River between the fourth and third millennia BCE. Dionysus may have evolved from the earliest polytheistic deities associated with the grape harvest and later came to represent winemaking and the culture of vintners (winemakers). Some have suggested that Dionysus was an adaptation of earlier European gods that represented soma, an ancient pseudo-intoxicant drink mentioned in the Vedas of ancient India and used in many religious rituals. Dionysus was most likely a combination of an early Greek nature god and a tribal god from the Thracians, an Indo-European people from Southeastern Europe, or the Phrygians, who lived in part of what is now Turkey. The earliest mention of Dionysus comes from a tablet inscribed around 1400–1500 BCE.

In the most popular myth of Dionysus’s birth, attributed to the mythic Greek poet Orpheus, Dionysus was the son of Zeus, the king/father of the Greek gods, and Persephone, goddess of the underworld. This makes Dionysus half “chthonic,”



a name used for the underworld of the Greek pantheon. Out of jealousy, Hera (Zeus's wife) had Dionysus dismembered and fed the parts of his body to the Titans, a group of older deities that ruled the earth before Zeus and his family of gods. However, the goddess Athena saved Dionysus's heart, and Zeus resurrected his son by implanting the disembodied heart in the body of a virgin mortal woman named Semele. Dionysus's "second virgin birth" or "resurrection from death" is a central element of all versions of the Dionysus myth and inspired many of the cultic rituals dedicated to Dionysus in Greece and Rome.

To hide him from Hera's vengeance, Dionysus was sent to live in Nysa, a mountainous mythic region in Asia (which may have represented India or Arabia), where he was raised by the rain nymphs, a group of feminine nature spirits depicted as beautiful young women. Dionysus discovered the grapevine and invented viticulture while living in Nysa. Hera located Dionysus and inflicted him with insanity, causing him to wander across vast regions. Before he was cured of his mental



Detail of an Attic red-figure stamnos, a type of ceramic drinking vessel, depicting Dionysus, from the Group of Polygnotus, ca. 440 BCE. The image shows Dionysus holding his thyrsus, a pinecone-tipped staff made from the stalk of a giant fennel plant (*Ferula communis*). (Museums-landschaft Hessen Kassel/The Bridgeman Art Library)

illness and returned to Greece, Dionysus introduced winemaking and grape agriculture to cultures from East Asia to Africa.

Dionysus had a retinue of followers, including such mythological beings as the nymphs, the centaurs (horse-human hybrids), and the satyrs (goat-human hybrids), all of which represent fertility, agricultural cycles, and the untamed animal nature within humanity. Dionysian followers engaged in orgiastic rituals, consuming wine as a sacrament and then dancing and singing to incite ecstasy. Sexual freedom and dramatic performance were important aspects of Dionysus worship and became part of the god's legacy.

Dionysus is often depicted carrying a thyrsus, a wand made from a fennel stalk, covered in ivy and tipped with a pinecone, which is often considered a representation of a penis producing seed. In some myths, Dionysus's thyrsus is also a

magical implement, with a hidden blade that can drive victims into a frenzied state. The richness of Dionysian myth and symbolism made the god a favorite among artists, and many wine goblets, casks, and other drinking implements have been found decorated with scenes from Dionysus's myths and images depicting the celebrations of the Dionysian cults.

## The Dionysian Cults

The earliest Dionysus cults originated during the Mycenaean period (the late Bronze Age), around 1400 BCE, but the peak of the Dionysus cult's prominence occurred in Athens around the sixth century BCE. During this period, the cult diversified, manifesting in several different types of Dionysian rituals. The most basic form of Dionysian cult practice was the rural, agricultural Dionysus festival held annually by local chapters of the cult to celebrate fertility and nature. The center of the festival was a phallus procession: a parade in which followers sang, danced, and played music while marching alongside a large statue of a penis.

The Anthesteria Festival, which was held for three days during the full moon of January or February, was a more advanced form of Dionysian worship that was organized around an annual wine-drinking festival. This manifestation of Dionysian worship was associated with occupational viticulture and usually involved drinking wine that had been aging since the previous season. The Anthesteria Festival also involved a unique tradition wherein slaves were released from their bonds for the duration of the festival and allowed to take part in the celebration.

The Agrionia Festival was held once a year and involved the reenactment of one of the later Dionysus myths in which Dionysus incites a group of women into a murderous frenzy to kill one of his enemies. The Agrionia blended the line between mainstream festival and the more clandestine, hidden rituals of the Dionysus cult. Celebrants at the Agrionia festivals were generally women and priests who had been inducted into the cult through a secret set of esoteric initiation rituals.

The most elaborate and public manifestation of the Dionysus cult was Great Dionysia, a large festival held in major cities annually in March or April. The festival recounted the myth of Dionysus's arrival in Eleutherai, where the people did not believe in his divinity. In response, Dionysus transforms the people into sex-crazed satyrs. Celebrants in the Great Dionysia commemorated this myth by transporting a Dionysus statue through the city and conducting a ritual sacrifice of a bull or goat. The festival also involved, drinking, dancing, and dramatic performances, often attended by the city's elite and funded through a system of public donations, thus constituting one of the earliest known systems of publically sponsored dramatics.

The Dionysian cult migrated from lower Greece into Rome, where Dionysus was known as “Bacchus,” and developed into a secret sororal (women-only) society that met three times per year in a secret location. Wine was served as an entheogenic agent (substance used to induce divine ecstasy), and worshippers danced and sang to honor Bacchus. The Bacchanalian cult, as it was then called, eventually admitted men and grew rapidly in popularity. Some historians have found that Bacchanalian celebrations were sometimes held multiple times in a single month. Some members of the Roman elite found the festivals to be vulgar and immoral, and in 186 BCE, the Roman Senate petitioned to have the Bacchanalian festivals outlawed.

## Meaning and Influence

Dionysus represents the untamed and hidden passionate side of humanity and the liminal world between the animal and human manifestations of nature. The ceremonies of the Dionysus cult represent the process of shedding one’s civilized persona and blurring the lines between civility and hedonism. Music was essential to Dionysian rituals, utilizing such primitive instruments as the drum and the bull-roarer, a piece of wood rotated on a rope to produce a vibrating sound. Celebrants also engaged in ritual drinking and dancing to incite an ecstatic state in which one could become intoxicated by the divine spirit. Dionysus was also essentially an agricultural god, representing transformation in the changing of the seasons and the coming of the grape harvest.

Historians have noted that the Dionysian cults were popular with marginalized groups, including immigrants, women, and slaves, and some have suggested that the cult offered sanctuary and belonging for those who were otherwise persecuted. The Dionysus cult was simultaneously mainstream and subversive, representing the duality of human nature. Dionysus was also sometimes held as the patron of immigrants, and this related to the myths of Dionysus having spent much of his youth and life living in Asia and the Middle East before migrating back to Greece.

The Dionysus cult is also part of the Orphic mysteries, a set of cultic religions based on the teachings of the poet Orpheus, who was a mythical character featured in a series of popular myths. In one myth, Orpheus travels to the chthonic realm of Hades and returns with mystical secrets from the underworld. These mysterious secrets were the basis of the Orphic mystery cults. Orpheus is often credited as the original founder of the first Dionysus cult. The Orphic mysteries are interesting because many of them contain strong parallels with Asian religion. The Orphics believed in a cycle of reincarnation, with the human spirit, or “soul,” being born again into new bodies, and that participation in esoteric rituals was the only way to free oneself from this cycle. This belief parallels the cycle of the samsara concept in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Reincarnation was a major theme in the Orphic religions and especially in the cults of Dionysus and Persephone, who were both killed or sent to Hades before being reborn among the living; thus the myths of both characters became emblematic of reincarnation beliefs throughout the pagan world. Many later Roman scholars believed that the Orphic mysteries and Dionysus cults were models for the formulation of Christianity. Theologian Robert Price has suggested that Dionysus's reincarnation and virgin birth from the human Semele may have inspired Jesus's similar resurrection and virgin birth from Mary.

Historian Martin Hengel has noted that the Dionysus cults were present in pre-Christian Palestine and were therefore in the right location to potentially influence messianic Judaism. Other scholars have noted that the two religions share a number of other characteristics, including the use of wine as a sacrament and the belief in ecstatic spiritual possession. While this theory is controversial, the Orphic Dionysus indicates that many of the beliefs found in Christianity were also found in other pagan cults of the pre-Christian era. These earlier beliefs may have paved the way, ideologically, priming individuals to accept the Christian standpoint after the Christianization of the Roman Empire.

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## HELLENISM SYMBOL

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### Symbol of the Mediterranean

The Hellenism symbol is a modern religious symbol that represents the neo-pagan revival of Greek Hellenistic religious beliefs. The symbol is derived from the olive wreath motif that emerged in ancient Greece and later became a symbol of the Olympic Games. The Hellenistic period (323–31 BCE) was an enormously influential era in Greek history and left a lasting influence on Western, North African, and Mediterranean culture. The term “Hellenism,” first used in the 17th century, refers to the adoption of the Greek language, customs, or philosophy.

### History and Myth of the Wild Olive

The wild olive tree (*Olea oleaster*) is a relative of the more common cultivated olive tree (*Olea europea*), which is one of the oldest and most important crop

plants in Western culture. Olives were first cultivated some 6,000 years ago, and they were transported with Greek colonists throughout the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Middle East. Botanists believe that the wild olive (often called the “oleaster”) was the source of the cultivated olive variety, which had been developed over centuries of selective cultivation and hybridization. The olive leaf was a popular decorative motif in Greek and Roman culture and is found in art and architecture throughout the Mediterranean.

The wild olive wreath, a semicircle formed from a branch of the wild olive, is associated with the Greek hero Heracles (known in Rome as Hercules), one of the divine demigods and heroes of Greek and Roman mythology. Heracles was the son of Zeus, and he was associated with the labors of Heracles, twelve great and heroic deeds that Heracles completed to prove his worthiness to the gods, including defeating mythical beasts and recovering lost treasures. According to legend, Heracles planted a wild olive tree at the Temple of Zeus in Olympia, and the branches of this tree were used to make wreaths that were given to the winners of the Olympic Games. Olympian poets have written that the athletes of the games only needed a simple wreath as a reward because they labored for virtue and not for riches.

According to the Third Olympian Ode, by the lyric poet Pindar (520–440 BCE), Heracles obtained the wild olive from Hyperborea, a mythical northern realm associated with the god Apollo and the northern winds. Hyperborea was envisioned as a mysterious Eden, where there was no labor or suffering and humanity reached a pinnacle of perfection. Over the centuries, historians have attempted to locate Hyperborea, and various theories have said that Hyperborea refers to the home of the Celtic pagans, the Siberians, or Indo-European people. The myth of Hyperborea fascinated Western esoteric theorists and became part of Russian occultist Helena Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*, a book in which Blavatsky speculated that human culture evolved through a collection of “lost cultures,” beginning with Polarea and then Hyperborea, Lemuria, and Atlantis.

## Hellenistic Greece

Today, the olive wreath is used by neo-pagans to symbolize a modern spiritual movement that attempts to recapture or reinvent the spiritual beliefs of Hellenistic Greece and Egypt. The Hellenistic period began when Alexander the Great of Macedonia conquered Greece, the Persian Empire, and then Egypt, between 336 and 326 BCE. The formation of the Hellenistic Empire led to transcultural migration and cultural diffusion between Persia, Egypt, and Greece.

The Egyptian city of Alexandria became the focal point for this transcontinental cultural *mélange* and was a major center of artistic and philosophical

expression. The language of trade was Koine, a colloquial form of Greek, and the fact that nearly everyone understood Koine made it possible for citizens to travel freely between Greece, Persia, and Egypt. The era was marked by the growth of the Hellenistic dynasties: the Antigonid dynasty of Macedonia and Greece, the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt, and the Seleucid dynasty in Persia. Unlike the democratic city-states of earlier Greek culture, the Hellenistic dynasties were large, cosmopolitan bureaucracies, and this transformation of culture had a significant effect on philosophy, art, and literature. Some of the most poignant criticisms of commercialism and government emerged from Greek writers and philosophers during this period, reflecting dissatisfaction with the imperial model of leadership.

Greek religion also changed during this period, especially through the addition of new gods from the Persian and Egyptian pantheons of deities. One of the notable features of the Hellenistic age was the tendency toward monolatry, or monolatrism, which is a focus on one god without the belief that other gods do not exist (monotheism) or the belief that one god is more important than the others (henotheism). Monolatrists often worship a single god exclusively, but they accept the polytheistic system in the belief that there are many different gods and that worship of any of them is valid.

Syncretism, or the blending of traditions and mythology, was another major factor of Hellenistic religion, often resulting in combined gods. One example is the combination of Zeus and the Egyptian god Amun to create the unified Zeus Ammon. Another example can be found in the cult of Isis, which linked the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Greek goddess Hera. Sometimes syncretic gods were integrated into mainstream worship, and others were primarily worshipped in isolated sects, often called the “mystery cults,” which were secretive societies dedicated to the study and worship of esoteric, mysterious religious figures.

The mystery cults were popular from the beginning of Hellenism through the end of the Roman Empire and may have played a role in inspiring Judaism and Christianity. For instance, some of the mystery cults, such as the cult of Apollo, were messianic, believing in the arrival of a divine being who would alter the course of history. The history of the mystery cults has become one of the most enduring elements of occultism in the West, with many conspiracy theories based on the evolution of mystery cults into global secret societies. Some of the more dubious and implausible theories have even linked these mysterious religions with Freemasonry and the fictional secret society of the Illuminati.

One of the most interesting syncretic gods is Serapis, a god that was intentionally created in Egypt to serve as the patron god of Alexandria. Ptolemy I Soter, the first of the Macedonian kings in Egypt, promoted this combined god who represented the worship of Osiris and Apis, a deity conceived as a black bull calf that was part of a popular cult following in Memphis, Egypt. The Apis cults conducted

the ritual burial of bulls in stone sarcophagi and used live bulls as oracles. Serapis myths combined elements of the myths of Osiris, Apis, and the Greek gods Dionysus and Asclepius (god of healing and medicine). In an effort to promote Serapis worship, the Ptolemaics promoted the idea that Serapis was the husband of Isis, the most popular goddess of the period and the subject of a devoted cult following.

The flowering of religious and philosophical beliefs in the Hellenistic world has left a deep impression on Western culture that still resonates in the modern world. One of the lasting legacies of the period was the dispersal of the early Jewish people from Jerusalem after the invasion by the Macedonians. This brought Judaism into contact with Greek and Roman culture and led to the persecution of the Jews, which resulted in the emergence of messianic cults and finally in the birth of Christianity. Hellenistic philosophy and religion also fed into Jewish ritual and practice, and the influence of these traditions can still be seen in many ancient Jewish mystical and esoteric rituals.

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## MITHRAIC MYSTERIES

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### Subterranean Cult of Rome

The Mithraic mysteries was a spiritual cult of the imperial Roman world that was inspired by and loosely connected to worship of the Persian god Mitra. The Mithraic mystery cult provides an example of both Hellenistic-Persian influence in Roman culture and also how the mystery cults competed with early Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.

### The Mithraic Cults

The Roman Empire was heavily influenced by the cultural confluence of the Greek Hellenistic period (323–31 BCE). From this cultural melting pot, the Romans inherited a fascination with the “mysterious” religions of Persia and Egypt. The Mithraic mysteries were linked to a broader interest in Persian art, religion, and iconography that developed in parts of Roman culture.

The origins of the Mithraic mysteries are fittingly mysterious, and many early historians believed that Mithras, the deity of the Mithraic mystery cult, was taken from the Indo-Iranian god Mitra who appears in the Vedic Texts or from the mythology surrounding the future Buddha, Maitreya, who is supposed to arrive on earth at some point in the future and bring about a new golden age. Recent scholars have rejected these theories in favor of the hypothesis that the Mithraic cult was invented entirely in Rome, possibly by a person who was from or lived near Iran and was familiar with Iranian myths. Some evidence indicates that Mithraism was influenced by the Persian religion Zoroastrianism.

The Mithraic mystery cult left no sacred texts or historical documents, but evidence of the cult appears in artistic carvings and other ritual artifacts from as early as the first century CE. The cult appears to have reached its zenith around the third century CE, at which time more than 700 Mithraic temples appeared across the Roman Empire. The cult declined at the end of the third century and then virtually disappeared for reasons that remain unknown. As with many religious movements that are shrouded in mystery and then disappear, fans of esoteric spirituality have latched onto Mithras as a source of lost occult wisdom. Some conspiratorial thinkers have asserted that the Mithras cult was a precursor of Freemasonry and that Mithraism still plays a role in extant, anti-Christian secret societies. These views are not supported or taken seriously by modern historians.

The Mithraic cult was organized around subterranean temples called “mithraea,” which were often built into natural caverns. The cult was centered in Rome and was fraternal, with women entirely prohibited from membership. The cult’s rituals were kept secret, and potential members were required to engage in a complex initiation process before being accepted into the group. The initiation ritual was never recorded, but it is shown in stages in a series of stone carvings. These carvings show a man naked and blindfolded, then with his hands bound, then being restrained on the ground, then with a crown on his head, and finally lying, as if dead, on the ground. After initiation, the initiate completed the ritual by clasping his right hand with the cult leader, and he was thereafter known as a “syndexioi,” or a person “united by the handshake.”

## Iconography and Myth

Mithraism is primarily known from three types of sculptures depicting Mithraic iconography and myth: the Tauroctony, or “slaughtering of the bull”; the Sun Banquet; and the lion-headed figure found in some of the Mithraea. From artistic remnants and later writings, the mythology of the cult has been partially reconstructed. Mithras was born as an adult out of stone and was associated with the sun god Sol. Mithras hunted and killed a sacred bull and later met with Sol, who





Mithras sacrificing a bull, Roman, second century CE. This sculpture depicts the central element in the Tauroctony, or “sacrifice of the bull,” one of the most important thematic images in the Mithraic religion. (De Agostini/Getty Images)

kneeled to him before the pair feasted on the flesh of a bull. At some point, Mithras ascended into the heavens in a chariot, accompanied by Sol. The precise meaning of these myths has not been determined, and historians have proposed several different interpretations.

The most important iconographic representation of Mithraism is the Tauroctony, which appears as either a relief or free-standing sculpture inside many of the Mithraea. In the Tauroctony, Mithras, dressed in Persian clothing and wearing a Phrygian hat, is seen kneeling on a bull, holding its nostrils with his left hand and stabbing the bull with a dagger in his right. Most versions show a canine and a snake attracted to blood flowing from the knife wound, while a scorpion

is depicted clawing the testicles of the beast. Mithras is usually accompanied by two additional figures holding shepherd hooks or torches to either side of him, known as “Cautes” (upward-facing torch) and “Cautopatēs” (downward-facing torch).

Other themes in the Tauroctony include the appearance of the sun (Sol) and moon in human form, with a ray of sunlight sometimes reaching down from Sol to touch Mithras. Often the central image is surrounded by smaller images depicting various events from the myth of Mithras. Scholars are uncertain about the function of the Tauroctony, and one of the leading current interpretations is that the various elements of the scene depict aspects of the Roman understanding of astrological phenomena and the movement of planets.

Some scholars have suggested that the Mithraic cult was a precursor or inspiration for early Christianity, and some have even suggested that Mithraism might have become the dominant religion if Christianity had not taken hold. Later scholarship indicates that there was little overt influence between Mithraism and Christianity. However, the Mithraic cult was a competitor of early Christianity, existing from the first to the third centuries CE, just as Christianity was evolving

and spreading among the Jews. There was a tendency, within Rome in general for citizens to gravitate toward concentrated religions and single-deity systems, and this contributed to both the growth of the mystery cults and the later dominance of Christianity and Judaism.

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# New Age and Neo-pagan Spirituality

The New Age spirituality movement of the 1960s and 1970s provides one of the most recent examples of the enduring human quest to find alternative representations of spirituality and faith. The neo-paganism movement, which overlaps with New Ageism, represents a similar desire to find alternative modes of religious expression, but it bases this search on explorations of esoteric wisdom within ancient societies. Both New Ageism and neo-paganism have influenced Western culture in many ways and represent a gradual movement away from the primary faiths that dominate global society.

## The New Age Movement

The New Age movement is an umbrella term used to describe a family of syncretic religious movements and concepts that emerged in the mid-20th century in Europe and America. New Ageism can be seen as an outgrowth of esotericism, a school of spiritual thought that attempts to understand spiritual truth through the acquisition of mystical knowledge. Esotericism has been part of the Western spiritual landscape since before the emergence of Christianity, and esoteric sects have emerged within many of the world's dominant religions. One of the best-known forms of esoteric spirituality is Gnosticism, a semi-Christian family of religions based on the process of accruing knowledge from within secret Christian Scriptures and other sources of sacred information.

The Theosophist movement of the late 19th century, led by Russian occultist Madam Helena Blavatsky and a group of similar theorists, sought to create a spiritual understanding of reality based on the wisdom of ancient manuscripts and diagrams, such as those from Gnosticism, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Western paganism. Many of the Theosophists predicted the coming of a new age of enlightenment, perhaps because of the arrival of a messiah or a group of enlightened leaders. The teachings of the Arcane School of the 1940s and of such

European occultists as Franz Mesmer gradually became part of this unique brand of Western esoteric thought.

These various strains of influence coalesced during the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s, with a number of independent schools and mystical gurus, or teachers, emerging in the United States and Europe who purported to teach methods of reaching enlightenment based on ancient knowledge and mystical teachings. Some derived inspiration from esoteric Christianity, while others looked to the east, such as Richard Alpert (Baba Ram Dass), a former colleague of Timothy Leary's, who taught a blend of Eastern philosophy and generalized self-help mysticism in the 1960s and 1970s. The new age predicted by early esoteric teachers became associated with astrology and the coming Age of Aquarius, which some predicted would become a golden age for humanity.

Belief in the coming new age is one of the central facets that ties the various New Age schools together, though the specifics of this revelatory era differ between schools. Some of these spiritual schools predicted that the new age would arrive in the 1970s or 1980s, and these schools have declined or disappeared, largely because of the apparent failure of their predictions. Belief in a coming new age reflects two aspects of New Age philosophy: First, there is the belief that the current age is not ideal, as evinced by war, racism, suffering, and a variety of other contemporary issues. Second, New Ageists believe that spiritual enlightenment will alter the human worldview such that global society may be changed for the better, thus initiating a new, utopian age. New Ageism often embraces a certain amount of skepticism toward science and empiricism, which they believe may ignore or overlook key truths that reveal as much or more about reality.

While each New Age school is different, the movement is characterized by syncretism, or the blend of ideas from different schools of thought. Another factor common to most New Age schools is a belief in supernatural phenomena and in the use of occult and pseudo-mystical practices in an effort to reach personal fulfillment and spiritual enlightenment. Occult practices, such as mind reading, communication with supernatural entities, tarot reading, and astrology, reflect a blend of Western esoteric occultism and inspiration from other traditions. The pseudo-mystical practices of New Ageism include meditation, yoga, chanting, acupuncture, alternative medicine, and dietary regimes, which are often depicted as being derived from ancient wisdom or secret teachings.

The popularity of such pseudo-spiritual exploration as yoga or tarot reading transformed New Ageism into a commercial industry intertwined with the pop-psychology, self-help, and healthy-living industries. During the 1960s and 1970s, only specialty New Age bookstores and occult shops sold goods aimed at this audience, but as the popularity of alternative spirituality has expanded, New Age-inspired literature and other products gradually became part of the mainstream.

### Ghostly Games

The Ouija board is a parlor game that was invented in the 1890s to capitalize on the American spiritualism trend of the mid-19th century. Scientific studies have shown that the “spiritual messages” that are believed to be transmitted through the board result from unconscious motor activity and correspond with the subconscious thoughts or wishes of the players.

Today, almost any predominantly white, middle-class, urban or suburban community in the United States has at least one yoga center or other source of New Age pseudo-spiritual exploration.

### Neo-paganism

The term “neo-paganism” is used to refer to a group of loosely related religions based on ancient pagan traditions. There is no single set of beliefs that characterize neo-paganism, as each neo-pagan tradition derives from a different set of influences. Some neo-pagan religions claim to be “continuations” or “derivations” of ancient schools of paganism, while others claim only to be influenced or inspired by these older spiritual movements. While there are many different varieties, the most influential schools of neo-pagan thought are Celtic or Druidic, Germanic, Wicca, Goddess worship, and Kemetic neo-paganism.

The earliest neo-paganist movement may have been the 17th-century British revival of Celtic Druidism, an obscure religious sect that completely disappeared from history and is known primarily through the writings of Roman historians. Very little is known about the Druids, but in the 1600s, a number of theorists published works claiming that the Druids could be linked to Stonehenge and other ancient monuments of the United Kingdom. Efforts to create a new druidic order began in the early 18th century and continued to the modern era. Surges of interest in neo-Druidism accompanied the late-19th-century esoteric religious trend and the counterculture and New Age movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Germanic neo-paganism, which includes the revival of Norse mythology and religious beliefs, began in the 19th century and gradually developed to encompass a variety of esoteric practices and theories. For instance, Germanic neo-pagans embraced the teachings of German poet Guido von List, who pioneered the occult interpretation of the runic alphabet, a form of Germanic writing that predates the adoption of the Roman alphabet. Germanic neo-paganism fed into the Nazi movement of World War II through the now famous Thule Society, a discussion group interested in ancient German history. Historians are still debating the degree to

which neo-pagan occultism played a role in Nazi theory and symbolism. Germanic neo-paganism has continued into the 21st century, with one of the most active subsets being the revival of Norse mythology.

The Goddess movement of the 1970s, which combines occult spirituality, alternative archaeological theories, and feminism, is another dominant school of neo-paganism that proposes a system of ritual worship based on a syncretism of ancient schools and beliefs. The related Wiccan movement began as an attempt to form a modern religion based on ancient Druidic spirituality and the theoretical existence of pre-Christian “witchcraft” religions. While Wicca overlaps with Celtic neo-paganism, it has grown to include esoteric theories from a variety of sources, including Eastern philosophy and other forms of New Ageism.

Finally, one notable strain of neo-paganism is Kemetism, or Egyptian neo-paganism, which attempts to explore the religion of ancient Egypt and to integrate ancient Egyptian mythology into modern life. Black Americans and Europeans gravitated toward Kemetism in the 1960s and 1970s, seeing it as a representation of native African spirituality, and they incorporated the religion into the broader black empowerment and African identity movements of the era. Kemetism largely fell out of favor by the 1980s, but it still has chapters in some American cities.

While each neo-pagan tradition is unique, there are certain themes and spiritual concepts common to Western paganism in general. First, neo-pagan traditions are generally polytheistic, believing in the existence of multiple gods, spirits, or deities. Second, neo-pagans tend to emphasize nature worship and the inherent spiritual connections between all living things. Neo-paganism also tends to be animist, believing that all life and even nonanimate parts of the environment share a common spiritual or physical energy. Neo-pagan spirituality often involves methods used to manipulate, read, or interpret this shared field of energy or life force within the universe.

Neo-pagans are also united by an interest in history and often by the desire to connect with the roots of their cultural ancestry. Druidic neo-pagans, for instance, may view their involvement in Druidism as a way to reconnect with the culture and society of ancient Britain, Ireland, or Scotland. It is also common for neo-pagans to believe that the major religions of the world have contributed to the detriments of modern society. A neo-pagan might believe, for instance, that Christianity or Islam had contributed to a worldview that promotes ecological destruction while the ancient religions were more ecologically friendly. Like the New Age movement, neo-paganism also typically involves the belief that there is hidden knowledge in the world and that accessing this esoteric knowledge is the key to some form of personal or spiritual enlightenment. For many neo-pagans, the key to understanding these hidden esoteric truths lies in uncovering the traditions of the ancient world.

Finally, any discussion of neo-paganism must turn to the fact that reinstating ancient pagan traditions is difficult and in most cases impossible. Unlike the world's major faiths, Western paganism is not part of an unbroken sequence but rather was completely replaced by other traditions before the pagans had a chance to preserve their religion in writing. Most of the records of ancient pagan cults come from the societies that replaced them, and the information provided by these historians may therefore be biased or inaccurate.

While some records remain regarding the myths of ancient paganism, there are virtually no records of how pagans conducted their religion, its rituals, daily methods of practice, and even the nature of belief in general. That is to say, historians have no way of telling how the pagans viewed their own religion. For instance, did the Germanic pagans tend toward a literal interpretation of their faith or were they more metaphorical? There are few historical clues to help historians answer these and many other questions, and so knowledge of these ancient cultures remains largely incomplete. The unlikelihood of being able to accurately revive ancient traditions does not make neo-paganism invalid. It merely means that modern paganism is more of an homage than a continuation.

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## HORNED GOD SYMBOL

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### Masculine Symbols of Divinity

The Horned God symbol is a modern religious symbol used in Wicca and Western neo-paganism as a symbol of the Horned God, a combined deity representing many of the masculine, hunting, and pastoral deities of European paganism reimagined into a contemporary deity. The most common design for the symbol is a circle topped with a crescent pointed upward to represent horns.

### The Symbolism of Horns

Observation of animal morphology and behavior was one of the earliest and most important sources of religious symbolism. Horn and antler symbols belong to this ancient, prehistoric class of symbolism derived directly from the earliest and most



basic observations of nature. While ancient humans believed that horns and antlers were the same, they are actually distinct biological structures. Antlers are made of bone and are grown and shed seasonally. Horns are made of two sections: a bone core that grows from the skull that is surrounded by a dead sheath of keratin (similar to the material in hair and fingernails). Unlike antlers, horns are never shed and continually grow throughout an animal's life.

Horns and antlers are most often found on males and are used for primarily two purposes, ritual combat with other males for mating privileges and to defend against predators. Reflecting these observations, horns and antlers have become symbolic of masculinity, combat, and warfare and have been used as a protective emblem. The largest, most powerful males, who generally have the largest antlers or horns, are generally dominant, meaning they have their choice of mates and become leaders of their societies. Antlers and horns thus became symbols of virility and leadership. Animals with antlers shed the outer surface of their antlers every year, and observations of this phenomenon may have inspired the association between antlers and cycles of growth and rebirth.

Deer and their antlered relatives, such as moose and elk, have been among the most important prey species for human hunters since the Paleolithic Era, while cattle, rams, goats, and other domestic horned animals were the foundation of human agriculture and animal husbandry. Horn and antler symbolism is therefore also a reflection of our cultural development, commemorating the importance of horned and antlered species in history, which have been both a source of food and of labor.

## **Horned Gods in Pagan Mythology**

Celtic paganism (the polytheistic mythology of the Celtic ethnolinguistic group of Iron Age Europe) is one of the chief sources of inspiration for Wicca and contemporary neo-paganism. While a variety of horned deities, including Egyptian and Roman gods, have contributed to the Horned God of neo-paganism and Wicca, the most important is the god Cernunnos, who derived from early Celtic mythology. One of the earliest images of this deity has been discovered in rock carvings from the Camonica Valley of northern Italy; it was inscribed around the fourth century BCE. The Celtic tribes of the late Iron Age lived in the forest and subsisted as hunter-gatherers, and important prey animals, such as deer and stag, feature prominently in the Celtic artistic record. The name "Cernunnos," meaning the "horned" or "peaked one," was first discovered on a stone carving found in Paris and dated to the reign of Emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE). Little is known about the antlered god of the ancient Celtic tribes, but it is often assumed that he represented similar qualities to later horned gods from other traditions.

Another deity that has become important in the neo-pagan movement is the Greek god Pan, who is generally depicted as a human-animal hybrid with the horns, legs, and hooves of a goat. Pan inspired the fauns, also human-goat hybrids, of later Roman mythology and became a major figure in the European Romantic period during which a variety of Greek and Roman deities became popular as literary and artistic subjects. Pan's animal characteristics linked him with the wilderness and with the animalistic side of humanity, including sexuality, fertility, and predatory impulses. Pan was a complex and tragic figure who was considered a minor deity in some parts of Greece, but he was seen as more of a semidivine trickster in other regions. Pan was not a civilized god and was therefore not worshipped in temples, but he was popular among rural Greeks who remained tied to their ecological environment and thus favored deities that represented animal spirits and the untamed elements of nature.

Gods and goddesses have been depicted as having animallike characteristics since the earliest records of human religion, and the emulation of animal qualities seems to be one of the most basic forms of human symbolism and spirituality. Early Roman religion had a god named Faunus who was basically the equivalent of the Greek Pan, and he was equated with the pastoral landscape and the more ancient spirits of the field, river, and woods. However, as Rome developed, Faunus disappeared and was replaced by the fauns, mythological half-goat monsters who were depicted as impish, mischievous, and sometimes evil. This shift in Roman spirituality was part of a broader trend away from the ancient ecologically based religions of ancient Europe to the more humanistic urban faiths that dominate Europe in the modern era. This shift accompanied the development of humanity from hunter-gatherer societies to pastoral



Panel of the Gundestrup cauldron shows the horned god Cernunnos surrounded by cult beasts, Celtic, second or first century BCE. Cernunnos may have been one of the inspirations for many of the horned, masculine deities that have emerged in various pagan traditions. (Heritage Images/Corbis)

agricultural societies and finally to urban imperial societies. Gradually, animals and the spirits of nature, which were once envisioned as the friends and teachers of humanity, were reframed as evil spirits representing the dangers of untamed nature.

The Horned God concept in Wicca and neo-paganism was created as an homage or interpretation of the ancient European ecological deities that represented nature and masculinity. In Wicca, the Horned God is the consort of the Mother Goddess and represents the creative power of the sun while the Goddess represents the feminine creative energy of the moon. The Horned God is often represented by a large, erect phallus, symbolizing his association with virility and masculine sexuality. Little is known about the gods of ancient European Celtic mythology, and the modern Horned God is therefore not a continuation of these classical beliefs. The Horned God of Wicca and neo-paganism is an amalgam of religious icons that was inspired by ancient beliefs but serves more as a romanticized representation of the mythologized roots of Western spirituality.

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## MJOLNIR

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### Symbol of Mythic Heroism

Mjolnir is the mythological weapon and emblem of Thor, the god of thunder in ancient Norse mythology. Thor was a complex deity associated with thunder and rain, power, protection, resurrection, and fertility. The symbol of Mjolnir has been adopted by the Germanic neo-pagan revival movement, which occurs in many different forms and uses the Norse gods and myths as an inspirational model for a modern nature-based, spirituality.

### The Norse World and Worlds

The Norsemen or Norse people were a sea-faring culture that occupied much of what is now known as Germanic Europe or Scandinavia between the 8th and 11th centuries CE. These Germanic tribes left no written records of their culture, but they produced a wealth of art, weapons, and other artifacts that reveal details about their lives, society, economy, and religion. The Norse people practiced a unique form of paganism with a variegated pantheon of deities, monsters, and heroes that

have become famous around the world through the remnants of Norse myths and legends. Between the 10th and 14th centuries CE, Christianity gradually replaced the native pagan traditions throughout Germanic Europe.

Most of what is known about Norse mythology comes from the work of Christian scholars who transcribed and recorded Norse legends during the Christianization of Scandinavia. The Prose Edda, written (or perhaps only compiled) by Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson in the 13th century, was intended as a manual to instruct students in the traditions of the Skalds—poets of the Icelandic and Scandinavian royal courts during the Viking Age (8th–10th centuries CE) and Middle Ages (5th–10th centuries CE). The Prose Edda has survived as one of the only sources of information regarding Norse myth. The other important scholarly work on the subject is the Poetic Edda, an older collection of Norse poems and stories from unknown authors and sources, some of which may have been written in the early Viking Age.

From these texts, scholars have learned that the Germanic pagans developed a rich and complex concept of metaphysical reality in which the universe was depicted as a multiverse consisting of nine separate realms or worlds that are connected to one another by the branches and roots of an immense ash tree known as Yggdrasil, the World Tree. Yggdrasil had three different levels, each of which contained three realms. The upper level consisted of Asgard, the home of the Aesir gods; Vanaheim, home to the Vanir gods; and Alfheim, which was populated by a species of elves. The middle level contains Midgard, home to humanity; Jotunheim, home of the Frost and Hill Giants; and Muspellheim, home of the Fire Giants. The lower level consists of Svartalfheim, land of dwarves; Niflheim, a sparsely populated realm; and Hel, the realm of the dead.

In the beginning, the Norse universe consisted of vast empty sea of primordial ice, fire, and ash. From this brew, a sleeping giant, named Ymir, came into being and was nourished by the milk of the Cosmic Cow, Audumla, who symbolized the elemental energy that fed the developing universe. Through a fantastic series of transformations (including a sexual union between Ymir's feet), Ymir produced the first races of beings, including Buri, the father of the Aesir and Humanity, and a race of giant mythical beings called the Frost Giants. Buri had a group of sons, one of which was Odin, the king of the Norse gods. Buri's sons killed the sleeping giant Ymir and used his body to build the nine worlds, the sun, and the moon.

Odin and his brothers then created the first man from an ash tree and the first woman from an elder tree and gave them the realm of Midgard for humanity to rule, under the watchful eye of the Aesir, who lived in the realm of Asgard. Asgard and Midgard were connected through the Bifrost Bridge, or Rainbow Bridge, a magical conduit that allowed the Aesir to travel between both realms and that may have been inspired by the seemingly mystical appearance of rainbows in the sky.

The Germanic tribes were a warrior people, and this reality of their lives is also reflected in their mythology, which contains a seemingly endless series of battles between the noble Aesir, led by Odin, and the many malevolent creatures that occupy portions of the nine worlds, including trolls, the Frost and Fire Giants, and a variety of other dangerous beasts. A series of powerful mythological heroes and villains participated in these battles, keeping Asgard and Midgard safe from destruction. However, Norse myth holds that the world is fated to end in a final apocalyptic battle, called “Ragnarok,” which was supposed to result in the complete destruction of the gods.

## Thor

The origins of Thor are somewhat mysterious, though he has become the most famous character of Norse myth, arguably from having been enshrined as a comic book superhero by Marvel Comics in 1952. Thor was the son of Odin and a giantess named Jord, who was Odin’s concubine. In the prologue to the Prose Edda, Sturluson claims that Thor was derived from Asian mythology and that the word

“Aesir” was a corruption of “Asia.”

Most modern historians have since rejected Sturluson’s Asian origins theory in favor of a native origin for the Thor myths.

Thor was the strongest of the gods, famed for his power and ferocity. He was the god of thunder and weather, and the sound of thunder was attributed to Thor’s chariot riding through the heavens. Though a powerful protector, Thor had a ferocious temper and often had to be restrained from eruptions of violence. He was usually depicted as an extremely large and muscular man with a long red beard.

Thor possessed a host of magical items, made for him by the dwarves of Svartalfheim, including his hammer, Mjolnir, which may have originally been an axe or club but later morphed into a hammer. Not only



Amulet in the form of Thor’s hammer Mjolnir, Viking, from Uppland, Sweden, 10th century. While Mjolnir is often depicted as a war military or “war hammer,” traditional depictions or Mjolnir indicate that the item was an agricultural tool. (Werner Forman/Universal Images Group/Getty Images)

was Mjolnir tailor-made for smashing trolls and giants, but it was also a thrown weapon that would magically return to Thor's grasp. Mjolnir was also a restorative tool, and in one myth, Thor used the hammer's power to resurrect two goats from their skin and bones. Thor spent much of his time fighting giants and engaging in contests of strength, bravery, and wit. His greatest enemy was the Midgard serpent, Jormungandr, a gargantuan snake born from a union between the mischievous god Loki and a giantess. There are several myths about Thor's battles with Jormungandr, but the greatest confrontation between the two is supposed to occur at the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarok, where Thor finally defeats the serpent but, in doing so, releases a cloud of poison that kills him as well.

The Norse people were part of a much larger, cultural-linguistic group known as the Indo-Europeans, a loose group of tribes that migrated out of Eastern Europe between the fifth and fourth millennia BCE and colonized much of Europe, India, and parts of the Middle East. Comparative archaeological studies suggest that many of the deities and mythological heroes of later European, Indian, and Middle Eastern cultures were inspired or derived from the polytheistic pantheons of the ancient Indo-European tribes. The storm god Thor bears a close resemblance to the Greek god Zeus, the Roman god Jupiter, and the Hindu god Indra, all of whom were gods of thunder and lightning. In addition, the mythological giant serpent is also found in many Indo-European myths, often as the archenemy of the storm god figure.

## Thor Worship

Archaeological evidence suggests that Thor was one of the most popular of the Norse gods, inspiring Thor cults throughout Germanic Europe. Thor was a protective deity associated with warding off evil and misfortune and was also equated with masculinity, vitality, and sexual potency. Thor's association with wind, rain, and weather also made him a symbol of fertility and agricultural productivity. Sailors prayed to Thor to provide strong winds to hasten their journeys or to prevent stronger winds that would probably kill them. Farmers and shepherds prayed to Thor for rain to nourish crops and livestock. Archaeologists have found evidence to suggest that farmers sometimes placed small totemic axes in seed holes, representing Mjolnir, as a type of good luck charm for the growing season.

Mjolnir was also a symbol of resurrection, possibly owing to myths about Thor's raising bodies from the dead. Small metal and stone hammers have been found throughout gravesites in Norse territories, and these objects seem to have been fitted with holes, suggesting that they were worn as amulets. The presence of Mjolnir amulets in graves suggests that they were perhaps intended to facilitate resurrection or passage to an afterlife.

The stylized image of Mjolnir has become a symbol of Germanic neo-paganism as well, representing power, virtue, virility, reincarnation, protection, and connection to the ancient religion of the Germanic tribes. Modern attempts to reinvent Norse spirituality are highly contrived because little is known about how the Germanic tribes practiced their religion or conceived of the metaphysical world in general. It is believed that the Norse religion was largely ecological in character, and Germanic neo-paganism is also envisioned as a nature-friendly spiritual movement. Neo-paganism aside, Mjolnir symbolizes the heritage of the Scandinavian people and provides a visual link to the native roots of their culture.

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## NATURE WORSHIP

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### Ecological Faith in Antiquity

Nature worship is a religious system based on the deification and veneration of nature or natural phenomena. Historians believe that nature worship was one of the world’s earliest forms of spirituality, often involving animism, or the belief that nonhuman animals, plants, and other features of the natural environment can possess a spiritual essence or soul.

### Ecological and Humanistic Religions

German biologist Wolfgang Schad’s 1971 book *Mammals and Man* contains the argument that the evolution of humans is a matter of separation from the environment. According to Schad, the design of the human body, including the morphology of such key features as the hands, feet, and mouth, can be explained as a series of evolutionary innovations that allowed humans to become less dependent on the environment. Schad’s concept of ecological separation provides an interesting parallel to a similar feature in religious evolution.

The earliest human societies subsisted by living in much the same way as many nonhuman species: hunting wild game and gathering fruits and vegetables growing in the fields and forests. To survive, humans learned to attend to the behaviors of wild animals and to the variegated natural patterns that surrounded them. To the earliest humans, the abilities of animals and the cycles of nature likely seemed

quite magical and this gradually led to the development of spiritual hypotheses to explain the features of the natural world. In addition, ancient humans understood well that nature is the source of life and that all humans are intimately linked to the land, the sky, and their fellow creatures for survival. Nature worship was among the earliest types of human spirituality, deriving both from our fascination with mysterious natural phenomena and from the recognition that life depends on nature and is subject to nature's mercurial transformations.

Historians believe that terrestrial gods, which are the deities associated with the earth, were invented before celestial gods, which are the gods believed to exist in an unearthly realm, such as a celestial heaven or spiritual plane. A culture's gods reflect the lifestyle of the people living within the culture, and the gods of the rocks, trees, rivers, and wild beasts were therefore perfectly suited to human societies living in close concert with their environments. The development of animal husbandry and then agriculture led to a new pantheon of deities representing this novel environment that sits within nature but is crafted by human hands. Further development led to semiurban, suburban, and finally urban lifestyles, as people more frequently lived lives focused on humanity and increasingly divorced from natural patterns. As the terrestrial gods became less relevant, humans increasingly focused on the celestial gods and the internal, personal search for divinity. This developmental pattern can be described as the evolution of "humanistic" religion from the more ancient "ecological" religions of humanity's ancestors.

While nature worship is no longer the norm, certain conceptual remnants of this earlier ecological approach to faith have filtered into broader cultural patterns. For instance, it is common, cross-culturally to refer to the earth as "mother earth," reflecting the basic understanding that all life is derived from and nourished by the earth in some primal sense. The idea of an earth mother or father is among the most ancient spiritual concepts known to humanity and has been reflected in various ways among a large number of religions. The Incas of Peru, for instance, believed in "Mama Pacha," or the "Earth Mother," while some ancient Egyptians divided the universe into the provinces of the sky and the earth and viewed humans and other creatures as the product of the union between the male earth god and the female sky goddess.

While there are still many folk religions in the world that retain a more ecological character, human society is now dominated by humanistic faiths and by a cosmological, celestial approach to divinity. By the time the early Jews and Christians were sacrificing animals to atone for their sins, their relationship with nature had already become highly abstracted. No longer did these individuals see themselves as children of the earth; they viewed themselves as children of the sky (or heaven) whose life on the earth was merely a passage to the next dimension. The material of the earth, therefore, was no longer considered sacred in its own right,



but it was merely substance created for the benefit and consumption of humanity and was sacred only in its human use.

The shift from ecological to humanistic religion may have hastened environmental consumption and exploitation, but it is an illusion to imagine that nature-worshipping cultures lived in balance with their environments. The ancient Australian Aborigines, who continue to practice a very ecologically oriented form of spirituality, hunted several species to extinction long before the humanistic faiths arrived on the continent with the first European colonists. The pollution of the sacred Ganges River and the deforestation of the red cedar groves, sacred to the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest, are other examples of how nature-worshipping cultures still participate in environmental destruction. Population growth and the need for resources are the most important factors affecting human use of the environment, and as the human population continues to grow, further ecological deterioration will result.

Perhaps one of the central factors motivating the shift from ecological to humanistic religions was humanity's increasing facility for "controlling" and manipulating the natural world. Medicine, for instance, was once based on gathering herbs and substances from nature, but it increasingly became a matter of cultivating plant or animal extracts and later of producing synthetic chemicals in laboratories. The development of medicine is a microcosm of the development of human culture as a whole, moving away from a model of the human within the environment and toward a model of the environment within the human.

### **Neo-paganism: European Nature Worship Revisited?**

Many of the modern neo-pagan religions of Europe and North America are modeled on the idea that the ancient pagan societies of Europe were ecological religions that often involved some element of nature worship. Neo-Druidism, for instance, is a new religious tradition based on a religious sect within the broader Celtic culture that once occupied parts of Great Britain, Ireland, and France. Scattered remnants from the Druids indicate that they had a strong reverence for nature and conducted numerous rituals dedicated to spirits of the earth and heavens. Historians generally believe that the spirits of the earth and the sun were among the most powerful totemic symbols of the ancient Druidic faith.

Very little evidence exists regarding the specifics of Iron Age Celtic mythology and spirituality, and many historians believe that it is impossible to recreate a religion based on this ancient tradition. The reemergence of Druidism grew out of the Universalist movement of the 1700s and gained potency during the mysticism craze that swept through Europe in the early 20th century. The nature-oriented rituals embraced by modern practitioners of neo-Druidism partially derive from

the scattered records of Iron Age Druidic rituals and partially from the more modern reinvention of Druidism that occurred between the 1700s and the early 20th century.

For instance, modern neo-pagans and neo-Druids have embraced the idea that the oak tree (genus *Quercus*) and the parasitic plant mistletoe (family Santalaceae) were among the most important totemic symbols of ancient Druidism. This belief is derived from the writings of Pliny the Elder, a Roman historian and naturalist who lived in the first century CE and described a “tree worshipping” Druid ceremony involving oak and mistletoe that he described as the basis of the Druidic religion. Modern historians have expressed skepticism in Pliny the Elder’s description of the Druidic faith and believe that many of the rituals described by the Roman historian may have been altered or misconceived. By extension, the modern neo-pagan oak and mistletoe ceremonies may also be inaccurate as they are based only on these questionable historical descriptions of the faith.

It is reasonable to believe that the ancient pagans of Europe had a nature-based religion, similar to those found in indigenous cultures around the world. However, unlike the Incas of Peru or the Native Americans, the details of pagan beliefs and practice have not been preserved through history. Modern Druidism is less a continuation of Druidic culture and more a reimagining of the faith that pays homage to European cultural history. The nature-oriented beliefs of Modern neo-pagans are also a reflection of increasing awareness regarding the rapid degradation of nature. This contemporary ecological consciousness is concentrated among affluent Western populations, which are the same populations that have embraced the New Age and neo-pagan faiths in general. While neo-paganism may have little resemblance to the nature worship of ancient Europe, it provides a sense of continuity and heritage for many followers and expresses the growing desire to “return” to a simpler, and perhaps more environmentally friendly, sense of divinity.

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## PENTAGRAMS AND PENTACLES

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### Fivefold Spiritual Symbolism

The pentagram, a five-pointed star, and the pentacle, a pentagram enclosed in an unbroken circle, are ancient spiritual symbols that have come to be associated with

modern neo-paganism. Both symbols have been linked to ancient magical rites and ceremonies and have been mistakenly associated with satanism or demonology. Pentagrams and pentacles seem to have appeared in many cultures around the world, and this has led some to assume that these symbols represent a deep mystical truth that has persisted as an undercurrent through the evolution of world religion.

### History of the Five-pointed Symbol

Historians have proposed a variety of theories to explain why the five-pointed star symbol has appeared in so many cultures with so many different meanings. The popularity of the symbol may be related to the fact that the five-pointed star is the simplest possible star shape. Three- and four-pointed symbols are more typically seen as Xs, crosses, or triangles, and so the addition of the fifth point is necessary to qualify the symbol as a “star.”

The pentagram is a version of the five-pointed star that is not filled in and consists only of diagonal lines, while the pentacle is a version of the pentagram contained within an outer circle touching the points of the star. Some historians claim that the pentagram has been a religious symbol for as long as 8,000 years,

but other historians propose a far more recent date of origin. Certainly, pentagrams and pentacles have been found in ancient artwork dating to at least 3500 BCE.

The pentagram and pentacle both appear in the symbolism of prehistoric Egypt, where some historians believe the pentagram was a symbol of the Egyptian netherworld, believed to be the source of morning star light. Another theory holds that the pentagram was the symbol of the Phoenician goddess Tanit, though there is little evidence to support this claim. The pentagram also appears in ancient records of the Babylonians, Sumerians, and Mesopotamians, with uncertain spiritual or symbolic associations.



The pentagram is one of a number of stellar and solar symbols common in modern reinventions of pagan spiritual systems. Though often associated with witchcraft and satanism in the modern media, the pentagram is used in many forms of neopaganism as a positive symbol of divine influence.

Many theories about the pentagram and pentacle hinge on beliefs about the early spiritual and mathematical symbolism associated with the number “five.” The human body can be envisioned as having a fivefold organization, consisting of the four limbs and the head. Some theorists have therefore suggested that the pentagram became an early symbol of the human body. Historians have also suggested that the pentagram became a symbol of the Greek goddess Hygeia, who was the patron goddess of health and hygiene. While this association may seem plausible, there is scant evidence to support the claim, and historians are uncertain whether the pentagram was widely known or used in ancient Greece.

Another theory is that the pentagram came to represent the five visible planets and contributed to early fivefold concepts of the cosmos. The pentagram has a number of other mathematical associations, and it has been linked to the golden ratio, a complex mathematical concept based on the relationship between certain numbers. Representations of the golden ratio have been found in many biological structures, including the growth of certain plant species and the development of mollusk shells. The lines of a mathematically precise pentagram reflect the golden ratio, and some have suggested that this signifies an underlying spiritual and mathematical significance to the symbol.

Patterns of five are common in Chinese Taosim and pre-Taoist philosophy, including the now famous Five Elements theory and the five animals. Chinese symbolism often uses the pentagram and pentacle to represent the essential relationships between components in their fivefold systems. Similarly, in Hebrew mythology, the pentagram has been used to represent the four planes (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual) of existence, which are linked together by God, which is symbolized by the fifth spoke of the star.

Some proponents of alternative historical theories have asserted that the pentagram was a secret symbol of recognition among members of the Pythagoreans,

### **The First Bases**

Western mathematics is based on a decimal, or base-10, system, which has become the most common mathematics system in the world. Ancient cultures, however, developed a variety of alternative systems based on different bases. For instance, the Mesoamerican societies often used vigesimal, or base-20, systems, while the native tribes of Papua New Guinea used a pentadecimal, or base-15, numeric system. The Native American tribes of the Chumash, along the coast of California, used an unusual quaternary, or base-4, system of mathematics similar to one used in modern theoretical mathematics to model the human genetic system, which is based on combinations of four DNA bases.

a pseudo-scientific mystical sect that emerged around the fifth century BCE and extended the esoteric mathematical and metaphysical theories developed by the Greek philosopher Pythagoras. Historical information of this “secret usage” by the Pythagoreans is tenuous at best and is based on little actual evidence. However, pseudo-historical myths about secret usage have contributed to rumors that the pentagram became popular in other rumored secret societies, such as the Freemasons or the mythical Illuminati.

Returning to the nonmystical, it has also been noted that the pentagram can be drawn without lifting the stylus from the page. This makes it fun to draw and is probably part of the reason that doodles contain a lot of pentagrams. There are many potential reasons for the popularity of the five-pointed star symbol, some linked with spiritual and mathematical associations and some likely based on little more than the symbol’s simple and logical aesthetic.

### **Significance in Neo-paganism**

The pentagram was once used in Christianity to denote the five wounds received by Christ. Though never a major symbol, this association may explain many appearances of the pentagram in Christian design and architecture. The Freemasons used the symbol to represent the blazing star and the Star of David, thus symbolizing the fraternity’s link to early Christian and Jewish mysticism. Masonic use of the pentagram has been controversial, however, because of perceived links to Satanism and the occult.

The first associations between the pentagram and the occult emerged in the mid-1800s in connection with the writings of French occultist Eliphas Levi, who drew in one of his books on mysticism an image of a “Sabbatic Goat,” that also contained a prominent pentagram symbol. This image later inspired a bizarre conspiratorial theory about a god named “Baphomet,” supposedly worshipped by the Knights Templar. Historians have found no reliable evidence to suggest that the Knights Templar were satanists and believe that Baphomet was a product of anti-Templar propaganda.

The Church of Satan adopted the inverted pentagram (with the fifth spoke pointing down) as its symbol in the 1960s. The satanists also commonly depicted the pentagram as being associated with the head of a goat, a traditional symbol of fertility common to the ancient Abrahamic traditions and later associated with witchcraft during the Puritan era. The Satanists purposefully adopted occultist symbols and Christian iconography as a way of representing their rejection of Christian morality and philosophy. From this moment on, the pentagram has been linked to Satan and the occult in the popular imagination.

In American neo-paganism and Wicca, the pentagram and pentacle are both used as charms for invocation and to focus spiritual energy. The circle is often linked to the earth or the natural realm, and the pentagram is linked with the five-fold organization of the body. Thus, the neo-pagan pentacle can be seen as representing the link between the earth and the body. Some Wiccan sects use the pentagram to represent the natural elements, usually conceived as air, water, fire, earth, and the spirit. Regardless of the specific symbolism used, the pentagram and pentacle generally represent the links between humanity and nature and therefore fit into the broader ecological focus of modern neo-paganism. Like many other neo-pagan symbols, the five-pointed star has many ancient and varied layers of meaning, and this has made the pentagram a fitting symbol for a religious movement that is at once current and historic.

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## SATANISM

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### Religion of Christian Rejection

In Western pop-cultural imagination, satanism refers to a category of ritual crimes and abuses committed by cults or individuals who worship Satan, the demonic antithesis of Jesus Christ in the Christian tradition. Ritual torture and the sacrifice of animals (usually cats for some reason) are practices commonly linked with this largely imaginary satanic practice. This understanding of satanism emerged from a moral panic that spread through the West in the 1980s and 1990s and is largely illusory, serving as a template for moral and societal fears regarding the erosion of traditional morals and values.

The satanic churches and "brotherhoods" that emerged largely from the countercultural milieu of the 1960s and 1970s have established forms of satanism that function as substantial religious movements, providing community, identity, doctrine, practice, and meaning for the individuals who adhere to them, thus fulfilling the essential requirements of religion. Satanists seek self-realization and spiritual or personal transformation through nontraditional methods, and this places

satanism within the New Age or alternative religious category. However, satanism is manifested in a variety of ways, from a more traditional model centered around churches or temples and codified doctrine and practices, to a more individualistic model akin to humanism and blended with elements of anarchistic and rationalist philosophy in which Satan serves as a symbol or archetype of natural, primal forces.

### **Satanism within Christianity**

In the sense that all versions of satanism are linked by the acceptance of Satan as a deity, deity-like figure, or a spiritual symbol or archetype, satanism is inextricably linked to the Christian tradition from which it arose. Satanism is an oppositional spiritual philosophy that seeks to invert the spiritual order proscribed by Christian doctrine. Embracing satanism necessarily places one in opposition to Christian philosophy and represents a substantive rejection of society (or elements of society) built on Christian ideals.

In the Christian tradition, Satan is evil. More than this, Satan is the source of *all* evil, spreading immorality, violence, and other ills throughout society. When the emerging satanism movement of the 1960s and 1970s was viewed through the stained-glass lens of those raised to view Satan as a malevolent and wholly unredeemable figure, the common image of satanism as a dangerous, immoral, and violent cult emerged and developed into a pop-culture phenomenon. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, satanism became an American crisis invented within the ethical void of the mainstream media and furthered because each journalistic expose on satanism drew viewers by the thousands, eager to have a scapegoat for the seemingly unending waves of societal woes.

Scholars of satanism sometimes point to the May 1985 episode of the ABC television series *20/20*, in which commentators stated that there may be thousands of underground satanic cults in the United States, as the beginning of the satanism craze. Geraldo Rivera's 1988 two-hour documentary about satanism in America was one of the highest-rated television documentaries in history, and investigators have identified dozens of other articles, television specials, and books written about this emerging threat to American society during this period. Many of the documentaries and books that helped to promote the satanism scare were based on autobiographical accounts of individuals who claimed to have taken part in satanic cults and later escaped to write books on the subject. Similar to the "I was abducted by aliens and have returned to write a book about it" phenomenon of the *X-Files* era, the former cultist biographies became a best-selling genre for nearly a decade, and much of the news about this crisis was based solely and completely on the reports of alleged former cult members.

Investigations of satanic cults, in most cases, failed to produce evidence of criminal immoral activity within satanism, and serious criminal investigations rarely revealed anything even remotely approaching the reports in the popular media. In many cases, what investigators found were groups of young people using the banner of satanism as a badge to make their antagonistic, angst-ridden youth groups seem more meaningful or dangerous. In other cases, mentally ill individuals who actually committed ritual murder and abuse were seen as representative of an underground satanist conspiracy. Investigations revealed that these incidents, and the individuals who committed these heinous crimes, had no links to an organized spiritual expression of satanism.

Crimes of this vein, often called “satanic ritual abuse,” are not expressions of satanism as a religious movement, but they are anti-Christian expressions in the extreme, manifesting Satan in exactly the way that Satan is viewed in Christian tradition. In some cases, the satanic craze inspired individuals to take on this banner, calling themselves satanists and participating in rituals that mirrored the stories appearing in newspapers and on television. The craze therefore created itself through a combination of misrepresentation, marketing, and fear.

### **Satanism beyond Christianity**

Through modern satanist organizations, satanism has become far more than an oppositional movement, but it has a serious public relations problem because choosing an icon of evil and immorality as one’s symbol makes it difficult for satanists to be seen as anything more substantial than a depraved cult or an adolescent expression of social or cultural angst. The deeper meaning sought by those who utilize satanism for legitimate self-realization and an expression of deeper spiritual concepts will be forever invisible to many who have been raised or taught to view Satan as a largely two-dimensional symbol of evil.

Anton Lavey, the godfather of modern satanism, established the Church of Satan on April 30, 1966, a date chosen to coincide with the spring equinox, a period historically linked to the pagan traditions of pre-Christianity. His book, *The Satanic Bible* (1969), is the foremost guide to modern ritual satanism. Lavey’s conception of satanism was consciously oppositional, and he intended it to be an affront to Christianity and the other Abrahamic faiths. Lavey’s concept of satanism is complex, but one of the most important themes is the idea that self-realization should not be based on the denial of one’s inherent nature. Lavey’s satanism therefore extolled the virtues of sexuality, materialism, and a focus on hedonism and attendance to the physical world. Lavey embraced the ideals of humanism, but he rejected humanism as an alternative to religion because it lacked structure for ceremony and ritual, which he believed were innately satisfying experiences to the human psyche.



In the decades since Lavey established his churches, satanism has evolved beyond Lavey's ideas as well, incorporating pre-Christian pagan concepts in a more substantive way. For instance, modern satanists associate their modified Satan concept with the fertility and pastoral gods of Greece, Rome, and pre-Christian Europe, such as the Greek half-goat god Pan or the Roman forest god Sylvanus. Satan has become an archetype of humanity's animal nature, representing the passions *and* values of a more primeval version of the species.

Over the years, satanism has moved away from the oppositional stance represented by Lavey and the Church of Satan. Still, given the vast array of modern alternative spiritualities available to practitioners, those who choose the satanist model most often do so with some level of conscious reflection upon the Christian system. Many also approach satanism partially out of a desire to oppose the idea so common in the Western cultural landscape, that Abrahamic morality is the *only* way to live a virtuous life.

Just as Libertarians propose radical departures from the mainstream political model, satanism proposes radical departures from the standard model of spiritual realization and argues that there are meaningful representations to be found by attendance to nontraditional systems. By reinventing Satan as a figure of natural power and personal liberation, satanism stands against the dominating influence of Western Christian-centrism but ultimately constitutes a parallel path toward many of the same goals and represents one of the most intentionally controversial approaches to religion.

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## STONEHENGE

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### Agrarian Monument of Prehistory

Stonehenge is one of the most famous prehistoric monuments in the world. It is located in Wiltshire, England, and is believed to have been an important spiritual and cultural symbol for the Bronze Age cultures of the region. A henge is a type of prehistoric monument that consists of a mound of earth surrounded by a ditch and usually formed in the shape of a circle or oval. Most henges also have wood or stone uprights edifying the outline of the shape. Stonehenge has a collection



Megaliths (large, ancient stones) constituting the circular monument known as Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain near modern-day Wiltshire, England. Built several thousand years ago, Stonehenge was a grave site and perhaps an astronomical center. Stonehenge is often considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Middle Ages. (Corel)

of large stones used to mark the circular formation. The stones are stacked and arrayed in a way that is believed to have had some spiritual or cultural significance. Stonehenge is not the only famous henge in Europe; the nearby Avebury Henge, consisting of three circular arrangements of stone, is another remnant of the ancient cultures that once inhabited the area.

### **Myths and Theories**

In a 12th-century “history” written by British historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, Stonehenge is described as being the creation of Merlin, the famed mythological magician who was the adviser and companion of King Arthur. Merlin apparently used his magic to bring the stones from Ireland and then arranged them in Wiltshire, sometime in the fifth century CE. In 1586, teacher William Camden, in his book *Britannia*, suggested that Stonehenge had been built by giants at some point in ancient prehistory. Other theorists, such as the architect Inigo Jones, theorized in the 17th century that Stonehenge was built by the Romans and was perhaps linked to one of the mysterious Roman cults. While Jones’s theory may seem plausible, there is no evidence to suggest a Roman cultic connection to the British henges.

In the 17th century, scholar John Aubrey conducted one of the first serious examinations of the ancient prehistoric sites in Britain. In his 1665 book about the subject, Aubrey suggested that the Druids of the Bronze Age may have had a ceremonial or spiritual use for the British henges, though Aubrey offered no distinct evidence for this belief. In his 1740 book, *The History of the Religion and Temples of the Druids*, archaeologist William Stukeley built on Aubrey's theory of Stonehenge as a Druidic monument used for religious rituals. Stukeley and Aubrey were the architects of the common mythology that Stonehenge was created and used by the Druids as part of their spiritual rituals.

In the early 1900s, the Universalist movement in Europe saw the advent of a variety of syncretic spiritual schools fueled by the idea that all people were united in a single divine reality. One of the manifestations of this idea was “neo-Druidism,” a modern neo-pagan faith pioneered by George Watson MacGregor Reid, who believed it was possible to use the surviving remnants of Druidism to create a new characteristic “faith” that reflected European spiritual heritage. During the 1905 solstice, a group of 650–700 “Druids” participated in a ceremony at Stonehenge. A few years later, the local landowner began restricting access to the site and attempted to charge admission. The followers of Reid's neo-Druidism objected to this on the grounds that it violated their religious freedom.

Reid's neo-Druidism, which he called the “Universal Bond,” fell out of fashion for some time, but it remained a strong undercurrent in alternative European spirituality. Over the next century, neo-Druidic orders spread and diversified, absorbing elements of other cultural traditions and modernizing their practice to reflect, rather than recreate, the ancient traditions of the Celtic Druids. In the 1950s and 1960s, elements of the branch of neo-paganism known as Wicca were also incorporated into neo-Druidism. From the 1970s to the 1990s, a number of countercultural groups latched onto this movement, attempting to hold festivals and other events at Stonehenge, a situation that concerned archaeologists interested in preserving the integrity of the site. In the 21st century, hundreds of neo-pagans (and fans of recreationist events) still gather at Stonehenge to celebrate the winter and summer solstices, seen as ancient periods of cultural and spiritual significance.

## Archaeology of Stonehenge

Archeological evidence clearly indicates that Stonehenge was built more than 2,500 to 3,000 years before the existence of the Druids, and archaeologists have found no evidence to suggest any significant connection between Druid spirituality and Stonehenge. Archeologists have found that some of the upright stone pillars in the Stonehenge formation are aligned with the rising and falling of the sun during the summer and winter solstices. This discovery has led many to speculate that

Stonehenge was once an astrological calendar that facilitated tracking the movements of the sun and moon. Astronomers generally disagree with this hypothesis, arguing that effective calendars must be able to be adjusted for annual variations and that large stone boulders are therefore not conducive to calendar construction.

Recent research, led by archaeologist Mike Parker Pearson, suggests that the earliest building at the Stonehenge site occurred within 1,000 years of the advent of farming in Britain. One of the most promising theories regarding the origin of Stonehenge is that the site accompanied a dramatic shift in early British culture, as the once isolated and largely independent tribes that occupied the region began to integrate, forming a more stable cultural identity. During this same period, other artistic relics found across Britain, France, Ireland, and Scotland indicate a similar type of increasing uniformity, suggesting that all of Western European culture was entering a period of cultural exchange and amalgamation. Pearson and colleagues believe that Stonehenge may have been built over a period of many years, as people from across the British Isles, as far as Northern Scotland, gathered to celebrate and contribute food and resources to the building of the monument as a shared representation of their new, unified cultural connections.

Excavations of Stonehenge suggest that the monument was originally a burial site, most likely used as a crypt for social or spiritual leaders. Pearson and colleagues have discovered a connection between Stonehenge and a nearby site known as Woodhenge, named for the wooden, rather than stone, circles found at the site. Scattered artifacts found at Woodhenge suggest that the site was once used as a temporary housing area, perhaps occupied once or twice a year over many decades or even centuries and then abandoned at the end of each season. Pearson and colleagues believe that the architects of Stonehenge, gathering from across Europe, met twice each year (during the summer and winter solstices) to conduct social rituals at Stonehenge and contribute to the ongoing construction of the monument (which likely took more than a century) while living, temporarily, in the nearby Woodhenge area. These early tribes most likely practiced ancestor worship and met near the gravesite of Stonehenge partially to honor their ancestors and past leaders. Stonehenge and Woodhenge together represent this ancient agricultural revolution, which ultimately led to the origin of European culture as it is now known.

While the neo-Druidic use of Stonehenge may be largely based on misconceptions and folkloric myths connecting the monument to Druid spirituality, the modern “ceremonial” use of the site does accurately reflect some aspects of the current understanding of Stonehenge. As in the ancient Neolithic culture of Britain, Stonehenge is still used as a gathering space during the agriculturally significant solstices, where individuals celebrate their collective unity and connection to their ancestors.

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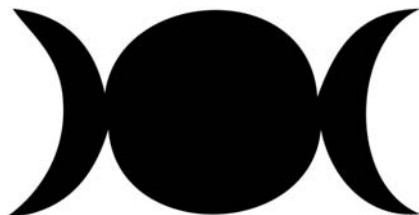
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## THE TRIPLE GODDESS AND TRIPLE SPIRAL

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### Threefold Symbols of the Spirit

The triple goddess and triple spiral symbols are used in modern Wicca and some related schools of neo-paganism as representations of Goddess worship and trifold concepts of femininity in spirituality. Popularized in the 1950s and 1960s, both symbols are generally linked to Greek, Roman, and Celtic pagan traditions. The most common triple-goddess symbol consists of three lunar images, representing the waxing, waning, and full phases of the moon.



The triple goddess symbol, depicting the moon in three stages of the lunar cycle, and the triple spiral are common trifold symbols used in Western new age spirituality. Though intended to symbolize ancient pagan spiritual traditions, both symbols are modern in origin.

### The Significance of Threes

The number "3" is considered sacred in a large number of spiritual systems. This fact in itself is not especially meaningful because many other numbers are also considered spiritually significant for different reasons, including 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and so on. Philosopher Carl Jung considered the triform god or goddess concept to be a significant archetype in its own right, representing the developmental stages of the human life (birth, life, and death) through the three forms of the deity. Jung's theories are by no means definitive, and three-pronged systems probably arose for a variety of reasons. For instance, it has been suggested that the trifurcated symbolism represented the nine-month period of human gestation divided into three trimesters. Some archaeologist evidence

supports this link, as triform symbols were sometimes associated with birthing rituals.

It is worth noting that the number 1 generally represents the concept of unity, while the number 2 often represents duality. The number 3 then, is the first and smallest number that can be used to represent a system more complex than a duality and is therefore commonly used in representing things that evolve in stages. Often, the triform deity is used to represent opposing states that could be viewed as a duality, with a third state serving as a sort of transition between the other two. The three-part system is generally organized into a circle, representing a pattern of development that is both linear, in that it flows in only one direction, and cyclic. This differentiates three-part systems from four- and five-part systems, which are more often used to symbolize elements that are interrelated, like the Five Elements theory of classical Chinese philosophy.

### **Maiden-Mother-Crone**

In Wicca and neo-paganism the triple goddess is often envisioned through the three life stages known as the maiden, mother, and crone. Feminist scholar Jane Ellen Harrison may have been the originator of this theory, as she noted mother, maiden, and crone archetypes in Greek mythology. Poet-mythologist Robert Graves, inspired by Harrison, popularized the three-goddess concept in his 1948 book *The White Goddess*. Graves's triple-goddess theory, and his books, became popular with the New Age and Wiccan feminist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, though Graves's argument was based on limited scholarship.

The maiden, mother, crone trinity represents the cyclic patterns of womanly life, symbolized by the stages of the moon. Women and the moon have long been equated, and this may represent ancient recognition that timing of the female menstrual cycle can be associated with the lunar cycle. Many different cultures worshipped the moon as a goddess or as a consort of a celestial sun god. In the triple-goddess concept, the new moon represents the "maiden" or "virgin" state, which is associated with childhood and youth. As the moon waxes and becomes full, it represents that adult motherhood state. The waning moon represents the crone, or the stage of death, eventually leading to rebirth and the beginning of a new cycle.

The triple-goddess concept symbolizes the links between womanhood and the patterns of nature manifested in the growth, seeding, and death of plants. As in many aspects of ancient religion, the concept of femininity is inextricably linked to the cycles of the agricultural year, and both represent one another in mythology. Interestingly, the crone is the least represented of the three stages, and some scholars believe this is because the aged woman, seen as powerful in neo-pagan and Wiccan tradition because of her knowledge, was considered less important in

patriarchic societies. The virgin and mother, however, may have been considered more significant to men because of the shared goal of reproduction. The wizened old man is a far more common archetype in the patriarchic spiritual structure.

Modern scholar Anne Ulanov, and some other feminist theorists, have suggested that the maiden-mother-crone trichotomy omits an essential element of the feminine persona: the sexually realized woman. This alternate stage of womanhood is the counterpart of male virility archetypes that celebrate the pre-fatherhood male at his sexual peak. While the essential qualities of growth, new life, and decay may be the most important symbolic associations, they link female development to the essential of motherhood, and this ignores the aspect of the female persona that realizes its identity outside of this biological and cultural imperative.

### **The Triple Goddess in History**

Triple-goddess myths and legends repeatedly appear in many spiritual systems around the world. For instance, in Hinduism there is a three-goddess system recognized in some Hindu sects made up of the goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Durga, or Kali, representing creation, preservation, and destruction, respectively. Similarly, the Greek goddess Hecate is sometimes depicted with three faces, representing the past, present, and future. In Wicca and neo-paganism, Hecate has been linked to the maiden-mother-crone archetype and is often cited as an example of this system in antiquity. Some Wiccan authors and feminist theorists have suggested that the goddess trinity was the original deistic trinity, which inspired trifurcated representations of gods, such as the Christian Trinity of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. While scholarly research has not verified this belief, it is clear that the trinity of womanhood is an ancient archetype that linked the lives of women to the greater patterns of nature.

### **Triple Spiral**

The triple spiral, or “triskele,” is an ancient symbol known from Neolithic carvings dating to at least 3200 BCE and linked to Celtic cosmology. Prominent examples are found carved into the entrance stone of the Newgrange Monument, an ancient burial tomb in Ireland. The symbol was adopted as a representation of the Holy Trinity after the Christian conquest of Celtic Europe, and some claim that it represented a trinity of goddesses before this period. The goddess association with the triskele, while plausible, is not based on sufficient evidence, and the original meaning of the symbol has been lost to antiquity.

In many cultures, the spiral can be seen as representing an unbroken line moving into the future and back again and thus is a common symbol for such concepts as eternity, rebirth, resurrection, and infinity. Mathematically, the spiral can be

related to the golden ratio, which is also linked to the pentagram, and this association has given rise to a host of pseudo-historic-scientific theories about ancient mathematical knowledge among the Neolithic pagans.

The spiral is a naturally occurring shape found in many different types of plant and animal life. The fronds of ferns and the patterns of seeds in a sunflower reflect the spiral shape, for instance, as do the designs in the shells of certain mollusks. In Polynesian spirituality, the unfurling spiral of a growing fern, called the “Koru,” is a symbol of new growth, strength, and birth. It is likely that spirals and the triple spiral also derived from nature-based symbolism taken from observations of natural phenomena. From an aesthetic and artistic standpoint, the continuous nature of the spiral may have been the only requisite inspiration for adopting the spiral as a symbol of continuity, a meaning that the shape has retained into the modern era.

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## WICCA AND THE GODDESS MOVEMENT

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### The Feminine in Western Spirituality

Wicca is a modern religion that emerged from the alternative religion craze of the 1950s and was inspired by ancient European agricultural spiritual traditions. Wicca has become a pop-culture craze in the United States and Europe, with dozens of books and Internet sites dedicated to the subject. Though the history of modern Wicca has been well documented, the premodern history of Wicca is an area of significant debate. Wicca is part of the more generalized Goddess movement of the 1970s, a combination of pagan spirituality and neo-feminist historical theories.

### Neo-pagan History versus European History

Contemporary Wicca emerged from a confluence of influences in the mid-20th century, but modern Wicca can be largely traced to two founders, Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente, who together founded a branch of Wicca known as Gardnerian Wicca. Gardner claimed to have learned ancient spiritual secrets when he was inducted into the New Forest Coven in the 1930s. His 1954 book *High Magic's Aid* can be seen as one of the essential influences behind the emergence of Wicca as a new religious movement. From such teachers as Gardner and Valiente, Wicca



spread and branched into numerous varieties, sometimes absorbing elements from other traditions, such as the Italian folk magic system known as “Stregheria,” as well as elements of Jewish Kaballah, and neo-Egyptian mysticism.

Many Wiccan practitioners believe that Wicca is part of an unbroken chain that stretches to pre-Christian pagan traditions. This claim is impossible to verify because, even if Wicca *has* persisted for generations, it is part of an oral tradition that was largely undocumented. There is a tremendous gulf of knowledge in the history of Europe before written records were prevalent, and the specifics of life and spirituality in pre-Christian pagan cultures have disappeared into this void. While scattered records remain, there is no way of knowing to what degree these records were altered before they were committed to writing.

Among Wiccans, it is widely believed that Christian domination resulted in the co-optation of pagan fertility and agricultural “feast days” that later became Christian holidays. Similarly, Wiccans sometimes argue that many folk customs still extant in Europe have pagan, rather than Christian, roots. Pop culture has enthusiastically embraced this idea, while historians have remained more skeptical. Morris and Maypole dancing (popular European agrarian folk dances) provide an example of how popular myth and history can disagree. In Wiccan tradition, it is often claimed that these dances originated as pagan fertility rituals that coincided with important agricultural periods. Historians have found, however, that the associations between folk dancing and paganism originated in the late 1600s from Puritan Christian propaganda.

The Puritans saw themselves as a moral authority, and their objection to folk festivals may be seen as a 1600’s version of modern campaigns against drinking, drug use, or television violence. The Puritans considered folk festivals, social drinking, and paganism evil, and so they began to equate them together without any logical or historical link. This assertion was repeated until it stuck, and eventually the pagan roots of harvest festival traditions became accepted in the popular imagination. Today, Wiccans and neo-pagans regularly engage in Maypole dances at harvest and fertility festivals, and many fervently believe that this tradition directly connects with ancestral paganism, though there is no evidence to support these claims.

It is very likely that the Maypole dance emerged from agricultural traditions and *was* meant to represent cyclic patterns of the agricultural year as well as to promote community integration and the formation of new marriage bonds among young people attending the festivals. Evidence suggests that European pagans may have held similar festivals, but this does not constitute an ancestral relationship. It is equally likely that the Maypole dance and similar customs emerged far later in history within a culture that had already accepted Christianity but was still linked to agricultural patterns by virtue of the predominant lifestyles of the era.

However, there is significant evidence to suggest that some folk customs *were* co-opted from pagan festivals. The most notable example is Halloween, or All Hallows' Eve, which seems to be related to the Celtic celebration Beltane. These celebrations were timed to coincide with the end of summer and the beginning of autumn and were therefore agriculturally significant. It was also widely believed that this sacred period marked a time when the doors between the realms of the living and the dead were open, allowing the spirits of the deceased to commune with living relatives. This was part of an ancient tradition of ancestor worship that emerged in prehistoric European societies.

In the Christianized version of the ceremony, individuals were interested in warding off evil spirits, rather than welcoming or honoring their departed ancestors. Exactly which elements of Halloween celebrations are ancient and which are more modern is the subject of continued debate, and many of the early pagan rituals that accompanied the celebration have been lost. Still, Halloween provides one example of how ancient pagan rituals were occasionally transformed under the emerging Christian order.

## The Goddess and Horned God

Two of the most important deities in Wiccan spirituality are the Horned God and the Mother Goddess, who represent the duality of masculine and feminine and are believed to be derived from pagan spirits worshipped in the Druidic and ancient Wiccan traditions. The Horned God is a composite deity inspired by the many horned gods and heroes from pagan myth. It is often believed that the Horned God inspired the Christian Satan, but this fact is a subject of debate among religious historians.

The goddesses of Wicca and the larger Goddess movement are also composite deities that combine myths from goddess cults around the world. The Fertility Goddess, symbolizing the generative power of the female, is one of the most ancient spiritual symbols known to humanity, and versions of this figure have been found around the world. In many cultures, the goddess is associated with the earth, and the Earth Mother has become a common spiritual and folk archetype. The "Mother Goddess" is the name often given to the primary feminine deity in many strains of Wicca.

Wiccan and neo-pagan traditions have also embraced a number of goddesses from Roman and Greek polytheism. The Roman goddess Diana, who was associated with lunar cycles, birthing, and hunting, has become one of the most popular pagan goddesses in modern Wicca. In Dianic Wicca, the most feminist-oriented strain of modern Wicca, Diana has become the central creator god, who is seen as the originator of both male and female attributes through creation. Diana is

also the central creative deity in the Italian folk-magic system Stregheria. Neo-paganism has also embraced the goddess Hecate, who is often associated with mystical powers, sorcery, and lunar patterns, but was also considered a material savior figure in some ancient Greek cults.

## Transformation of the Feminine Icon

Goddesses are entirely lacking from the Abrahamic traditions, and while important female figures appear in nearly all religions, the women depicted in Abrahamic faiths are quite dissimilar from the goddesses of polytheistic traditions, who were often considered independently worthy of worship. By contrast, females of the Abrahamic faiths, such as the Virgin Mary, are honored by their connection to a central, and more powerful, male God.

Wiccan and neo-pagans have enthusiastically embraced the theory, common in pop-feminist history, that all religions, and perhaps all human societies, were once matriarchal. The theory is based on the hypothesis that childbirth was once considered a miraculous event because humanity had not yet discovered paternity. Women were therefore the mystical and political leaders of society because of their apparent magical birthing powers. Learned feminist scholars, such as women's rights activist Gloria Steinem, have embraced the theory of a prehistoric matriarchal culture and lectured about the hypothetical "gynocracy" of the ancient world. It has become common in Wicca and neo-paganism to believe that Celtic paganism was matriarchal, or at least egalitarian, and that it was not until Christianity dominated Europe that women were subjugated and prohibited from serving as leaders. A concept of European paganism has emerged in which the pagans are viewed as innocent victims of a malevolent takeover by the male-dominated Abrahamic faiths.

A number of historians, however, have argued against the matriarchal-patriarchal evolution theory. For instance, feminist religious scholar Cynthia Eller argued in her book *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* that the scattered evidence from ancient civilizations is insufficient to derive a realistic image of gender roles. However, given the current knowledge of prehistoric cultures, Eller believes that it is highly unlikely that matriarchal culture was ever a widespread reality. Archaeological evidence suggests that many polytheistic traditions where goddess worship was common were invented within patriarchal social systems in which the roles of women were constrained.

The absence of the goddesses from modern religions might be related to broader patterns of cultural development. Goddesses were almost always associated with the earth and with ecological and agricultural spirituality. This may have derived from the associations between the power of women to give birth

and the power of the earth to produce animal and plant life. Humanity gradually moved away from the agrarian lifestyle as more and more individuals were freed to engage in professions that were human-centric, rather than nature-centric. It is perhaps partially true that the Goddess was left behind as humans gravitated toward religions that presented a more personal and generally less-complicated model, namely, a single god with whom every person shares an intimate personal relationship.

So little is known about prehistoric pagan cultures that it is premature to presume that Goddess worship represented a dominant role for women or even an egalitarian social structure. The manifestation of egalitarian and female-dominated spirituality in the modern era is perhaps less a representation of the past and more a representation of a potential future. Though Wicca and neo-paganism may not be faithful representations of ancient traditions, they have been inspired by powerful representations of femininity from past eras and have used these to create a modern spirituality in which women are freed from many of their stereotyped roles. For future generations then, it is possible that the egalitarian society that may never have been could eventually come to be.

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# Glossary of Terminology

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**Atheism:** Disbelief in deities or supreme beings.

**Divine:** Pertaining to spiritual power or the power of a deity.

**Ecological:** Pertaining to the natural features of the environment and the relationships between organisms and the physical compartments of the earth.

**Faith:** Belief based on spiritual comprehension or religious teachings rather than on proof.

**Henotheism:** Focus on the worship of a single deity without disbelieving in the existence of other deities.

**Humanistic:** Pertaining to human life and culture.

**Millenarianism:** Belief in a coming future period of revelation or change that will result either in destruction or the dawn of a utopian era.

**Monolatry:** Exclusive worship of a single god while recognizing the existence of other deities.

**Monotheism:** Religious system based on the belief in a single deity.

**Mysticism:** System of obscure thought, spirituality, or philosophy.

**Myth:** In reference to religious traditions, a story about divine individuals or spiritually significant events that is often used to represent key aspects of a certain faith or religious philosophy.

**Occult:** Pertaining to a system of magic or secret supernatural powers.

**Pantheism:** Religious system that identifies god with the universe as a whole.

**Polytheism:** Religious system based on the belief in multiple deities or divine spirits.

**Profane:** Object, being, or concept not dedicated to divinity or set apart for secular rather than spiritual use.

**Religion:** A structural system for the exploration of reality and specifically the spiritual beliefs of a certain group or culture.

**Sacred:** Object, being, or concept given veneration because of its association with a deity or other divine force.

**Spiritual:** Pertaining to the belief in nonphysical aspects of the universe or a philosophy based on the belief in the spiritual aspects of reality.

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